

NO



MORE



HEROES



Leaders are finding that a traditional directive approach no longer gets the job done. Could solution-focused coaching be the answer in these more ambiguous times?

Mike Brent and Mark McKergow report

We are often struck by the number of managers globally who

wish the world weren't such an ambiguous and messy place, especially at the moment.

Recently in Germany, for example, an engineering manager was becoming frustrated. The logical approach he had always relied on was failing to achieve results from his people. But why?

The answer may lie in complexity science. With many inter-relationships and vast amounts of data, there is no rational way to analyse a situation. Actions will have unintended consequences; unplanned external events – and there have been many recently – will knock carefully planned strategies for six. Yet leaders still need to take things in the right direction.

The SF approach

Working with apparently contradictory drivers has always been difficult. Increasingly though, hard-pressed managers are finding a helping hand in the solution-focused (SF) approach. Based on a set of therapy tools, the SF approach is used in businesses around the world, including at Lufthansa (Germany), Canon (Japan) and Nationwide (UK).

The idea behind the SF approach is that if you want change, don't try to analyse what's wrong in order to fix it. Simply find where useful change is happening – and then build on it.

Figure 1 (above) illustrates the SF approach. We call this the 'Albert model' after Albert Einstein, who famously said that "things should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler".

This diagram shows how the process of coaching can be simplified by overlooking certain

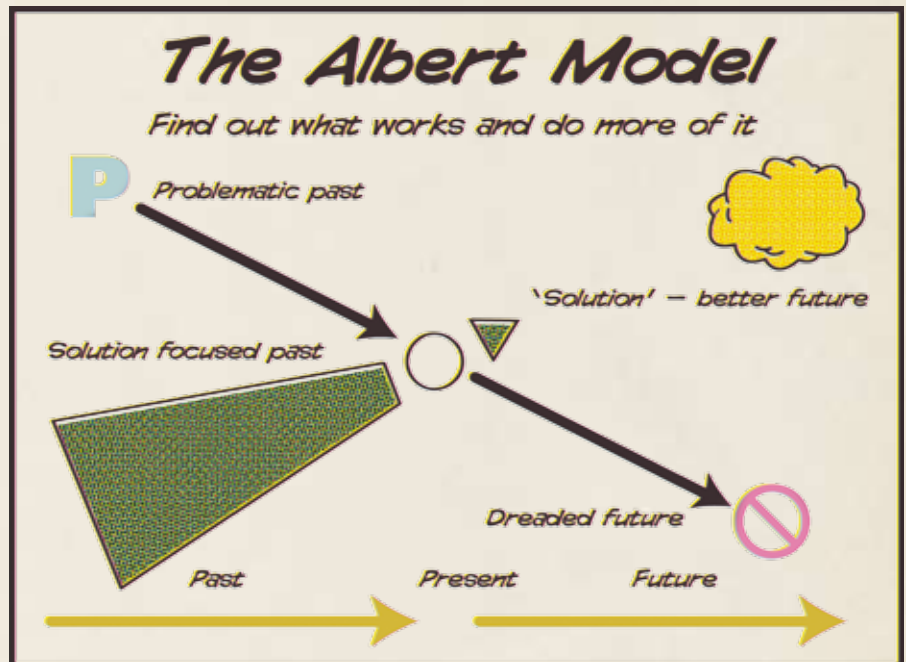


Figure 1

aspects of a situation, while focusing on others.

Whereas conventional problem-solving approaches analyse problems and make progress by addressing causes, the SF approach sidesteps this and moves directly to looking for connections between the future that's wanted – the 'solution' or 'miracle' – and the time when this already happened.

Finding relevant strengths and taking small steps to build on existing, useful change allows ideas to be tried quickly, and the more effective measures reinforced.

The process is not guided by the problem at hand. Instead it focuses on helping all involved to clarify what they want in very detailed, concrete terms. It is a simple, yet surprisingly effective approach.

My hero

For many decades the dominant paradigm of leadership has been the idea of leader as transforming hero. 'Leading from the front' however, is utterly out of touch with current realities. Successful modern leaders are adopting a coaching style sometimes called 'leading from one step behind'. The SF approach is particularly suitable. The facilitative style can be sharpened and made more effective by a gently persistent focus on finding what works, rather than analysing what's wrong.

We can look at these different styles and their contexts on the spectrum in Figure 2 (page 45). In situations where the parameters are simple and known, the leadership challenge resembles a

Directive vs facilitative styles

DIRECTIVE

- Work out what's wrong and fix it.
- Need to work out what to do.
- Solo efforts produces quick results.
- Sell your strategy.

SF COACHING

- Find out what's working and build on it.
- Connect what you want with what's working.
- Build relationships to bring more know-how.
- Build the next steps together.

puzzle that can be solved analytically. The leader can assess, come to a course of action and then sell it to others using a directive style.

As the situation gets more uncertain, the leader starts to focus their energies on harnessing the knowledge and awareness of those around them using a facilitative style, such as coaching.

As the complexity increases, so does the potential for conflict. The leader then takes an SF coaching approach to helping everyone clarify what they want, what's working and the small next steps.

Attempts at using an analytical directive style in a complex situation quickly get out of hand. The leader will use up time and energy trying to do the impossible. If they then arrive at a (probably incorrect) conclusion and try to sell it, a power struggle may ensue.

We suggest that a leader with SF coaching skills is very well placed to handle the most challenging situations. They will be able to 'lead from behind', drawing their organisations together at critical times. Furthermore, the focus on small actions increases confidence by allowing progress to be made.

New dimensions

Recent research into leadership at Ashridge (Binney et al, 2005) has found three key aspects to

leadership as something that:

- happens between people;
- is shaped by context;
- is most effective when you bring your full self to it.

People focus

If leadership is something that happens between people then managers and leaders must increase their focus on relationships. In our experience managers tend to be more task-than relationship-focused. They are busy, under pressure to deliver – and very often like it that way. As one manager put it, "I love firefighting." But firefighting is not leading...

Many managers have a strong background in technical or finance fields. They have been experts in their areas and have succeeded by working hard, solving problems and telling people what to do.

Their skills earned them promotion. The problem is that what got them there is no longer 100 per cent effective. Now they face ambiguity, as well as people and strategic issues. They will focus on what they know and do well, giving advice and direction, but once they become a leader in a complex environment it becomes impossible to have all the answers.

Having SF coaching skills can help enormously. Asking good

“The SF approach helps leaders bring their full selves to their leadership. It means being able to say, 'I don't know!'”



Miracles can happen

David Montague, group chief executive at London & Quadrant Housing Trust, is a fan of the SF approach:

In team and divisional planning sessions we can create a sense of ambition, unity and confidence around specific problems and longer term team/divisional objectives.

In each case the 'miracle' has been articulated and agreed by the team, who have then gone on to agree how near or far away they are from it, what steps can be taken to get closer, by whom and when. A miracle team has then been created and charged with the responsibility of delivery. Our experience suggests that miracles can happen.

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questions about what works around here, what we all want, what strengths we have, and so on, gives people something definite they can do, which will build relationships with others. The SF approach can offer the leader a degree of certainty about what to do next. The need to heroically succeed alone is replaced by a gathering of know-how.

Shaped by context

Henry Mintzberg identified the ability to tolerate ambiguity as a

key leadership skill many years ago. He writes in his book *Managers not MBAs* (2004) about the way many MBA courses, particularly in the US, focus on rapid analysis of case studies as a key skill for senior managers. We share his view that this leads to false security in the power of such processes to work in real life. A focus on collaboration and exploration of real

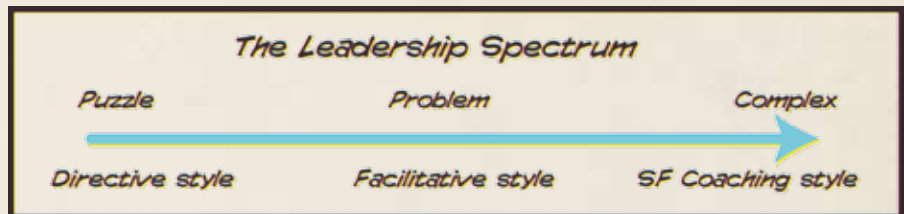


Figure 2

situations forms a better training ground in the real world.

This ambiguity – the idea that meanings depend on contexts which change continuously and are therefore not open to easy analysis – can be difficult for managers trained in a problem-solving approach. Moreover, when faced with complex issues, the question, “What’s wrong?”, doesn’t help because knowing the answer doesn’t help us find what to do.

The SF approach teaches us to ask instead, “What do you/we want?” The answer is an imaginative question that helps people clarify what is important and what isn’t. Similarly, another SF question, “When does that happen already?” looks for times when things are already working in the given context – negating the need for systems analysis.

SF allows the hard-pressed manager to act systemically without thinking or knowing they are doing it, by focusing on the context at hand. Rather than selling their strategies, they can help everyone build next steps together.

Something of yourself

The SF approach helps leaders bring their full selves to leadership. It means, among other things, being able to say, “I don’t know!”

There is huge pressure on leaders to know the answers but in ambiguous situations there are no answers. So an effective leadership approach is to tap into people’s brains to create options, possibilities and alternatives.

Another means of bringing your full self also applies to the people you lead. They must bring their full selves but the leader has some responsibility in facilitating this.

One way is to make full use of the energy that’s there by asking good questions – and taking the answers seriously. Another is to help people find and take small steps that provide feedback and help everyone see what actually works in this particular case. This also has the excellent side-effect of building intrinsic motivation. Helping people look good and connecting to their strengths puts them in a better state of mind – and reduces defensiveness. ■

References and further reading

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- See “Lost and found”, a special report on SFC by Stephen Palmer, Anthony Grant & Bill O’Connell (*Coaching at Work*, July/August 2007). www.cipd.co.uk/coachingatwork/articles/Istandfnd.htm [checking url with Chan]