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## **Solution-Focused Management: Towards a Theory of Positive Differences**

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### **Summary**

This article summarises the core elements of the solution-focused approach, which have their origin in a psychotherapeutic context. First, a model is developed that works out the central pattern of the solution-focused approach, which in the author's opinion is the focusing on positive differences. All principles, attitudes and techniques of the solution-focused approach centre on the production of information, which is different if it is or fits better.

Against this backdrop, the outlines of a solution-Focused Management-approach are developed. Thus, the specific options for using and implementing the "solution-focused approach" are to be made easier in respect of the classic management functions for enterprises that currently are situated in settings "close to consulting".

### **A concept spreads in the world of consulting and management**

The "solution-focused approach" was developed by Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg and their colleagues at the BFTC in Milwaukee. This concept, also originally known as "brief consulting", has now entered wide reaches of our society and is currently spreading through the areas of consulting and management. Since the first world conference on "Solution-Focused Practise in Organisations" 2002 in Bristol (organised by the Bristol Group), there has been a world-wide integration and discussion process (see [www.solworld.org](http://www.solworld.org)). For instance, a large number of publications referring to a rich variety of application projects for enterprises can now be observed (see e.g. Aoki 2005, Berg/Szabo 2005, McKergow/Clarke 2005, Jackson/McKergow 2002, Furman 2004). Originally these ideas mainly concerned coaching and team development issues (see Maier 2005, Sharry 2004), but now solution-focused work is clearly spreading into broader areas of management, such as HRM, Marketing, Project Management, and many more (see the contributions to this volume).

This extended reach is possibly connected with the increase in problem-solving pressure on enterprises. The focus of solution-focused management is on the difference between problem and solution, and this difference arguably keeps enterprises and employees equally busy. In addition, the efficiency potential of brief consulting is also interesting for decision makers in enterprises, as

solution-focused projects involve much less effort in developing design measures (see Clarke/McKergow 2007).

One of the reasons the solution-focused approach is so attractive for enterprises is the fact that it touches upon central questions and aspects of management as well as the success of an enterprise and its staff. This enormous potential for business practice and management research exists, as the following questions can be answered:

- What can safeguard the success and the survival of enterprises, teams and individual employees and how is it done?
- How can strengths and resources, and thus core competencies, be found and optimised throughout the enterprise?
- What can be done to design the manifold changes in an enterprise more efficiently?
- How can, in times of dwindling resources, measures in enterprises be worked out simply and more efficiently?
- And last but not least: How can solutions be found more simple?

In my opinion, these opportunities have not been made explicit enough in the discussion of solution-focused work. Of course, these questions are also discussed in other management and consulting concepts and some answers can be found. Solution-focused work, however, offers different and new answers and especially a new quality by combining the individual core elements. First empirical studies already show positive economic effects (see the chapter on "Research" in this volume).

### **Towards a Theory of Positive Differences**

Solution-focused work in enterprises today comprises a broad range of principles, methods and instruments. Techniques such as miracle question, exceptions, well formed goals, simplicity and many more are available and have successfully been tested in business practice. Most of these approaches were originally developed in therapy, which is the reason why solution-focused work has been most widely spread in similar settings (coaching and consulting). Another reason for this is that the approach concentrates on questioning techniques (it is no coincidence the seminal volume by Peter de Jong and Insoo Kim Berg is called "Interviewing for solutions") or is concerned with questions regarding the design of consulting settings. Without further development, the use in classic management areas and with employees would be limited, as many tasks in every-day work involve not so much question techniques, but other activities, such as entering information, motivating, following objectives, developing concepts, using tools etc.

For this reason, a conceptual framework of solution-focused work is helpful that can facilitate the application for other tasks in management and enterprise.

This framework will now be outlined by:

- Developing a theoretically founded pattern from the already existing principles, techniques and attitudes
- Formulating a sketch for a theory of solution-focused management on this basis
- And briefly presenting, by means of examples taken from different functional areas of management, new starting points for less discussed areas of application, such as motivation, information transfer, marketing etc.

As we concentrate on the concept of focusing positive differences as the linking pattern, the term “theory of positive differences” suggests itself.

### **The Principle of “Finding Differences” – what is different when it works?**

One of the most important core elements of the solution-focused approach is the focus on “what is different when it is better?” All techniques of this approach (such as asking about exceptions, Future Perfect...), summarised below, point at the differences and the elements that function (see de Shazer 1988 pp.2). And it is exactly at this point where we can see why the expression “solution-focused approach” is justified. Every effort is taken to make all persons involved in solving the problem consistently focus their activities on developing information that is relevant to the solution and directed at positive differences, which is called “solution talk”. And, thus, *focusing on positive differences* is at the centre of this approach.

Of course, every practitioner knows that in every-day work, analysing the negative differences often become a main issue. Here people try to find out what happens if things do not work – an approach known as “problem talk”. The side effects of analysing negative differences are well known: The question “whose fault is it” will be discussed and increases the likelihood of conflict, energy for making changes gets lost and demotivation spreads, when the details of non-functioning are discussed.

Focusing on differences is also helpful with a phenomenon that often makes finding solutions more difficult: employees describing problems presuppose that these problems are constant, also over time (which reduces any hope for change). Thus, the first step in developing incremental changes is in most cases to “make the problem more liquid” and so to perceive the differences mentioned before (de Shazer 1988, pp. 52). In this way the number of options for action increases and, after all, it is specific actions that are also a central element of the solution-focused approach.

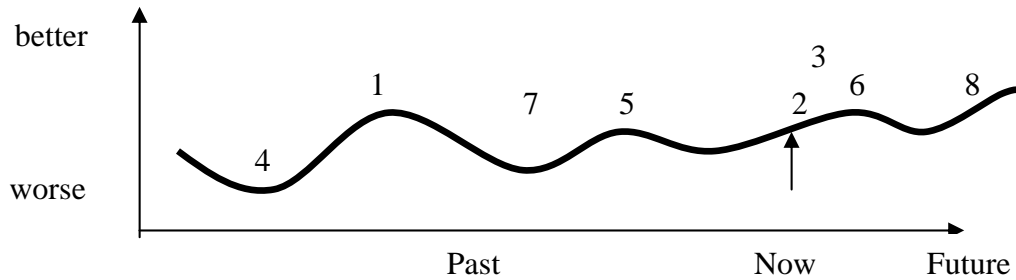


Figure 1: The pattern of finding “positive differences” of solution-focused techniques

The many specific techniques of the solution-focused approach (see deJong/Berg 2002, Mahlberg/Sjöblom 2005) clearly show this pattern of focusing on positive differences (the numbers relating to the individual techniques can be found in figure 1 and exemplify when particular techniques can show positive differences during the problem-solving process):

- 1. *Exceptions*: By asking about exceptions from the problem, specific information is identified, which happens at those times the problem inexplicably does not, or only slightly, show. In this way, positive differences from the past referring to the problem can be detected.
- 2. *Miracle Question*: This “universal technique” for specifying utopias (however, the miracle question is no miracle) or other types such as “Future Perfect” focus on specific details, from which persons involved will see that the problem has miraculously disappeared. The great advantage of this technique is that the image of a desirable and often even feasible future can be developed without necessarily any reason in the past. Again, specific details of positive differences can be seen.
- 3. *Scaling*: Today, scalings are used in many different ways, mostly in the form of a scale from 0 (worst state of the problem) to 10 (problem solved). The game with differences here is very colourful, but the positive difference is always the focal point (e.g. where specifically will you first see that you have moved from "5" to "6"). Scalings more or less resemble the "ladders" in the game with differences (de Shazer 1994).
- 4. *Coping questions*: These also focus on positive differences, by finding out what people do in order to avoid things getting worse. Even in a very difficult situation, employees take actions to avoid things getting worse – and that is a positive difference.
- 5. *“Presession Change”*: This technique refers to an approach, where clients, e.g. at the first coaching session, are asked whether there have been any improvements in the meantime. Thus the focus is on those things that show positive change even before the start of the problem-solving process.
- 6. *The development of “well formed goals”*: Developing these refers to specific, small steps described in specific ways of behaviour, in order to start

something better or new (and not to end something problematic). Of course, the focus is on positive differences again.

- 7. *“Doing something instead”* When solving problems, there is often talk of what should *not* be or should *not* happen. The technique used here is focusing on the alternative (“what should happen instead”).
- 8. *“Tasks”*: Both “observation tasks” and “behavioral tasks” (deJong/Berg 2002, pp110) include either observing positive differences or a specific activity in a positive direction (even if the person concerned just pretends things are better).

Therefore, in my opinion, the pattern of focusing on positive differences is present in all techniques described (and several more techniques, such as Reframing could be mentioned here). Particularly impressive is the number and variety of techniques, which provide an excellent basis for applications in management. It also becomes clear that the solution-focused approach is a continuous, resource-oriented approach that is possibly one of the most consistent concepts of this kind.

One important effect of focusing on positive differences is also the appreciation inherently linked with this approach. If, when dealing with positive differences, e.g. meetings are analysed that produced better results, or successful product launches are analysed more closely, the efforts and little successes of those involved are automatically appreciated. The solution-focused approach constantly stresses that appreciation is not a technique, but a basic attitude. Here it becomes apparent why this sustained effect keeps turning up throughout the approach: it is "built in" with the central principle of focusing on positive differences.

None of these techniques involve analysing the problem and the things that do not work. And so it is much less likely that problem-solving leads to frustration, anger, paralysis and powerlessness. All phenomena every practitioner knows well from meetings, workshops, presentations etc., and which are reduced by consistently focusing on information relevant to the solution. As an aside it should be mentioned that solutions are not directly asked for, which is very common in the world of management (“What is the solution mister X to win back the customer?”). Exactly this question often results in awkward silence. It is the indirect focusing on positive differences and objectives (de Shazer 1988, p. 5), not making a demand for solutions, which makes this possible.

One specific aspect of the approach regarding positive differences has only been mentioned in passing: concentrating on SMALL positive differences. This raises the probability that relevant information is found or created and, of course, also the motivation for starting step-by-step changes, as smaller steps are much more likely to be implemented. Focusing on smaller positive differences thus

simplifies the approach. This simplicity is also a basic principle of the solution-focused approach (“keep things as simple as possible – but no simpler” A. Einstein).

Positive differences are not just focused on, they are also central on the level of activities. It is mostly the meta-rules (see Sparrer 2002, pp.76) of the solution-focused approach that are helpful here:

“If it works do more of it”

“If it does not work do something different”

The first rule clearly implies a specific, more intensive use of resources (which as a rule involves little additional cost). "Amplifying what works" is an important basic attitude in solution-focused work, which is made use of frequently. The second principle, by "doing something different" increases the probability – without needing to know the answer – that something else and thus better can happen. In this way, a problematic pattern might be broken.

The third meta-rule is slightly different in nature and should also be mentioned here: “if it works don't fix it”. Strictly speaking, this principle looks slightly paradox, why indeed should we fix something that is not broken? In every-day business life, however, it is in my opinion more and more the case that employees and especially managers start changing a lot of things and in doing so also change concepts that used to work (often causing unfavourable side effects). Therefore, this principle is often helpful – especially in view of an economical use of resources.

The question of "doing things" and taking action, however, is not just here, but in many examples an important aspect (see the various examples also in this volume). This is yet another argument in favour of the usability of this concept for business practice.

Thus, the central pattern of the techniques of the solution-focused approach can be fittingly described as focusing on the small positive differences and translating this into actions. But what does this difference of better/worse that is so often brought up actually refer to? This leads us to another important aspect of solution-focused work: the interactional view and thus taking into consideration of interdependencies, which enables a more holistic approach.

### **The Interactional View**

An important core element of solution-focused work is the interactional view (see deJong/Berg 2002, p.70), which is expressed in the commonly quoted principle that “every action is interaction” (Jackson/McKergow 2002, pp.43). When working out objectives and solutions, the focus is always put on interdependencies, i.e. the interplay between employees and the work situation/environment. If, for instance, a salesperson considers doing something differently, a common question in the solution-focused approach is "what will

the customers do differently, how will they react?" In this manner, it is the fit that is always supported, with the literature mainly focusing on the fit between people and, in my opinion, focusing on the interdependencies between people and situational factors would be an important development (and from a management perspective particularly the fit between the enterprise and the relevant environment).

In combination with this principle, the orientation towards positive differences described above turns into an approach which specifically and in detail finds out what is different when it fits better (deShazer 1994, S 121ff.).

This interactional view thus resembles the results of management research: achieving success and satisfaction for enterprises, teams and employees is always the result of a good fit and the most important starting point for measures can be found in the question "does it fit?" (see Osterloh/Frost 1996, Lueger 1996). Efficiency and effectiveness in an enterprise are closely linked with this question (see Osterloh/Frost 1996, p. 156).

On the level of the individual employee, the fit between the workplace and the employee's characteristics is important. There is no such thing as a gut/bad employee or workplace, but one that fits or does not fit. Even when an employee thinks his dissatisfaction and reduced performance potential are related with the dynamic changes, it is most often the fact that the dynamic change acts together with his personal resources. Often, employees state that the situation has caused a problem and are not (fully) aware of the importance of the "fit". Here it is helpful to "liquidify" people's positions by adopting an "interactional view".

At the same time, for the success of a team (see Lueger 1996) and organisational units it is not so much the sole focus on team or environment, but again the "interactional view" (between team members and also between the team and the context) that counts.

For the management and control of enterprises on a strategic and operational level, the question "does it fit?" is equally central. If an enterprise, for instance, encounters a crisis, this crisis is a misfit between the enterprise and the relevant environment (often the market and customers' expectations). Once the crisis has been overcome, misfits have as a rule been reduced and a better fit has been achieved (e.g. by changes in the distribution system or product launches).

With this interactional view it is also easy to create a link between problem and solution, between fit and misfit, and I believe it is clear to see what employees and enterprises want to achieve with their solutions (see Schmidt 2004). What managers and employees in business practice call a "problem" is, as a rule, a misfit (even though it is commonly only one side of the coin that at first is under scrutiny, such as the market, the difficult colleagues etc.). And what is called a solution in practice, is a better coordination of the relevant aspects, even if it is just a small reduction in misfits.

I believe that this constitutes an important starting point for further projects of solution-focused work, management practice and also management research.

The fit of enterprise or employee and the context in most cases does not just touch upon two, but many more aspects. If, for instance, someone describes the way he or she organises him/herself as a problem, there is usually not just a misfit between personal time management and work intensity, but there are often a great number of other relevant aspects, such as ambiguities, a lack of support from colleagues, coordination with the family etc. In most cases, these interdependencies are very complex and any attempts to explain these are, by their very nature, incomplete. Solution-focused work approaches the problem-solving process in a very different way. While most management concepts take the question of where and why a problem originates to be central, here the problem is practically left aside. All efforts are focused on construing the "solution" and on describing as many details as possible regarding what is different when it is better. It is essential to understand the solution rather than the problem (see Lueger 2006).

By using this approach, it generally turns out that information regarding the solution is not the opposite of the problem, but simply shows another quality. Above all, however, focusing on what works or should be better results in a significantly higher willingness to accept change.

Nevertheless, problems or misfits are a topic even with this approach ("to be solution-focused does not mean to be problem-phobic"). Yet making the problem an issue mainly serves to create a connection with the person describing the problem, to create a platform (Jackson/McKergow 2002) and not so much to create a solution. In doing so, the use of particular concepts ("oh, there's a mismatch here", whenever an employee sees his own failure as the problem) can already provide relief, as the number of potential starting points is raised (person and situation) and new possibilities are created.

The aspect of using a different language ("language creates reality") by using terms focusing on fits and misfits is also in line with another important principle of solution-focused work: change something not someone".

Commonly messages in an enterprise are phrased in such a way, as to imply it is the employee who should change (if often indirectly, such as "Mister X, don't you want to attend a communication seminar?). Making interdependencies an issue is just one example of "something should change". The possible applications are manifold by focusing on e.g. cooperation (instead of the ability to work in a team), and the flow of information (instead of communicative behaviour) or on things like processes, outcome and the like.

This takes us to the next item, language and meaning and the question, how in an enterprise, or its sub-units, agreement can be achieved on what should be done for things to work better.

## **Social Construction of Meaning**

Solution-focused work is considered to be a constructivist approach. The central element of the approach is always how a person describing a problem (or rather telling a story they refer to as a problem) sees things or constructs reality. Based on this individually construed reality, The question of giving meaning is clearly important, that is "who in an enterprise decides what the solution is?".

One basic attitude of solution-focused work is the principle that "the client is the expert", which puts the responsibility for giving meaning with the person concerned, i.e. the employee. In all those cases where an individual looks for an individual solution (such as with coaching) this question is easily answered.

In enterprises, on the other hand, this setting rarely occurs in every-day work situations. Even in a conversation between an employee and his/her superior there is a clash between two different constructions of reality. In meetings of more persons, the number of points of view increases and regarding the question about an enterprise's direction, complexity is accordingly high. And every employee knows from their own experience that the meaning of a phenomenon (such as there are many rules for information exchange) has very different meanings in different areas of an enterprise. Realities in an enterprise are always socially construed and their meaning is derived from context (Kergen 1999) and there's a constant challenge to socially validate reality (Weik 1979) in enterprises. This refers to the development of consensual areas and thus the clarity what is now valid.

Exactly this establishment of consensual areas is facilitated by the solution-focused approach and focusing on positive differences. First, things with positive connotations, such as small successes or things that work are more accessible for other people. Second, by working out differences and looking for several positive differences ("What else?") the number of options is increased, which also facilitates the development of a mutually acceptable solution.

Naturally, coordinating consensual areas concerning the development of solutions is, particularly with many points of view in groups or larger units of an enterprise, not without obstacles. But it is getting simpler and thus follows another principle of solution-focused work: "it is simple but not easy".

## **Solution-Focused Management**

How can the outlines of such a solution-focused management-approach be described, which enables solution-focused work not just in settings "close to consulting", but in all functional areas of management?

Against the backdrop of the concept developed here, solution-focused management can be seen as a:

- a concept for control in enterprises that includes a consistent focusing on those aspects that resemble small positive differences (at the level of the individual employee, in groups and the whole enterprise),
- with these differences mainly referring to those aspects that fit better
- thus taking measures to get more out of the things that work and to do things differently when they don't work
- finally, observing and screening which of these measures and activities led to positive differences etc.

It can be assumed that by implementing such a concept, the favourable effects from the consulting-oriented experiences with solution-focused work so far can also be transferred to many settings of every-day management. The following effects are particularly likely:

- Establishing and developing a culture of appreciation by focusing on positive differences, which builds trust
- Using resources and strengths of company-wide knowledge about what works well
- Focusing on "doing" and "something" such as objectives
- A holistic view through taking into account interdependencies and the question of coordination
- Focusing on few but essential things ("Simplicity")

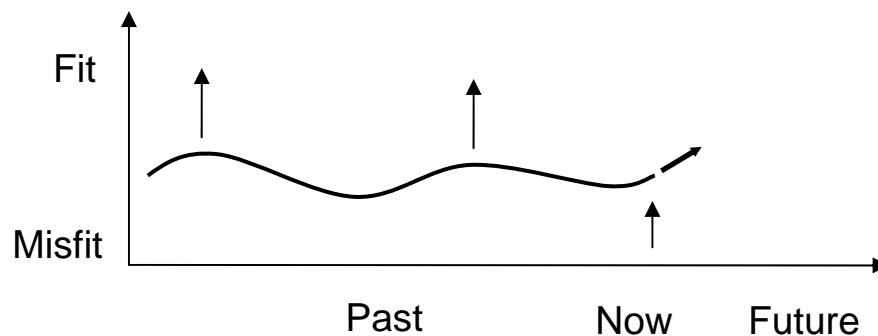


Figure 2: Dynamic development towards more fits and solutions

When using the approach described, it can be assumed that a positive development towards a better state is achieved: thus, mainly a better fit of the enterprise with the markets/environment, but also a more favourable fit within the enterprise is likely. Like at the start of a "balloon", by focusing on positive differences, the balloon is filled with "energy" and this creates an upwards development. One important challenge in this context is a solution-focused design of management instruments and the "paperwork" in enterprises. If

positive differences are also reflected in instruments and processes, this would quickly lead to a broader effect in enterprises.

Interestingly, similar aspects as those mentioned above are increasingly mentioned in the discussion of management concepts. Especially practice-oriented concepts (see e.g. Malik 2001) and resource-oriented management concepts (Hamel/Prahalad 1994) show a similar leaning.

In my opinion, against this background there are new and further opportunities of using solution-focused management that will be outlined briefly now (this book, after all, contains a multitude of examples for possible use).

One important task in an enterprise is to pass on information in connection with presentations or speeches, where the setting is one of one-way communication. Following the "theory of positive differences", that information should be foregrounded that makes clear what is different when things work better. If the managing director wants to motivate the assembled employees towards tackling the concept of "quality", he can, for example, present the following aspects:

- Specific details on where quality works well in the enterprise
- How people can make out that quality develops positively
- What is different if quality fits well
- What can be intensified or done more often, with a focus on small steps certainly being helpful etc.

It is not uncommon in business life to find a different approach in such cases: detailed descriptions of situations where they quality is not right (which employees see as a degradation of their efforts), details about problems such as statistics on customer complaints, references to the competitors etc.

The potential applications for passing on information, however, in the author's opinion also include e-mails. Against the backdrop of focusing on positive differences, an e-mail can be written in a much more solution-focused manner. The elements mentioned here show that it is not just questioning techniques but also statements and messages that can be orientate towards positive differences.

Another potential use can be found in the area of "motivation in enterprises". Based on the concept described, the approach of a superior would focus on finding out about differences in motivation. The most important question with motivational problems is not an attempt at explaining why a person is demotivated (which is a very popular and oft-discussed question round the water cooler), but what is different if a person is a little bit more motivated. A superior would observe exactly these situations more closely, gather information and, in conversation with the employee, work out together what is different when things works better (the needs of the employee and the characteristics of the work

situation). If the superior takes an action resulting in a higher commitment of the employee, he will look for opportunities to do more of the same.

The rest of this book contains a multitude of conceptional ideas and especially examples, case studies and projects involving solution-focused work in enterprises. In my opinion, they also follow the pattern of finding and making use of positive differences. These applications have been proven in practice and cover the areas of leadership, marketing and sales, project management, work design, human resources, organisational development and learning, training and coaching, as well as conflict management.

It would be gratifying if you, dear reader, find inspiration here for applying this approach in your enterprise. At this point a final principle of solution-focused work is to be mentioned that is important in this context: “every case is different”. It is essential to develop the die positive differences in a particular context, that is your enterprise, and so these projects do not provide recipes for other contexts. They definitely do provide ideas for new approaches though and we sincerely hope they will be of use for you.

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