

The Short Story – a new tool for Solutions Focus Coaching

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Action

Once upon a time there was the Action Plan. Anyone who was anyone in any organisation had an Action Plan. They carried this written document from meeting to meeting. Action Plans felt good. They said you knew what you were doing.

Action plans could be divided into action points. The next action point told you what you were doing next.

Then along came solutions focus, with some new ideas and new concepts, including OSKAR coaching. OSKAR may have been new, but its 'A' contained the word Action, which was somehow familiar. And the solutions focus tool called 'Small Steps' sounded rather like an action point too.

Simplicity

Now here's another idea for your coaching tool kit - the Short Story – a brief account by the performer of how things are going to be next time they face the issue that brought them in.

Of course, if we value simplicity and Occam's Razor, we must be cautious about introducing new items into the repertoire. We take more satisfaction from reducing our models than adding to them.

Yet it seems to me that something is going on here in coaching conversations that is useful - that is worth naming and also worth encouraging. So this article explains what it is and offers guidance about using it.

Change - Static states connected by actions, or constant movement?

A company wants results. Its leaders set goals and targets that specify these results. And - as subsets of these corporate aims - teams and individuals within the company have their goals and targets.

To achieve the goals in this company, there is a plan - an expected or imagined way forward. Sometimes the plan is specific, sometimes vague. To make things happen, the people must take action. They can decide these actions in advance and call them action plans – perhaps divided into action points. They divide them into action points to make them more manageable chunks, or to separate different aspects of the plan. There is a sense that we get from one static state to another more advanced or desirable static state by leaps of action.

Solutions focus looks at matters rather differently. Change is happening all the time. Within a company, two or more people might have a conversation about changes they

would like to have happen. Through the solutions focus lens, the conversation itself is a part of that change (possibly a very important part). As Steve de Shazer's Freudian book title says, 'Words were originally magic', and conversation is one arena in which magic is performed.

Therapy tasks

Solutions Focus in organisations derives largely from Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), and it is common for therapists in this tradition to give their clients a task. The task is something for the client to do – generally before the next therapy session. This sounds rather like an action point.

Yet there is a different degree of expectation about whether or not the task is going to get fulfilled. After all, the relationship between a therapist and client has a different quality of authority from that between a coach and a performer or a manager and a member of staff. The question of who is telling whom what to do alters the status of a task, a suggestion or an order.

It also alters the consequences that might be expected from the task-giving. In organisations, if a manager gives a direct report a task to do, everyone normally expects that the task will be done and that the consequences of the action will plainly contribute to the goal being achieved. In therapy, this may or may not be the understanding. Perhaps the task-giving is designed purely to provide more feedback and information; it may have little to do with any direct achievement of the goals.

Solution-oriented therapists are becoming less and less concerned about tasks and whether or not the task is done. This is less shocking than it might at first seem, once we appreciate that task-giving here is entirely therapeutic and nothing to do with achieving organisational goals and is free from the complicating questions that tend to arise in an organisation about responsibility, contracts and promises.

With the precursors to SFBT, the given task was often paradoxical – that is, contrary to what was eventually supposed to be the outcome. The aim was more to break a stuck pattern. With the transition to SFBT itself, there was less focus on stopping of what was wrong (with the consequent paradoxical tasks). Instead the first focus was on doing more of what was already working. The tasks became more about noticing what was working.

The Small Step

Tasks designed purely to break stuck patterns and the noticing task are the direct ancestors of our Small Step – one of the Solutions Tools described in the book, *The Solutions Focus*.

In a typical coaching conversation, the Small Step is usually chosen by the performer. It is supposed to be genuinely small, easy to do, happening soon, within their agency. It may (or may not) be an action point, and many performers who are used to action points within an organisation and not particularly interested in these subtle distinctions simply choose the sort of action point with which they are already familiar. And that is fine.

For the coach, the Small Step is a tool to be wielded with skill and care. The coach is interested in the performer choosing their small step well. The ideal step arises from the possibilities generated during the coaching conversation, and may be checked for the performer's commitment to taking it and for their belief that it will make a useful difference.

In the interactional world, when the step is executed it creates ripple effects or changes in the dynamics, and progress is made – with a well-chosen small step leading to progress towards a Future Perfect.

In sports coaching, the next step for an athlete is typically the practice of a particular skill, such as a tennis stroke or sprint start, or toning a set of muscles in a body-building regime. Often this is based on the expert knowledge of a coach, who has in mind a fitness programme or new skill development. These steps are more like organisational action points than therapeutic tasks.

The tension

The apparent similarity between organisational action points and Small Steps can lead to a tension in the choice of action. The coach has in mind something small and the customer in the organisation is thinking big. He is more used to a heroic kind of action that gets closer to getting a goal achieved. The organisational action point is a step along the way in a well-thought-out plan, and it directly helps to reach the goal. It is not there purely to create movement, with the particulars of the action almost irrelevant. The action is designed to create benefit for the organisation, not something entirely personal to the client.

Avoiding this tension, some solution focused therapists leave out a Small Step entirely. The conversation consists of building a clearer vision of the preferred future and an unearthing of resources. Then they see what happens. This appears to put less pressure on clients, who by definition are already under stress and strain. There is no need to force them into action. They'll do things or they won't, in any case. If there is no agreed action, then there is no consequent feeling of vulnerability from failing to carry out the action. And no consequent blame of self or of the therapist or of the method, if the action happens to be missed or leads to a worse situation.

It's a danger in a coaching relationship if either the coach or the performer get too hung up on the Action or Small Step. The question can arise of 'Why didn't you do it?' or 'Was it done well enough?' It can lead to defensiveness or even argument, probably unhelpful routes. Preferably, the Small Step is the best idea that occurred at a certain moment in a coaching conversation. It may or may not help, and if someone has a better idea about what to do twenty minutes or a day or two later, then there's at least as much reason to go with the new idea.

Enter the Short Story

In some coaching conversations, the Short Story can go before or after the Small Action or it can replace it.

The Short Story is a recap by the performer of the most memorable, meaningful, significant or useful parts of the conversation so far. It tells how things are going to be when the performer next tackles the issue that is under discussion.

It is based on the Platform and imbued with all the magic of the conversation, including the pertinent aspects of the Future Perfect, the finest of the Know-how and Counters, and the considered and sifted collection of possible actions gathered along the way.

I've noticed that a Short Story often happens spontaneously during my coaching conversations. For example, one senior executive wanted to improve her presentation skills. She had been told her presentations were dull, and during the coaching session she described what a really terrific presentation by her would be like (Future Perfect) and told me about the best presentations she had given in the past (Counters), and I offered her some tips (Know-how) and Affirms.

Then I invited her to describe what would happen at her next presentation, and she explained in detail the warm-up process she would use immediately before the meeting, how she would have her notes organised, the way she would breathe during the opening moments of speaking, how she would maintain eye contact with the audience, and so on, through to the reaction she expected at the end – namely one or two colleagues coming up to tell her it had been better than they had anticipated.

Another client, a chief executive, wanted coaching on dealing more effectively with the media. He began his Short Story by saying, 'I know exactly what I'm going to get interviewed about this week – and here's how I'm going to handle it,' before describing how he would confidently use the techniques we had been exploring during the coaching conversation.

Rehearsal and visualisation

The Short Story in these and other cases seems to work as a visualisation or mental rehearsal for the performer, as they assimilate all the most relevant and useful information from the earlier parts of the conversation.

It is an additional tool, leaving open the possibility of a Small Step, such as an initial action point, or a noticing task, in the traditional ways. An action point might remain an excellent idea, for example, if the performer expects to go away with one and believes it will be useful.

As the performer talks through the Short Story there is a palpable sense of these events happening. The client sounds confident, motivated, plausible and in control of all the details. The coach is impressed – and probably says so. And they all lived happily ever after.

References: The Solutions Focus – the SIMPLE way to positive change, by Paul Z Jackson and Mark McKergow.