The Journey to Solution Focus

by Géry Derbier and Soledad Pinter

"Solution focus" originated in the therapeutic world around the 1980s at the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA.[1] Over years of practice at that facility, Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg, influenced by the brief therapy approach of the Mental Research Institute, discovered and refined a specific approach to conversations with clients:[2]

- It begins with some version of the question, "How are you hoping that our talking together will make a difference in your life?"

- It is essentially future-focused, with questions along the lines of, "How would you notice that the miracle has happened?" that build a detailed description of the client's preferred future.

- It explores when the client has already been able to achieve aspects of the preferred future.

- It does not assume that the therapist knows what clients need to do to solve their problems, to build resilience, to harness their strengths, and so on.

In the early 2000s, these ideas began spreading into the world of corporations, with an increasing number of applications in such fields as leadership development, training, teamwork, appraisal meetings, strategic planning, and more.

Soledad Pinter and I are colleagues who share a deep interest in the concept of solution focus. In this article, we each share a story of such an application in the business realm.

Derbier on Solution Focus in the Large

Identicar[3] is a family-owned company of about 200 employees, based in France, that since its inception in 1982 has continually reinvented itself to protect drivers and their vehicles. Upon meeting Identicar's executives in 2015, I learned that the company had been spending months working very hard collectively to figure out the future of the business. Though happy with the results of that envisioning phase, management was concerned about how to make that future happen. As the COO and the HR director said during our first one-hour meeting, Identicar had to change, but, at the same time, the company wanted to keep its "agility." Back then, I had no idea what that meant, except that the executive committee was willing to give the following idea a try: consider the organization as a product and apply core Agile principles to its development. We incorporated an additional ingredient as well: solution-focused conversations.

How It Got Started

We began with a three-hour workshop for the executive committee, which included about 10 people. The workshop was structured with the essential solution-focused conversation tools.[4] First, the committee built a shared description of what a successful change initiative would look like, aka the "perfect future." This big picture was built in two iterations so that all would have first-hand experience of what is meant by the Heart of Agile imperatives: collaborate, deliver, reflect, improve.[5] Then, they pondered the following questions on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 meaning the perfect future is already in existence and 1 being the opposite:

- Where is the company at the moment?

- What makes it already different from 1?

- What differences would you notice if it was just one step further along?

These remarkably simple (but difficult-to-answer) questions gave the entire committee a practical understanding of how the whole initiative would develop and a sense of confidence that some tangible results were achievable within a reasonably short amount of time.

The next step was to invite a core team of people from different parts of the organization, have them use a simple steering mechanism (an iteration every six weeks that would actually deliver some change in the organization that would make a tangible difference),

and equip them with simple solution-focused thinking tools to design the content of each iteration. The COO volunteered to be part of the core team, acting as its host.

The core team started with a one-day workshop that was an expanded version of the executive committee workshop. The team allotted more time to depicting the perfect future and formed subgroups to handle different subjects. At the end of the day, the team had defined the very first signs of progress and established steps that could be taken within a couple of days. The core team gave itself a name that would also become the name of the overall initiative: "Mowgli."

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Solution-Focused Deliveries

Over the course of more than three years, the group implemented many organizational enhancements: changes in the arrangement of physical space, new social activities, new services for employees, new organizational rituals, and more. Let's look at some examples.

Cozy Space for Conversations

One subgroup of the Mowgli team tackled the problem of scarce meeting rooms. Exploring what was already working, group members shared the observation that people tended to gather to chat informally in a small, rather empty place near the elevators and bathroom. This seemed to be true on each of the five floors of the building. As a first step, the group added some comfy, inexpensive furniture at only two floors, without any public announcement whatsoever. Some weeks later, it seemed that people appreciated the initiative and were using those spots more and more, even for short "official" meetings. The group soon bought additional furniture for the remaining floors.

The Soft Power of Invitation

One theme the Mowgli team decided to address was breaking down silos and supporting better communication between departments. Particularly in France, it is commonly held that one of the best ways to have a conversation is during the sharing of a meal. Of course, some people from different departments were already eating together occasionally. This subgroup decided to organize lunches and to invite selected people from different parts of the organization to those meals.

When examining "What's better?" weeks later, the group reported that some lunches did take place, but not everyone had responded to the invitation. Team members decided the next small step would be to come up with a better invitation. Thinking of a time when they themselves had received a compelling invitation, group members decided that instead of using a digital invitation, they would go for the more old-fashioned *carton d'invitation*, but with a twist. They would put the card in an envelope and secretly place the envelope at the desk of the invited person to create an element of surprise around these mystery lunches. The next week, every lunch had been successful, with every invitation accepted, and the event became an eagerly awaited occasion by many people in the company.

The Surprising Unpredictability of Very Small Steps

Another Mowgli subgroup chose to address the elevated levels of stress in the company. This group would use the usual reflection structure: first depict with as much specific detail as possible a perfect future (i.e., what the workplace would look like when the problem has been solved); then investigate what mechanisms, if any, are already in place to cope with stress; and next conceive a first small change that could be implemented within four or five weeks. The last stage in the reflection process was to imagine a tiny step that was doable within a couple of days.

In the course of imagining the perfect future, the subgroup realized it had to make a distinction between "good" stress, which is linked to the will to perform and to produce value, and "bad" stress, which is to be avoided. The subgroup asserted to the whole group that giving a name to the bad stress would be the first step toward improvement. The group entered a unanimous decision protocol, choosing the name "Gargamel,"[6] after a famous cartoon villain (always defeated at the end of the story by the

smart, little, blue-skinned creatures known as the "Schtroumpf" ["Smurfs," in English]).

Three weeks later, an employee who did not belong to the Mowgli team related the positive effect she had experienced using Gargamel. "Gargamel allowed me to talk with my boss, who happens to be one of the co-owners of the company," she said. "I never had the nerve to tell him I was overloaded and that I was feeling a high level of stress. But I managed to tell him I had a strong feeling that Gargamel was lurking around. And, to my surprise, he immediately entered into a discussion with me to find some way of handling the situation. It's been going really well for me since then." Gargamel soon became part of the company vernacular, helping people begin constructive conversations about stress in the workplace.

Over the following months, employees were offered "Gargamel workshops." As the Mowgli team members had learned some solution-focused coaching skills by practicing them during their own reflection workshops, they invited employees who wanted to deal with a "Gargamel situation"[7] to solution-focused reflecting team sessions. In these sessions, people could get help and ideas from other colleagues on ways to handle their own specific context. It proved to be a great learning and bonding experience for everyone who attended these workshops.

Solution Focus Spreads Across the Organization

As the Mowgli initiative gained visibility and appreciation, other parts of the organization became interested in applying the recipe. The customer services department, for example, set up an initiative to find ways of developing its specific management needs, roles, and responsibilities. Among the differences the customer services people brought in were a more collaborative way of defining business objectives, a new point-of-contact role to support autonomy within the teams, and mutual coaching sessions between managers. The sales department started an initiative to rethink its internal workings as well.

The head of HR became interested in how the solution-focused conversations seemed to help people to work together and produce results within the overall Mowgli initiative. In recruitment interviews, HR employees started to use one of the solution-focused tools, or "units of conversation."[8] They noticed that asking a

candidate the question, "Suppose we decide to work together and it proves to be a good idea for both of us, what would you like us to be saying to each other six months from now?" produced an enjoyable and richer interview.

One of the major beneficiaries of the spread of solution focus has been the evolution of the annual performance review. Reviewers have learned and adapted a very practice-oriented and easily implementable format[9] that departs from the usual problem-centered view. The performance review has become a quarterly ritual throughout most of the company, with both managers and reviewees enjoying this greater frequency and the highly effective use of time that the format makes possible.

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What Fascinates Me with Solution Focus

What fascinates me most with solution focus is its radical simplicity and remarkable efficiency in connecting language, reflection, and action. To elaborate detailed descriptions instead of theorizing about a situation is a surprising and powerful way of gaining clarity. As a side effect, it brings a sense of possibilities that very often translates into a willingness to engage. Using the solution-focused conversation approach is the most pragmatic everyday tool that I have found thus far to handle and do justice to the complexities of human organizations. Consequently, I have been adding solution focus into my otherwise Agile practice for some years, and it is now core to the Heart of Agile culture.

A Challenge for You

Invite a friend for a conversation and ask him or her to recall a recent, sparkling moment — just one moment. Then ask your friend questions to investigate what made this moment so sparkling. Slow down and dig into the details, as in a movie when the camera focuses for minutes on tiny details in a scene. Notice what makes that conversation different than the others.

Pinter on Solution Focus in Coaching

I recently worked with one of the biggest banks in Europe, which needed to transform its internal way of working to improve time to market and increase customer satisfaction. More than 100 coaches with different backgrounds had been summoned for this task over the past few years. As part of this task force team, two fellow colleagues and I were assigned to support an area inside IT, coaching the director, a team of eight managers, and around 13 scrum teams.

Solution focus is a nice way to begin coaching team leaders and managers (individually or as a group). We have used solution focus several times at different management levels. Let's explore two examples: one at the individual level and the other at the team level.

> *As Mary told me the different things she spotted while visualizing her perfect future, I wrote each one down on a Post-it Note.*

A Solution Focus Exercise at the Individual Level

One of the eight managers — we'll call her "Mary" — wanted to meet to talk about next steps with the coaching strategy. She had some concerns regarding what she termed the "waste of coaching resources." Mary complained that "we are not doing the things that matter" and that "people are neither improving on getting ownership of things nor being proactive, as fast as expected or needed." Part of her natural behavior was to complain about the status quo. She said that she was willing to make the necessary change, but, at the same time, she wasn't letting go of old habits. Mary usually complained about "us," which might refer to the management coaching team, her colleagues on the management team, and/or the people in the department in general.

While she was talking to me at the coffee machine about her concerns, in an effort to reorient the conversation, I proposed that we try a small exercise. We wrote her three major concerns, mentioned above, on Post-it Notes. Then we used the "miracle question" exercise to visualize her perfect future. I started by telling her:

"Imagine that tomorrow you come into the office, you walk to your department area, and all your reasons for concern are gone, but no one had told you anything about it." I then asked Mary the following questions:

- What would you notice is different?

- What would give you a hint that something had changed overnight?

- What would you see? What about the people? What else?

- How do you feel about this? Tell me more….

As Mary told me the different things she spotted while visualizing her perfect future, I wrote each one down on a Post-it Note. Then, for each item noted, I asked her, "On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is that perfect department area you walked into at the beginning of the exercise, where do you think we are today?" She put a number next to each Post-it. By doing this, Mary turned intangible perceptions into facts she could measure.

Next, I asked Mary to "Tell me which of these items already exist in your department area to some extent; good things that are not yet at '10' but are evident and are higher than a '1.' " This was quite difficult for her to see and, after some moments of reflection, she could identify four aspects that she could see in the teams today. An interesting outcome was Mary's realization that the pain points she had been complaining about weren't the ones with the lowest scores. On the contrary, they were pretty high on the scale. It was clear from the exercise that, based on her previous complaints, the teams never would have guessed the real pain behind her words.

I then invited Mary to focus on the one item with the lowest rating and asked:

- If tomorrow, when you come to the office, this particular aspect has a rating of 3 instead of a 2, what would you notice is different that has raised it to a 3?

- Can you describe the change in more detail?

- How would you feel about it?

- What would others notice that is different with you?

Mary quickly identified a very small action that would raise that 2 rating to a 3. After that, we briefly discussed which small action we could start doing that afternoon

to move toward that 3. That small identified action will become the first quick, small experiment to probe.

We needed to end the exercise at that point, as Mary had to leave for another meeting. She liked what we had done, took a picture of the Post-it Notes, and proposed running this exercise with the rest of the management team in the department.

Follow-Up Actions

Later that same day, Mary talked to the relevant team and shared the findings and the proposed small experiment to probe. Team members accepted the experiment and tried it that very afternoon. The experiment resulted in an improvement in the visualization of their tasks board to show the status of tasks and deliveries by feature.

Takeaways and Learnings

- Every moment can be an opportunity to trigger a small change, a new experiment to probe.

- It is important to focus on supporting people on their journey to the solution, throughout the exercise, at their own pace.

- Remember to follow up on the experiment(s) in the very short term, aiming for the adoption and sustainability of the practice probed.

A Solution Focus Exercise at the Team Level

One of the scrum teams was doing quite well, but for reasons identified as external to the team, team members were feeling stuck and not moving forward in their continuous delivery after every sprint as they were used to doing. They were willing to explore and try new, small experiments, but they had run out of ideas.

During a reflection workshop at the end of one sprint, we agreed to use solution-focused questions to visualize a perfect future regarding collaboration, delivery, and the way the team experiments with improvements. The aim was to allow team members to visualize the perfect future where that feeling of being stuck is gone, while noticing what is unfolding differently. Describing in detail the facts, feelings, and perceptions of that perfect future helped the team identify new, small improvements to try right away.

We did three rounds, with each reflecting on a different aspect.

In the first round, we investigated collaboration. We used a deck of collaboration cards,[10] created by Cutter Consortium Senior Consultant Alistair Cockburn (Guest Editor of this issue of *Cutter Business Technology Journal*), that has different suits with actions to help teams start to collaborate. We gave one card to each team member to read aloud. Then we invited the team to think about each action:

- Have you noticed this card being played in your daily work?

  If the answer was yes:

  o What did you notice about the environment?

  o How would you describe people's reaction?

  o How did you feel?

  o What else?

  If the answer was no:

  o What would you notice if you came to work tomorrow and the problem was gone, but no one had told you about its being gone?

  o What would you notice is different?

The team members scored each topic on a scale of 1 to 10. To score the topic, they revisited where they were today with that topic. They then discussed how they could improve the topic's rating by one point and came up with one experiment to try.

Throughout the exercise, people discussed their cards, and even combined them to maximize the potential experiments to improve collaboration and outcome. Whenever more than one idea came up, they dot-voted[11] to prioritize and chose one to try (or two if the ideas were small enough).

The second round was about delivery. We asked about a perfect future where they were able to validate or invalidate their decisions more quickly than they could today. They pictured delivery into production in smaller batches. This round produced an awareness of how big the deliveries were and helped them find a different way to slice deliveries to reduce the gap

between the timing of their perfect future validation/ invalidation of decisions and the present timing. As an immediate action, they started conversations with the team responsible for the IT release calendar to reduce the time to market of these smaller deliveries.

As the last round of the exercise, we asked team members to reflect on how to improve, in just one aspect, the way they are trying experiments. Again, using the miracle question, they listed actions, discussed, and voted. They decided to shorten the cadence of the experiments from two weeks to one week, so that they could follow up and adapt the experiments sooner for potentially better and more sustainable improvements.

What Fascinates Me with Solution Focus

What fascinates me the most about solution focus is the simplicity of the questions and the power of the visualization. By changing the tone of the conversation or the tone of the questions asked, we can change the perception of, and the willingness to be closer to, that perfect future that participants describe themselves.

A Challenge for You

Find someone who is always complaining, whether about everything or about one thing in particular. Listen to the person for a while, then say something like, "That does seem to be problematic; what would you like instead?" Try your best to help the person describe in as much specific, tangible detail as possible what he or she wants instead of the current situation. Notice what is different from the conversations you have had previously.

Derbier and Pinter's Final Reflections

The elements of solution focus that seem to make the difference are the tone of the conversation and the continual focus on the future. We could call it a different language game. Solution focus is a new element that we are incorporating into our work using the Heart of Agile, which asks you to collaborate,

deliver, reflect, and improve. We use solution-focused conversations to help teams improve their collaboration, and even to discuss delivery and reflect on reflections. Our best hope is that with solution focus you notice the change you want to see in the world.

Endnotes

[1]Dolan, Yvonne. "What Is Solution-Focused Therapy?" Institute for Solution-Focused Therapy, 2019.

[2]McKergow, Mark. "SFBT 2.0: The Next Generation of Solution Focused Brief Therapy Has Already Arrived." *Journal of Solution Focused Brief Therapy*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2016.

[3]Identicar (https://www.club-identicar.com).

[4]McKergow (see 2).

[5]Heart of Agile (https://heartofagile.com).

[6]"Gargamel." Wikipedia.

[7]McKergow, Mark, and Jenny Clarke (eds.). Positive Approaches to Change. Solutions Books, 2005.

[8]McKergow (see 2).

[9]Lueger, Günter. "Solution-Focused Rating (SFR): New Ways in Performance Appraisal." In Positive Approaches to Change, edited by Mark McKergow and Jenny Clarke (see 7).

[10]Collaboration Cards (https://collaborationcards.com/).

[11]"Dot-voting." Wikipedia.

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