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## **Random Micro Solution Focused Work - Or why a random coaching machine might be a better coach**

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### **Summary**

Solution focused work is without doubt successful and very useful for a lot of situations. Nevertheless, this approach offers a lot of potential that has not been explored so far because of the narrow definition most practitioners use. Solution focused work could be more appropriate and useful in situations and settings that cannot (or only partly) be covered with the present understanding, if it would offer a wider range of solution focused activities.

This article briefly analyzes a common solution focused coaching definition, and shows how our understanding of each single aspect of this definition not only restricts us as coaches in our work, but also neglects potential target groups. To capture more of this hidden potential we have to explore new forms of solution focused work. Random micro coaching invites us to think about the optimal length of a coaching session, as well as about the way practitioners derive their questions. This approach not only proposes to ask coaching questions randomly but also to offer brief (or micro) coaching settings. Get involved in it and explore the advantages of random micro solution focused work.

The solution focused community is getting bigger, more and more studies, articles and books about the way coaching works are being written, and solution focused approaches are meanwhile being applied to organisational issues and transferred into other fields of life (McKergow 2004: 9). According to Jackson and McKergow, solution focused work is a “powerful, practical and proven approach to positive change” (Jackson and McKergow 2002: 1). These are only a few of the indications that show that solution focused work is not only successful but also spreading around the world.

Nevertheless, this approach offers a lot that has not been explored so far. On the one hand, the transfer into different fields promises a lot of interesting and yet undiscovered benefits and synergy effects. On the other hand, a lot of potential still lies in the approach itself. If we look closer we realise that many practitioners use quite a narrow definition which restricts them.

Solution focused coaching is often constructed in the following or a similar way: a) There is a client b) with a serious problem c) who has to contact d) a coach who asks e) a lot of questions f) in a certain way.

Such a definition destroys much of the potential in different and yet related ways. Although this is a very common definition among practitioners, it is important to notice that this construction is only one of many possibilities! There are other constructions and definitions of solution focused work which suit much better situations that are not covered by the above and which could open completely new ways.

Let's consider the above construction in detail and see if it could make sense to define certain aspects differently:

*a) There is a client (...)* I agree with the opinion that there has to be some kind of client to work with. The question rather is the following: What criteria define a client? And do they have to be the way we defined them? There seems to be much agreement on these criteria. If you think about your clients you may notice for example that they all have a problem, that they contacted you, that they want to change something, that they know that you are the coach and they are the client, etc. Could you imagine to work with people with opposite criteria, e.g. with people who don't know that you coach them or who don't know (yet) that they have a problem, or who have never contacted you? These people might not be the clients we are used to. Nevertheless, a solution focus could also be very useful to them. Imagine that you are at work and suddenly your colleague asks you: "How would you realize this evening that today was a very good day?" I'm sure that you could benefit from this question. Even though you didn't want to change something before the question or you are not a client, you might benefit from questions like these. This indicates that a lot of people who have not yet been coaching clients or will never be coaching clients could nevertheless benefit from solution focused questions. In this sense the usually narrow definition covers only a part of the whole possible range.

*b) (...)* with a serious problem (...) There are a lot of potential clients who don't have a problem that is serious enough to contact a coach. They usually deal with these less dramatic questions and decisions by themselves. Some of these questions are easily solved without help from outside, some of them are trickier. A situation, a decision or a question has to reach a certain value on a dramatic scale before our clients contact us. You might have worked with clients who had problems at work or within the family and who have tried lots of things before they came to you. But have you ever worked with someone who didn't know what to cook for dinner or what to wear tomorrow? In the beginning this idea might seem funny, but if you explore this question, you suddenly realize that there are many situations like these where a solution focus could be helpful even though the situation is not very problematic. It becomes clear that there are a lot of questions, decisions and problematic situations in one's life, but that only a very small number of these are taken into a coaching session. The field of simple, not very dramatic, questions is far larger. There are a lot more poten-

tial clients, than we can imagine today, if we manage to create an appropriate and beneficial solution focused setting for them.

*c) (...) who has to contact (...)* Clients usually have to contact the coach to schedule the first meeting. For some people, this first step is very difficult for a variety of reasons: On the one hand, they might not know anything about solution focused coaching or where to find a good coach. On the other hand, they might be afraid because they don't know what will happen during a solution focused coaching session or because they don't want to talk to someone that they don't know. A person who has a less important issue is unlikely to overcome her inhibitions. But this does not mean that a solution focus could not be very helpful to her or even lead her to a better solution. To get more clients we therefore have to ask ourselves how we can decrease the inhibition threshold of contacting us.

*d) (...) a coach who asks (...)* Does it have to be a coach who asks these helpful questions? Or could everybody do this? I agree with people who think that it takes a lot to become a good solution focused practitioner. But I am also convinced that everybody can ask helpful solution focused questions. Maybe most of the people ask such questions without knowing it. But does it have to be a human being or could a computer do the same job? In the thinking of constructivism, the coach, in her own world, can never know what question fits best. So she simply chooses a question from a set of questions in her mind and hopes that this is helpful. This is something that a programmed computer with thousands of solution focused questions could easily do. You could even tell it to ask the questions in a certain order. There might be a lot of reasons why this is not a good idea. However if we focus on the advantages we may realize, for example, that for people who don't want to talk about their problem, a computer-coach might even be the better choice.

*e) (...) a lot of questions (...)* The length of a coaching session varies not only from coach to coach but also from client to client or problem to problem. There is also less agreement among solution focused practitioners about the optimal number of questions or length of time. The range might go from 20 to 30 minutes, to 2 or 3 hours. Potential clients therefore have to decide how much time they are willing to spend for one session. If the desired time frame is within the above range there is no problem. But if they want to spend less time, for example only five minutes, they might not find a practitioner who offers such *micro coaching*. This does not mean that problems can always be solved within this short amount of time. Yet sometimes less time or fewer questions could be more. There might even be situations where one question is all it needs, or situations where the client not want to spend more time on the issue at that moment. In a constructionist or a solution focused thinking the client is expert for his world and knows how many questions are enough for her. This argument leads to two simple conclusions: To fit better to the huge variety of clients and problems it makes sense to offer a range from a "one-question-coaching" to a long term coaching setting, and the length of the coaching should be determinable by the coachee.

f) (...) *in a certain way*. Most solution focused practitioners have their own way of asking questions. They may use common questions e.g. “solution-building questions” (Cauffman and Berg 2002: 4) or have adapted them or invented their own questions that fit their personal style of coaching. You probably won’t find two exactly identical coaching styles. Most coaching models have a defined beginning (e.g. a question like: “What brings you to me?”); they usually start with what Cauffman and Berg call “Socialising” (Cauffman and Berg 2002: 6, Cauffman 2003: 1), and a defined end (e.g. a question like: “How useful was this coaching session for you on a scale from 1 to 10”). Even the middle part is often structured. There are practitioners who try to fit their questions to their clients and practitioners who ask the same questions in the same order every time. Some coaches try to play with the order of the questions. Cauffman for example mentions that the steps of his eight step dance can be combined “into an idiosyncratic combination that suits the specific situation” solution focused coaches are dealing with (Cauffman 2003: 1). There are thousands of different ways, but every coaching style or model has a certain structure. Could you imagine solution focused work without a structure? Without a certain beginning or an end? These questions lead us to the idea of randomness. I have never seen a coach who randomly asks his questions from the beginning to the end. Why not? Is it not helpful? Is it really, like Cauffman says, an unorganised hopping around (Cauffman 2003: 1)? How do we know that our coaching style is better than total randomness? How can a practitioner say that she works in a solution focused way and believes in Constructionism and non-linearity, and at the same time knows what (order) is best for the client? This truly is a contradiction. But if it is impossible to know what order fits best, how do practitioners choose their questions? And why don’t they rely on randomness? I don’t want to propose that everybody should switch to *random coaching*, but randomness in coaching can be viewed as another option that could open a new field of study, and that sometimes could even be more helpful. Consider for example the situation where you as solution focused practitioner are out of good questions and don’t know how to proceed, how do you choose your next question? Why not choose a question randomly and see what happens? The idea of randomness could offer us another option to our normal way of coaching and could at the same time be another way of coaching.

It should have become clear that the above definition is only one way to define coaching. If we stay within this definition we lose a lot of the potential that solution focused work offers us.

Perhaps it makes sense to describe coaching in the following way:

There is a person (e.g. a manager) who does not want to talk to anyone about her issue and who is looking for a solution within the next five minutes. She has only a simple question, but needs some other input. Therefore she visits an internet coaching machine where a computer asks her one randomly chosen solution focused question

with the option to stop after the question or to go on and get another one. This goes on until she decides to stop and do something else.

For this person a *random micro solution focused* way of coaching might be the best way to deal with her question. She would never have contacted a coach, because of the relatively low seriousness of the problem, the limited time frame and her decision not to talk to anyone. Therefore this random coaching machine is a better coach for her than "traditional" solution focused coaching.

Random micro solution focused work is an approach that uses solution focused questions in a random and micro way:

The questions are randomly chosen from a set of defined solution focused questions e.g. within a computer database or on a set of cards. This randomness has many advantages: It does not depend on the client, on the problem, on the situation or even on the coach. This independence not only allows it to study the usefulness of one single question *ceteris paribus* but also fits perfectly with the concepts of constructionism, chaos theory and systems theory. If we believe in these theories we can never know what question fits best or even better than another question because we don't live in one simple linear world. These theories could even lead to the conclusion that randomness is the best we can do as coaches, or at least as good as any other concept.

The micro aspect refers to the number of questions asked or the length of the coaching. In a constructionists and systems theoreticians' world, every problem, situation, and client is completely different. Therefore solution focused work has to have different forms. The number of questions that are most helpful in a special situation can vary a lot. There might be situations where one question is all that is needed and in other situations two hours of coaching might only be the beginning. In micro solution focused settings only a few questions get asked. This makes sense for all the situations and clients where only a few questions are enough either because of the limited time the client has or because of the positive effects these questions have. If micro coaching is combined with a mechanism where the client can choose after every question if she wants to stop or to go on (e.g. by asking her), it can be very short (one question) or get very long too.

I'm not proposing that the random micro solution focused concept is better than other forms, but that this form, like every other form of coaching, fits better to a certain set of problems, circumstances, and clients. Because of the explicit focus on the optimal time frame as well as the fact that random micro coaching does not need a coach (almost everybody can choose a random question) this way of solution focused work perfectly fits into the management setting. Imagine a company where every employee has their own set of random coaching cards which are used to help solve their colleagues' problems, to make meetings worthwhile, or to create decisions that are con-

sistent with the company's strategies. This way solution focused work would not only be beneficial but also be part of the corporate culture.

To explore the full potential, and to be most helpful, solution focused work has to evolve. It should have become clear that the traditional view covers only a small part of the whole possible range. New concepts have to be created. Therefore random micro solution focused work is an attempt to do more of the same and at the same time to do something completely different in order to be most helpful. So get involved and explore the advantages of random micro solution focused work. You will be surprised!

## References

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