Moving FORWARD with solution-focused change
A results-oriented and appreciative way of making progress
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The solution-focused approach

Just before the turn of the millennium, a relatively new approach to psychotherapy began to raise curiosity among some organizational consultants, coaches, and trainers. Articles and books claimed this approach to be quite different from other approaches. They claimed it was simple, positive, and amazingly effective. Around that time, several groups of people in different parts of the world started using the approach in organizational settings. Now, roughly ten years later, these pioneers have made considerable progress. They discovered the solution-focused model is also very useful outside the field of therapy. Coaches, trainers, consultants, and managers have started to apply the approach, or parts of it. This has helped them to be more effective in achieving their goals. Moreover, often, at the same time, it has made their work more enjoyable.

Below follows a description of the solution-focused approach to change. We developed a simple and, hopefully, *sticky* acronym, FORWARD, to make it easier for you to start applying and to remember the main ingredients of the solution-focused model. Next, some examples will follow on how to apply the solution-focused model in the workplace. We will end the article with possible ways forward.

What is solution-focused change?

Many authors describe the solution-focused approach as a process in which practitioners invite their clients to envision their preferred future. Next, they start asking questions about the clients' strengths and resources, and about things that have already gone well and then they invite them to take small steps forward. Often in this process, they use techniques like **scaling,** the **miracle question**, **exception finding questions** and **coping questions**.

The FORWARD-model

A new and different way of explaining the solution-focused approach is through the FORWARD acronym. The letters FORWARD stand for:

F	Focus	Focus on what you want to be different
O	Outcomes	Describe the desired outcome in detail

R	Realized	Describe results already realized
W	When	When did similar successes already happen
A	Action	One small step forward
R	Results	Monitor for achievement of new results
D	Desire	Make desire for further change explicit

Below follows a brief description of each step:

1. **Focus on what you want to be different**
   The first step in the solution-focused change process is usually to focus on what you want to change and why you want to change that. There may be two kinds of desire for change: 1) there is something negative you want to get rid of (a problem) and 2) there is something positive you want more of (an unfulfilled aspiration). In this first step of the solution-focused change process, you ask questions like:
   - What would you like to be different?
   - What is it you want to change?
   - What is the reason you want things to be different?
   - How is the current situation bothering you?
   A remarkable aspect of the solution-focused approach is that you skip problem analysis and diagnosis. Analyzing why the problem exists and who is responsible for causing the problems are not part of the approach **(read more).** Instead, you take the shortest route to the desired outcomes.

2. **Outcomes desired are made specific**
   Next, you focus your attention on specifying how you want things to be. In other words, what should be the concrete positive results of the change process? An important precondition of making any change process succeed is to know specifically what you want to achieve **(read more).** When people start formulating how they want things to be different, they often become excited and hopeful. By focusing on specific positive goals, the change process has actually begun. In this step, you ask questions like the following:
   - How would you like things to be different?
   - What do you want to achieve?
   - What will be different when the change has succeeded?
   - What will you do differently?
   - How will others notice things have become better?
   - What advantages will this have?

3. **Describe results already realized**
   The third step is often to look specifically at what is already there. It is like looking at the glass as half full. This often has the following strong positive effects: 1) people involved find new energy and hope **(read more).** People tend to overlook what has already been achieved. When they rediscover what is already working well, they often become more optimistic and hopeful, 2) they find some practical ideas to hold on to what works well and to make some progress. The following questions are associated with this step:
   - What is already going well?
   - Which results have already been achieved?
   - What helped?
   - What worked well before?

4. **When did success already happen?**
   The following step is to identify specific situations in the past in which things have already gone better. This might involve: a) an exception to the problem: the current problem was less problematic, or b) an earlier success: the situation you want to achieve was already

happening to some extent **(read more).** When you have identified such a situation, you answer questions like:
- What went right in this situation?
- What was different in this situation?
- What made possible for things to go better?
- What was your own role in this success?

5. **Action: one small step forward**

   Then, the attention shifts to taking action by looking at how earlier success is useful for the current situation. This is sometimes called *building a bridge between successes in the past to success in the future.* You focus on taking one small step forward instead of taking a big leap. Taking small steps has several advantages: 1) it is easy: the required energy, motivation, and trust are minimal, 2) it is safe: if it does not work not much will be lost, 3) it is encouraging: aiming for a small step implies something positive, namely that there is already a lot functioning well as it is, 4) there is a chance of positive snowball effects: the one small step approach has a surprising side effect: it may lead to a snowball effect: one small improvement may unexpectedly bring about more positive change **(read more).** Associated with this step are questions like:
   - How is what we talked about relevant for your current situation?
   - What small step forward could you take?
   - How would you notice that this small step would work?

6. **Results achieved are monitored**

   After the small step forward has been taken you, focus your attention on what goes better. This purposeful improvement-focus helps you to notice positive changes, even small ones. Noticing that you are moving forward is supportive to making further change. First, is it encouraging to notice you are on the right way. Second, it provides you with a clear sense of what works so that it will become easier to take next steps forward. In this step, the following questions are answered:
   - What is going better?
   - What helped?
   - What did you specifically do that worked?
   - What else went better?
   - Etc.

7. **Desire for further change is made explicit**

   A next step is to ask specifically what further change is desired. Doing this allows you check your motivation for further change and to adjust you goals, if necessary. The benefits of frequently asking what further change you want are threefold: 1) motivational: by remembering why you want things to be different you re-inject new motivation for change, 2) fine-tuning: it allows you to fine-tune your goals by taking into account new things that have happened, or new insights you may have gained, 3) efficiency: it keeps you from doing too much. The question may help you to realize that you have already done enough and that you don't need to make further changes. Questions in this step may be:
   - What further change do you need?
   - When will you know you have made enough progress?

Use the FORWARD-model like a recipe

The FORWARD model is a descriptive model, not a prescriptive model. Its intention is to describe what happens during a solution-focused change process. Its purpose is to inspire you, not to confine you. The order in which to use these steps is not mandatory. You may also decide to leave out one or more steps when you apply the model. Think of the model as a recipe. You can freely apply these steps, add your own flavors, and experiment. Can you recognize in the case below how the FORWARD steps are taken?

Case: improving productivity

Charles wants to improve the productivity of his team because it has been far too low the last few months. The team is now performing on 49% productivity while the monthly target is 63%. Charles' short-term goal is to get back on target within three months. That way everybody will clearly see the team is back on the right track. It would mean more job security for everyone within the team. In addition, it would mean that the business unit manager would worry less about the team and get off Charles' back more. It would also be good for Charles' reputation. It would prove that he is able to turn a bad-performing team into a well-performing team. Charles thinks of how he has managed before to turn a lesser team performance into a better one. He had organized a team meeting in which he discussed all available information with his team and expressed his worry. He had asked the team to come up with ideas to improve the financial performance. In response to this, several good ideas were brought forward. Charles noticed that the team members made more appointments with customers and that sales increased quickly. Charles realizes that the following things worked well: informing the team fully, sharing his worries, and activating every team member to come up with improvements without telling them specifically what to do. Charles again arranges a team meeting and does the same things. This time too, it leads to a quick recovery of the financial performance. The solutions turned out to be already there within the team but they were not fully utilized. By the intervention Charles made they have become more available so that they could be used to improve the results.

Two meanings of FORWARD

For us, the acronym FORWARD has two meanings. The first meaning refers to the characteristics of the approach. The solution-focused approach enables you to focus constantly on helping people move forward in the desired direction. The second meaning of the word refers to how practitioners have made progress in understanding and applying the solution-focused approach in a wide variety of settings. A first field of application for many was in the context of personal coaching, a setting more or less comparable to psychotherapy.

Advantages of the solution-focused approach

When people start applying the solution-focused approach, it can be challenging. You have to learn new skills, mainly in asking helpful questions. In addition, you have to unlearn some things. You leave certain very familiar things out when you work solution-focused, like analyzing problems, finding out who is to blame, and looking primarily at what is not right. When you manage to learn these new skills, the advantages can be great. Some of the main advantages are:

1. The solution focused approach works as least as well as other approaches.
2. The approach can be very broadly applied. It turns out to be useful for dealing with a wide range of problems and goals.
3. It works much faster than many other approaches.
4. Clients are more satisfied with themselves and about the change process.
5. Practitioners who use the model to help others are more satisfied with their work.

New applications of the solution-focused model

These positive effects have encouraged many people to start using the solution-focused model in a broader context. Consultants applying it become more client-focused. They have learned how to help clients formulate their own goals and to find their own solutions by asking the right kinds of questions. They have noticed that clients have become more independent because they found out they could solve their own problems.

Solution-focused change in groups

'Solutionists' also began to apply the solution-focused model more and more in group situations. From the time it was invented, the solution-focused model had been applied in group situations, mainly in family therapy. Many people have now found that they can apply it in organizational group settings as well. All the steps in the FORWARD-model can be easily used in groups. You can

use the model to formulate goals, to share what is going well, to identify steps forward, and so forth.

Solution-focused management

A particular challenge has been to make the solution-focused model available to managers. Many people were convinced right away that managers could use solution-focused techniques to help their employees. However, we wrestled for quite some time with the question about how to deal with situations in which employees are not performing well. The normal solution-focused steps are specifically aimed at helping people to make progress in the direction of their own choice. However, what should a manager do when an employee is not meeting minimal requirements or when the employee's behavior is unacceptable because it is harmful to others or to the organization? We realized that in these situations the goals of the manager (and the organization) are the starting point for the conversation. These situations ask primarily for providing direction instead of helping. Thinking and experimenting more with these thoughts, we developed a tool, which we call the goals continuum. We developed ways in which the solution-focused appreciativeness and clarity can be used to direct people. We refer interested readers to **this article** to learn more about that model.

Further FORWARD

The solution-focused approach is not unique in the sense that it overlaps to some extent with positive change approaches like **Appreciative Inquiry**, the **Positive Deviance initiative**, **Positive Psychology** and **Strengths-based management**. Will all these approaches merge into one new approach? Or will they develop further more or less independently from each other? Who knows…? One thing seems certain, however. The solution-focused approach will not stay the same. It will develop further.

Insoo Kim Berg once answered the following question: "Do you see the solution-focused approach as a finished approach or do you think it will keep on developing and changing?" She started laughing and answered right away in a don't-be-silly kind of way: "Oh no, it's not finished. For any model to stay alive it will need to constantly keep developing and renewing itself." She smiled brightly and continued: "So, we need bright young people who will do that."

We would like to invite you to join us in further developing the solution-focused approach by starting to try out some of the things mentioned in this article and by sharing your experiences. Together we may find small steps forward.

> We dedicate this article to the memory of Insoo Kim Berg who taught us many
> things we use every day and who remains an example and inspiration to us.

Coert Visser is a coach and trainer using the solution-focused approach to change. He has written many articles and a few books. His book (Doen wat werkt), which he co-wrote with Gwenda Schlundt Bodien, was awarded a prize for best (HR)management book by a professional jury and by a public jury. He has also interviewed thought leaders like Insoo Kim Berg, David Maister, Carol Dweck, and Jeffrey Pfeffer. More information: **www.oplossingsgerichtveranderen.nl** / **www.m-cc.nl/solutionfocusedchange.htm** / **Dutch network** / **Dutch blog**

Gwenda Schlundt Bodien is founder of **Positron**, Personnel management & Coaching. Together with Coert Visser she co founded the Dutch solution-focused network NOAM. She does individual coaching, team coaching, organizational consultancy and training. Gwenda has published many articles and a few books on HRM and the solution-focused practice.