Solution Focused Corporate Coaching
Louis Cauffman & Insoo Kim Berg

In the beginning of the eighties, the Solution-Focused Model was designed by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg for use in the world of psychotherapy. This SFT-model rapidly became one of the leading models. In this article, Cauffman and Berg describe how they use the Solution-Focused approach when working in a business environment.

Traditionally problems are approached "from the itself"; it is assumed that to solve a problem, one must first discover how it arose and what the causes behind the problem are.

> **The Problem-Oriented Manager Asks: "What Is Going Wrong? What Doesn't Work?"**

Take a look at most strategy meetings: in order to find out what their company needs to do next, some managers feel the urge to make long and depressing lists of what goes wrong. What is not good or not good enough? How come competitors are so much better? What should have been done already? What are the reasons why we did not do X, Y or Z? Whose fault it is that we are in this position? How much time is already lost and how little time is left?

The same goes for most Monday-morning startup meetings: time is spent talking about what went wrong last week, which problems to expect this week, and which problems to tackle in the meantime.

When meetings continue along these problem-oriented lines, your team becomes more and more absorbed in figuring out every problematic aspect of the situation. Hey, we managers are good at that. We are trained to do just that: go into all the possible details of the 'why's and why-not 's'. As everyone attempts to tease out the more deeply hidden causes of the already-weighty problem, we forget to focus on how the problems can be solved.

Imagine that same strategy meeting. You and your colleagues are engaged in a intense discussion about the future of your company. You first spend thirty minutes trying to find out what doesn't work in your company—what is going wrong, where the mistakes lie, what the company's weak spots are. You then ask the group, including yourself, how they feel. Without a doubt, most feel depressed and frustrated. After all, problems have

been heaped upon more problems, forming what seems an insurmountable obstacle. The likelihood that positive change will arise from this process is minimal.

Yet there is another way! We can approach the problem from a totally different perspective—that of the possible solution. In short it goes:

> **The Solution-Focused Manager Asks: "What does go well? What Does Work?"**

Now start your strategy meeting this way: ask your colleagues to list all the things that are going well (despite the current problems)—the company's strong points, the employees' past successes, the successful moments they have had, their favorite memories, and everything that functions well enough so that they want to keep it going. After thirty minutes ask them how they feel. They will tell you that they feel cheerful, hopeful, and confident that they can solve the problem. And they are right: They are more likely to successfully solve the problem when they have taken time to remember their resources, abilities, and past successes.

Whether you are a manager, a business owner or a consultant, regardless of the level of your position in the organization, you are always coaching the most important assets of business: people. Paying a close attention to the specific use of language is an essential characteristic of the Solution-Focused approach as Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg originally designed it for use in the world of psychotherapy. The language we use frames and to a great extent determines the way in which we handle problems. We will show how you to use Solution Talk and make use of Solution-Building questions. Additionally you will learn the Eight Step Dance of Solution-Focused Coaching.

The business examples in this article come from our practices as a Solution-Focused Corporate Coaches & Consultants.

Brief Theory of the Solution-Focused Management Model:
1. If something does not work, do something else.
2. If something works, do more of it.

Essentials of Solution Talk
Let's take a closer look at the essential characteristics of Solution-Focused language.

1. What still works?
We concentrate on what stills works and therefore we talk about what still works, in spite of the problems. We don't speak in terms of problems and matters that don't work—that is problem language.
Suppose a manager complains that his high level of stress is preventing him from working efficiently. Instead of asking him to describe what he can no longer accomplish, (or worse) why he is so stressed, the Solution-Focused Coach will ask him about the things he *can* do in spite his high stress level. Imagine the changed atmosphere of the conversation.

The owner of a very successful plastic extrusion company, Mr. Rothar felt caught between his only son-in-law, who was demanding an increasingly central role within the company, his daughter and the non-family CEO. The straw that broke the camel's back was the son-in-law's purchase of an entirely new computer system without prior consultation. The CEO threatened to quit. Mr. Rothar also was furious at his son-in-law, but his hands were tied—the son-in-law was a board member and shareholder, he thus had the authority to purchase the equipment. Since I was already doing some consulting work for the company, Mr. Rothar talked to me about this problem. Of course I first listened to Mr. Rothar's story and allowed him to vent his emotions about it. But instead of studying his problem in depth, I asked him what was going well in the company. I was more interested in the well functioning aspects of the successful family business. Mr. Rothar's anger soon passed and we agreed to organize an open conversation with his daughter and his son-in-law. This conversation was not to revolve around the solo action of the son-in-law but rather to focus on their common thoughts about the future of the company. A second meeting would include the CEO. This approach allowed all parties to voice their opinions in a constructive, solution-building context. A strategic plan was the result, including decision rules about major investments.

2. How the problem ends is more interesting then how it begins.
We are more interested in how the problem ends than in how it begins. Everyone who has a partner occasionally has an argument with him or her. Most people can predict with surprising accuracy how these arguments usually start, proceed and end. The same goes for recurrent work-related problems. How these arguments start or develop is less relevant than how they usually *end*. Once you have determined how the arguments end, you can learn how to stop the argument cycle much faster.
A fast-growing distributor of electronic parts encounters liquidity problems. It is clear that they need a much higher turnover to cover the increased costs. The credit lines are already stretched to the max. The sales director, heavily supported by the marketing manager, sees a solution in extra advertising budgets, extra sales effort, and a "highly necessary" investment in setting up a big website. The financial manager has designed a cost-control program: serious efforts in cost control are imperative.
You can easily imagine the tension: Without sales effort (which costs money), no extra turnover will occur; without cost control (through which a higher margin is achieved), there will be no progress in the cash position. The ensuing conflict is predictable: The salesmen want to invest, but the financial manager wants to save money. The salesmen blame the financial manager for being shortsighted while the financial manager blames the salesmen for being careless with money. The salesmen then blame the financial manager for not believing in the vitality of the company while he blames them for living from one day to the next without facing the consequences on the financial position of the company, etc. If this discussion continues it simply will result in "more of the same." Thus, instead of asking unproductive questions like: Who started blaming the other and why? Who is right? Who should admit they are wrong?, the Solution-Focused Coach prefers to ask useful questions: 'How does the argument usually stops? What is it that you do differently when you aren't at odds? What are both parties willing to agree to?

How did you tackle this sort of dilemma in the past? What did you do differently then? Which constructive decision ended the conflict between the financial manager and the sales director about the investment in the new outlet last year? What will you do differently once you have reached an agreement?' The answers to these questions focus on the beginning of cooperation towards common goals.

Solution-building Questions
Questions shape the answers you get therefore asking the right questions helps you to set the correct tone and build further solutions. People usually ask questions to receive information. However, Solution-Focused Coaches go further. The Solution-Focused Coach asks questions to help staff to evaluate their own perspective on the problems and to direct the conversation toward solutions. Therefore the questions you ask are the beginning of the shaping of solutions. Asking questions is a more collaborative way of having a conversation than constantly taking the lead is.

When you follow up on those answers with even more Solution-Building questions, you will notice that you and your staff are building solutions together. The following list outlines some basic Solution-Building questions that you can alter and build upon in your own original, creative ways. When you will read the section on the Eight Step Dance, you will see that these questions fit in with a specific 'Step'. After reading the whole article, you can experiment with these tools and get a feeling for 'the Power of Words'.

- What should we discuss in this meeting so that this conversation will be useful? (Goal setting)
- How will you know that the problem is solved? How will you notice this? What would you do differently then? (Future orientation)
- What would be the smallest step you could take to solve this problem? (Making big goals more workable)
- How would the other departments notice that you are making progress? What would your boss say you would be doing differently if things improved? (Expanding the possible solutions into the system)
- What else do you have to tell me so that I can see this situation even more correctly? (Eliciting cooperation from the client)
- Have you ever solved similar problems? How did you solve them on that occasion? Who helped you? How did he or she help you? (using exceptions and resources)
- Are there moments in which the problem is less intense? What is different then? (Adding nuances instead of black-white opposition)
- Has something changed since you scheduled this meeting about the conflicts concerning the project? (Eliciting signs of spontaneous 'pre-session' changes)
- Now that you have achieved that, what is the next small step you could take? (Success builds/breeds on success)
- Imagine that this problem is solved. What will be different then? What will you do differently? What will your colleagues do differently? What will the management do differently? (Future orientation by visualizing a future in which the current problems are solved)

The following case illustrates the use of solution-building questions to help clients focus on what they'd better do differently in the future in order to get their problems solved.

The owner of a carpet manufacturing company had experienced some health problems and consequently had been absent frequently during the past two years. Once recovered and working again fulltime, he began colliding with his son-in-law. He was convinced that his son-in-law had seized the opportunity to take charge of the company. The son-in-law believed that it was his duty to keep the business running and that he had therefore earned the right to continue managing the company in the same way he had during the owner's absence. The conflict also affected the family. The daughter was caught in the middle and the mother was blamed for choosing sides whenever she tried to get them to reconcile. This negative atmosphere extended even to the shop floor: The personnel received contradictory orders and had the feeling that they were being used as pawns.

How should the situation be approached? To aim to stop the misunderstandings and arguments would be to run the risk of getting involved in the tangle of conflicts. Both men would try to convince you that he is right or, even worse, would force you to choose a side—a type of "if you're not on my side you're against me" thinking.

It is better to ask questions that help both men to think about cooperating again. It turned out to be useful to ask them the question separately: "What has to change to regain order and peace?" The father-in-law's first answer was: "My son-in-law has to stop shutting me out." The son-in-law said: "My father-in-law has to stop mingling with my work and leave me alone." These answers were not very useful.

To the question "What could and would I do differently to make things easier?" the father-in-law answered: "We can't go on the way we are acting now. I will try to be friendly to him but I'm not going to butter him up." The son-in-law said: "I could ask my father-in-law to join the meetings I've organized with my production team, but he shouldn't snap at me during the meeting." With these answers, both of them gave a little opening to something useful.

Our next question was: "What is the smallest sign that will show you that things are going better?" The son-in-law replied: "I would feel more at ease and I wouldn't be on edge when my father-in-law is around." The father-in-law answered: "My son-in-law wouldn't avoid me anymore."

We followed this with: "What would you do differently when you notice that you are more at ease when your father-in-law is around?" and: "What would you do differently if you were to notice that your son-in-law is no longer avoiding you?" The answers to these questions help them paint a detailed picture of possible solutions. As the conversation progressed both men were more willing to change their attitudes toward each other. The father-in-law agreed to try to act positively toward his son-in-law. He translated this into being more friendly, inviting him for a drink on Sunday, agreeing with him in the presence of their coworkers (or remaining silent if he didn't agree), and trying to find it in his heart to say something positive when his son-in-law did something well. The son-in-law planned to inform his father-in-law weekly about the state of affairs of production, to go through the orders with him, to present the quality-control figures, and to show interest in his proposals.

Remember: Questions are midwives for solutions.

The Eight-Step Dance of SFC
What follows are the different steps of the Solution-Focused 'dance'. You can combine these steps into an idiosyncratic combination that suits the specific situation you are dealing with as a Solution-Focused Coach.

1. **Socializing**
   The motor of change is the working relationship between the Coach and his client (system). Taking care of a positive and cooperative working relationship not only allows you to get away with mistakes but also puts a booster on progress.
2. **Context**
   Nobody works in a vacuum; no business operates in a vacuum.
   We always have to consider and sufficiently take into account the context in which the problem occurs. Otherwise you will fall into a 'simplistic solutionism', a solution orientation of the flattest kind—problem: "Doctor, if I touch this it hurts. What should I do?" solution: "Stop touching it." Later, the patient dies of a cancer that could have been cured if it had been detected quickly. Examining a problem without considering its context minimizes the possibility of finding a real solution.
   Some high-tech companies are dominated by a "we want the future today" mentality. The ambitious manager gives his employees numerous tasks without realizing that they simply don't have enough time to carry them out. Consequently, several conflicts arise: The employees feel overwhelmed by too many tasks and assignments, and the manager is convinced that his people don't fulfill the needs of the company. Tension builds until the top management has to interfere. But trying to solve the problem by pointing out the manager's "task overdose" probably won't work because it didn't work when they tried it in the past. Blaming the employees for being incompetent or lazy won't work either—although unfortunately this happens frequently. Instead, the top management must consider the context—the business mindset of "we want the future today." It is this mentality that causes the manager to behave the way he does, and the management, therefore, must take this into account when they encourage him to provide more efficient leadership by behaving in alternative ways. Perhaps the manager has the (misguided) notion that the amount of work he assigns is proportionate to the importance of his position—according to this logic, the more assignments he gives, the harder he is working.
   Two large banks were planning to merge. A task force was set up to guide the process. The chairman of the work group was well aware of the fact that competition could arise between the employees of the merging partners. By first asking everyone which elements of their previous company they definitely wanted to keep, he gave them the opportunity to make concrete propositions. Then, taking these propositions into account, he offered a consensus about the

task force's goals. From this he deduced that a slogan—"the best of both"—could serve as a guideline for further development of the process. Thus, when tension arose during the course of the merger, the project manager could fall back on this created context. This made it easier for everyone involved to avoid the traps these types of processes often fall into. It also helped both banks to quickly gear their procedures—both internal and external—toward each other.

3. **Goal Setting**

   Clear, concrete and realistic goals that are important to the client and his company, lead the coaching intervention to swift and lasting results. The question: 'What should we discuss in this meeting so that this conversation will be useful?' is the standard question to initiate goal setting. You can use this question when starting every meeting in order to get focused on goals and avoid talking in the air.

   The art of Solution-Focused Coaching lies in the reshaping and redefining of the goals towards do-able and useful goals that then become beacons on the road to success.

4. **Exceptions**

   There isn't a single problem in the (business) world thinkable that is there all the time and with the same intensity. Solution-Focused Coaches focus on these exceptions since they are partial solutions. Elaborating these partial solutions by using Solution-Building questions, promote gradual change towards more permanent solutions. The Solution-Focused Coach concentrates on the "who, how, what, when, and where" of exceptions.

   An example: Janet complains that her coworkers consistently ignore her during team meetings and is so irritated by this that she is at odds with her team members. The Solution-Focused Coach will not suggest that she try talking to her coworkers about the problem. (Janet's answer to this suggestion would most likely be: "I have already tried that many times and it only makes things worse.") It is better to look for the moments in which she *does* have positive contact with her colleagues. We call these moments 'exceptions to the problem'. If it turns out that her colleagues don't ignore her during small, informal meetings, the Solution-Focused Coach will ask her to further investigate these moments: How do you react to your colleagues during these informal meetings when the conversation is going well? How does you behave differently then? What exactly do you say then? The next step is to help her to translate that behavior into the team meeting setting.

5. **Resources**

   Traditional models assume that problems arise because of a staff's deficiency or inability to create a solution. The Solution-building approach holds the assumption that the employees involved in the problem *do* have the resources to solve that problem. The job of the Solution-building manager is to help the employees to (re) discover these "forgotten" resources and/or to give them new tools to build solutions.

   In this context, we define "resources" as every available tool that can be used to create solutions. Resources can be things as intangible as effort, motivation,

loyalty to the company, collegiality, or expertise, but they also can be very concrete tools, such as communication skills, crisis and conflict management, procedures, business insights, technical tools, time, money, or attention. Sometimes what initially seems negative can be considered a positive: A crisis can become an opportunity, a setback in business opens your eyes, loss of clients prompt you to pay more attention to clients, complaints may encourage you to be more customer-oriented, your company's weaknesses may become opportunities for improvement, threats become chances—the list goes on.

6. **Complimenting**

Compliment giving is an important skill that is seriously neglected. For solution-building managers, giving compliments is a natural way of communicating to people. They don't give compliments just to be friendly or to garner approval from their colleagues. The point of giving compliments is to build a positive working relationships, give the client self-confidence, elicit a solution focus instead of a problem focus, and support and increase the possibility for change. Compliments are a powerful confirmation of the useful behavior of employees. And try to remember: 'Every compliment yields a dividend!'

7. **Scaling Questions**

People often think in absolute terms: They feel good or they feel bad. Something goes well or goes poorly. The company results are good or bad. The light is on or off. It's black or white. But most matters in life, and in business, aren't black and white—the range of grays is almost infinite. (There are only a few exceptions: You are dead or alive, pregnant or not..) In fact, such black-and-white thinking will quickly trap us into believing that a problem isn't really solved until everything is perfect, while in reality, small improvement is often the first step toward a solution.

The solution-building model uses a ten-point scale to help to reveal these shades of gray. This technique is exceptionally useful in the business world, where people are used to working with numbers and scales are readily accepted.

The 'scale of Progress' is used to measure progress toward a solution.

It should be asked in the following way: "If I were to ask you to situate yourself somewhere on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates the moment when you were performing badly on the job and 10 indicates the moment when you think the problems have been sufficiently solved to continue working comfortably and functionally, where would you say you are at this moment?" Accept whatever number your employee mentions and then ask: " OK, so you say you are on a 3. Good, now what is already different so that you are able to give it a 3?" Help the employee to elaborate the answer in as much detail as possible. Make abundant use of the question "What else?" as this will help to elicit more lively details and keeps your employee going. Continue this line of questioning by asking: "What is the smallest next step that could move you up on the scale? What would it take?"

8. **Future Orientation: the Miracle Question.**

   Solution-building managers introduce the miracle question by asking clients if they will grant them permission to ask a peculiar question that initially may seem irrelevant. After the client has given the manager permission, he or she asks the following question (preferably in a slightly dramatized way):

   Imagine that you go to sleep tonight, and while you are sleeping a miracle happens. You wake up not knowing that the miracle has occurred. How would you know a miracle has happened? What would you do differently? What would make you realize the miracle had happened?

   The miracle question is useful for several reasons. First, the word "miracle" gives the client permission to think about the widest spectrum of possibilities. After all, a miracle doesn't have any boundaries or rules. Therefore, the client is prompted to think broadly. Second, the question circumvents resistance: Because the answer need not be part of the "rational" world, there is no need to use rational counterarguments. Third, the miracle question is future-oriented— the answers are connected to a future in which problems are no longer problems. The miracle question de-emphasizes the problems of today and yesterday and refocuses the client's attention toward a possible future in which more satisfactory solutions are at hand. Fourth, it is an elegant way to elicit clear, future-oriented objectives from clients. Finding solutions becomes much easier once clear objectives have been set. (Objectives will be discussed further later in this chapter.).

Conclusion:

Combining Solution Talk and Solution-Building Questions while dancing along the eight-step dance, allows you to maximize your efficiency as Solution-Focused Coach.

Have fun!

Louis Cauffman
www.solution-focused-management.com
www.korzybski.com

Insoo Kim Berg
www.brief-therapy.org

Short bio of Louis Cauffman:
*Director-Owner of the Korzybski Foundation, an international training institute in Solution-Focused Brief Therapy with branches in Belgium, Holland and France.
*Director-Owner of the Integrative Management Institute bvba, a consulting company that specializes both in family-owned business AND in Solution-Focused Board Room Coaching & Strategic Management for (multi)national (not-for) profit companies.

Address:
Louis Cauffman
Marcel Habetslaan 31
b-3600 GENK BELGIUM
+32 89 38 33 22

Short Bio of Insoo Kim Berg:
*Co-founder of the Brief Family Therapy Centre, Milwaukee, USA
*Known as the 'Sherlock Holmes of psychotherapy', Insoo is working with large (non)profit organizations where she introduces the Solution-Focused approach in her own irresistible style.