Solution Focus in Organizations

Alan Kay: **The Glasgow Group**
Accelerate Change with Solution Focus

Solution Focus (SF) is a smart model for change, unique only in its simplicity. Much of what is espoused and practiced in solution focus has been around in various ways for some time. What makes it different and possibly more effective is the framework in which it is practiced, namely:

- What's working
- What do we want when the problem goes away
- What small steps might get us moving in that direction

There are many change practices that are helpful to individuals and organizations. Positive Psychology, Appreciative inquiry and so on, have helped build a base of powerful research and practice knowledge supporting the idea that, more often than not we can make change work for us.

The origins of Solution Focus lie in the world of therapy. Not the kind of therapy that requires lots of our time getting to understand what's wrong and why, hopefully to yield at some point insights about getting better. Instead SF looks at what we want to happen so that we can go forward. We reframe problems by looking among them for purposeful elements, solutions within, and willfully ignore the *cause* of what troubles us.

"In the 1970's and in early 1980's, a startling discovery was made that almost every problem contains an element of solutions." Inso Kim Berg.

Inso Kim Berg's partner Steve De Shazer subsequently came up with the notion that SF was like a set of skeleton keys that opened the door to solutions. Based on what had worked in the past, participants were encouraged to do something different and pay attention to the effect it had on them and others.

Today, SF is helping transform organizations. Few change models can have so easily transferred from one discipline to another. Perhaps that's because organizations are a lot like families.

Most, if not all organizations tend to be problem focused, witness the SWOT analysis that not surprisingly weighs heavily on the weaknesses and threats and pays scant attention to strengths and opportunities. That said, having a problem focus is not entirely a problem - a great capability of humans is to understand problems and fix them. If scientists and engineers didn't root around problems, many medical discoveries wouldn't happen and bridges would collapse. Of course, creativity also has also had a hand in the journey of human progress. So have happy accidents, usually caused by diligent work.

So, if a problem focus works for engineers, why is it less helpful among people inside organizations? The simple answer is that discussion of problems and their cause slows things down, blunts productivity and under-utilizes people resources. In SF we don't obsess about the problem, and certainly not its cause. Instead, we move faster and more effectively towards things that work.

Ah yes, you say, but what if the solution we arrive at is the wrong one? The answers are: a) it's better to have made progress right away and to learn something, b) if indeed we do manage to get a solution via the slower problem/cause mode they are often highly constrained, c) things change all the time anyway and the situation often resolves itself by osmosis, only slowly and not the way we want. So, why not use SF to speed up the process. How?

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The first step is to be counterintuitive: stop using the ancient and well loved tool, i.e., complain / understand / fix. Instead:

The solution focus steps	Why?	So that we…
Talk *briefly* about the problem – the 'issue'	Not the cause! Instead, quickly define a) where to focus and b) what we want to be different	Begin somewhere and know what we want to change.
What worked in the past? What's working now?	Despite the problem we're here today, so how did we do it? Something's working!	Affirm that we have strengths / resources allowing us to see forward more purposefully
What do we want to have happen ideally, in the future	If the problem were to disappear, what would we do instead	Build on our resources to paint a detailed picture of progress and things done well with the problem gone
Small steps	With the current resources and the better future in mind what micro steps do we need to get going	See ourselves making progress in order to take on even more

It can't be that simple, can it? Not really. In every practice there are many deviations and exceptions. Thus in SF we treat every case as different, and those who use it see SF more as a tool box than a 'system'.

What really matters is how we practice SF. These tenets help make the SF difference come to life:

- Ask not tell
- The customer is the expert in the change they want, not you
- You do not need to have all the answers in order to make progress – work with what you have
- Find the resources and the small steps will appear
- Support your customer by letting them own the ideas and support that notion
- Change as little as possible

If this all sounds a little like buttercups and butterflies, then SF may not be for you. But, be careful not to dismiss it simply because it doesn't fit your framework for change. Change is happening all the time, with or without your influence, and SF is simply a method to speed up change that might just work.

More Reading: 21 questions about Solutions Focus

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Professional association: http://www.asfct.org   Twitter: alankay1
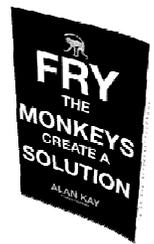
Alan Kay, Principal of The Glasgow Group is a solution focused change consultant. Since founding The Glasgow Group in 1994, his busy consulting practice counts some of a wide range of North America's large, mid-sized and small organizations among its clients. He has also delivered management development solutions to vocational colleges in the UK.
Focused on speeding up strategic and human change using existing resources, his work is driven by Solution Focus to create sustainable attitudinal and behavioural change particularly towards the customer. His book is, 'Fry the Monkeys, Create a Solution', and his work has been published several times in books and journals. Alan also teaches executive development students at the Schulich School of Business, York University. He is board member of ABC Canada Literacy and a member of the CMA education committee.

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