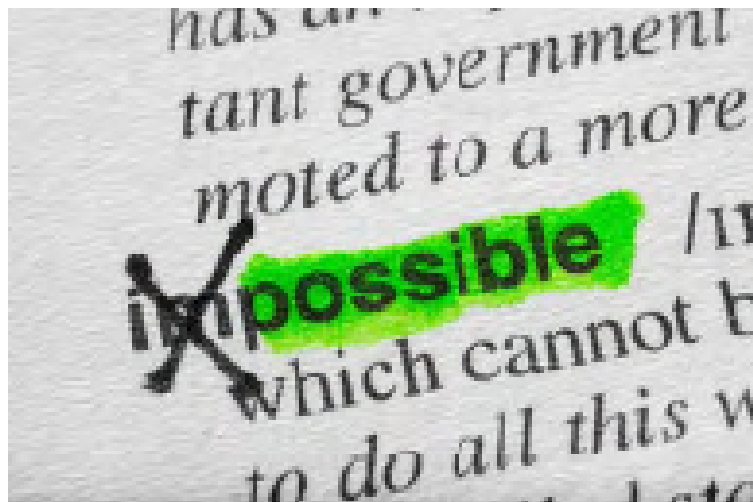




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Coaching as Organisational Development



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Solution Focused Organisation Development:

A Swiss case study

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The solution-focused approach contributed a great deal to the organisational development of a Swiss company. Techniques such as ‘solution talk’, awareness of resources, abilities and possible next steps - as well as finding out what works - helped the company to move from a problem-oriented, stuck situation in October 2009 to a dynamic organisation with a culture of appreciation by July 2010.

This case study is about a Swiss company with around 200 employees that merged with another in 2009. When I first met the CEO in October 2009, he explained they were in the middle of this merger and facing numerous problems. Together, these problems had led to a near standstill and the employees were under constant pressure. They had

worked with different organisational developers in the past, but were not satisfied, because their expert models didn’t fit the company’s needs. The CEO invited me to help him solve these problems.

Keywords

Solution Focused Organisational Development, solution talk, appreciation, focus on what works, change.

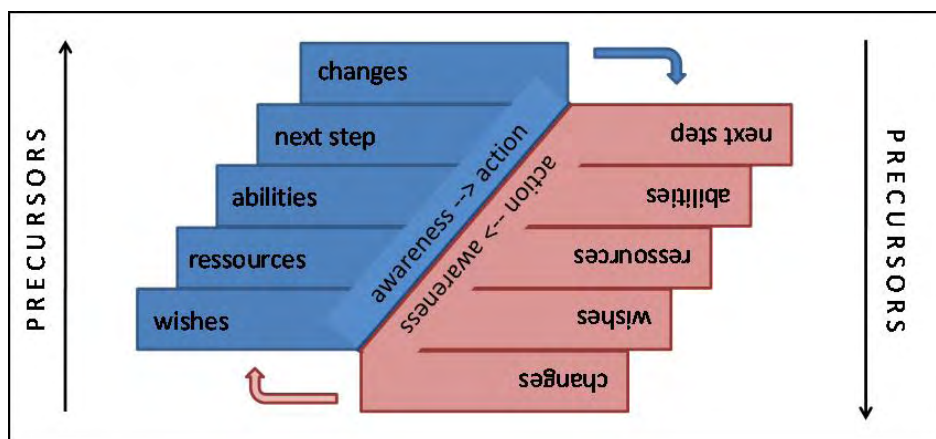
Framework and assumptions of Solution Focused OD

Goethe said, “Our wishes are premonitions of the abilities which lie in us, vanguards of that which we are able to accomplish.” We might add that our wishes are not only premonitions of our resources and abilities, but that our abilities are also precursors of the possible next steps and future changes that we are able to accomplish. To influence progress, it therefore, makes sense to become aware of your

- wishes
- resources
- abilities and
- possible next steps.

This gives you a firm, confident base from which to decide your next step and act in the direction of your desired changes.

Figure 1: Godat Model of Development



But development can take place not only from awareness to action but also the other way around. This proves valuable in settings when people generally act first. Their actions serve as signs of their existing abilities, resources and also their wishes to change the situation. If they become aware of these elements they can better influence future change. This solution-focused model, based on the work of Insoo Kim Berg, Steve de Shazer and others, applied equally to individual and organisational change.

Solution Focused Organisational Development makes the following (testable) assumptions:

Solution talk creates solutions;
problem talk creates problems

- Solution talk creates solutions; problem talk creates problems.
- It is useful to find out and appreciate what works and do more of it.
- The organisation knows everything it needs to find suitable solutions.
- The people in the organisation can be experts for that organisation's development.
- Organisations are complex systems that can be influenced but not steered.
- Small changes by members of the system can lead to immense development of the organisation.

Given organisational complexity, it makes more sense to work on a level of going from one step to another (in a desired direction) than to use a traditional detailed long-range plan.

Interventions: solution talk, appreciation and focus on what works

1. Solution talk with the CEO

My first intervention, as always, was to sit with the CEO to find out what exactly he wanted and let him do 'solution talk'. 'Solution talk' trades on the idea that change follows attention. The more you focus your attention on problems, the more you tend to consolidate them: As Steve de Shazer used to say: "Problem talk creates

problems, solution talk creates solutions.” So, if you want your client to become a solution expert, you ask questions about his or her desired future, resources and abilities, possible next steps, and encourage this talk in preference to talk about problems.

My client was used to talking about and analysing problems. Therefore, we spent time ‘platform-building’, a process of transition from talking about what was wrong to finding out what positive things he wanted. Gradually he became a solution expert, reaching more clarity about what he wanted. He was finally able to create the following desired future - (Step: awareness → action: wishes):

“I am aware that we will always face challenges and have problems to solve. But I want a dynamic organisation where the employees take responsibility for these challenges and are enthusiastic about their work. And we need to move on quickly with all activities concerning our merger.”

He also knew exactly how he would notice that his company had moved to a “dynamic organisation” and what “employees take responsibility (...) and are enthusiastic” would look like.

After asking him about existing resources (Step awareness → action: resources) and his abilities and those of his employees (Step awareness → action: abilities), he realised that his executive board was the key to success. Therefore we planned a 2-day-workshop (Step awareness → action: next step) with them to:

“Support the teambuilding of the executive board, because half of the board is from our company and half from the other, and define the next steps of the merger.”



2. 99% is working - workshop with the executive board

The focus of this 2-day-workshop was the resources and abilities of the executive board, appreciating the good work they had been doing and all the things that were working perfectly well (Steps action → awareness: abilities, resources, wishes, changes).

The main finding for them was astounding: Even in problem times 99% is still working. The core processes of the two companies were running perfectly well and every day the 200 employees served hundreds of customers. In addition, appreciating and thanking each other for the good work everybody had been doing brought them closer together as a team.

Workshop flipchart

Since they also defined the main next steps and responsibilities of the merger (Step

awareness → action: next step), we decided to meet again with the executive board in a month.

To my delight, this proved unnecessary. The CEO called me after three weeks and said:

“Is it possible to cancel this workshop? I think we don’t need it anymore because the merger activities are all on track – I can’t believe it, but it’s true(!) – And the executive board is taking the responsibility I was wishing for. I now would like to focus on the mission statements of the new company to create a new corporate culture.”

This led to self-organised new assignments of tasks and increased cooperation

The CEO had gained confidence in his executive board, in the defined next steps and the assigned responsibilities. He next allowed the executive board greater autonomy and the merger tasks were processed more quickly. Furthermore, the members of the executive board talked a lot more with each other and got to know each other better. This led to self-organised new assignments of tasks and increased cooperation.

3. Solution talk with the CEO

After about one hour of reflecting on the following miracle question (Step awareness → action: wishes):

“Imagine that tonight while you are asleep a miracle happens that takes you into your preferred future. But because you were asleep you don’t know anything about this, how will you find out the next day that it happened?”

The CEO came up with the idea of short (1 ½-hour) core-value-workshops with all departments (Step awareness → action: next step).

4. Focus on what works: Core-value-workshops with all employees

Given that the appreciative workshop with the executive board had worked well, we decided to do something similar with all employees and let them work on four questions in small groups:

- What are we (as employees, as team, as department) doing really well?
- What values are we living in our everyday practice that we are proud of?
- What do our customers praise?
- What abilities and resources do we have?

(Steps action → awareness: abilities and resources).

*What are we ...
doing really well?*

*What values are we
living ... that we are
proud of?*

*What do our
customers praise?*

*What abilities and
resources do we
have?*



Workshop participants answering these questions

The CEO and I facilitated these workshops in groups of about 20 people over 1½-months. During these workshops I realized how the CEO became more and more appreciative. Whenever a group didn't know what to be proud of or what they were doing well, he mentioned all the positive aspects that he had observed before. This was usually the starting point of a lot more positive aspects. More than that, the employees were delighted to hear that the CEO really appreciated their work.

The feedback shortly after these workshops, after one week and after one month, surprised us all. Employees, managers, the executive board, and the CEO discovered a new shared culture of appreciation and cooperativeness. Employees with different functions started to get to know each other and to work together more closely.

Furthermore, since the lived core values were almost the same in each department, it was easy to use them to create common mission statements and corporate values that really fitted the company.

Key OD learnings of the company

Although there were formal changes (written core values, new organisation (chart), special programs of appreciation, etc.), the main developments, in my view, happened informally and can be most readily identified when talking to the people and comparing their everyday practices.

- **Appreciation leads to a better work environment and motivation:**
Employee: "I now know that my work is appreciated, and that motivates

me.” Team leader: “I saw the effects of appreciation on my employees and I will focus more on what works”. CEO: “I realized how I became more appreciative and saw the effects of it.”

- **Getting to know each other leads to better outcomes:** Project Manager: “I am amazed. Our project is dynamically making progress because we now know each other much better.” CEO: “They have got to know each other better.” Employee: “We now work together a lot better since we got to know each other. I can even understand that they sometimes have different views and opinions.”
- **Similar core values lead to better cooperation:** Employees: “We were amazed to see how similar the core values are. We now have a base to communicate and work together because we believe in the same things.”

My key learnings

- **Solution talk creates suitable solutions:** It was good to keep asking the client about wishes, resources, abilities, next steps. This enabled suitable solutions and demanded a lot of ‘not knowing’ on my part.
- **Small interventions can lead to immense change:** If you asked the employees what the most important intervention was, they would all say the appreciation from the CEO that showed them that he cares and that they are important. This small intervention led to a massive culture change.
- **Find out what works and do more of it:** One of the most significant findings for the executive board and the CEO was that - despite all the problems - 99% was working well. They now had the chance to decide on what they wanted to focus on – on the 99% or on the 1%. Furthermore they could use the 99% to build on and do more of.
- **Go from one step to another:** In the beginning we could have been tempted to make an action plan, but due to the complex and dynamic situation this plan would have been irrelevant after a very short period of time. Therefore, we decided to take one step after another and define next steps along the way. I am glad we did this because no one would have been able to predict such a great success with only four steps.

*solution-focused
coaching and
Solution Focused
Organisational
Development go
together*

In this case and my everyday practice I often realize that solution-focused coaching and Solution Focused Organisational Development go together, add to each other and can't really be disconnected.

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About the author

Dominik Godat is a solution-focused coach, organisational developer and facilitator. He runs Godat Coaching (coaching@godat.ch, www.godat.ch, a member of STELLWERK [Entwicklungsmanagement www.stellwerk.ch](http://www.stellwerk.ch)) working mainly in Switzerland and Western Europe with profit and non-profit organizations.

Dominik also trains and coaches individuals, managers and teams who are looking for success in business and in their private lives. He invented Random Coaching in 2006 and has influenced many solution-focused coaches since. He contributes to books, including Solution Tools, Solution-Focused Management, and 57 SF Activities for Facilitators and Consultants. He is member of the international steering group of the SOLWorld community (www.solworld.org) and works closely with coaching pioneers, including Peter Szabo. He also holds workshops at international conferences and lectures at several universities in Switzerland.

He lives with his girlfriend near Lucerne and loves to be outside enjoying Lake Lucerne and the mountains.