

Effects of SF training on productivity and leadership behaviour

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This careful study looks in great detail at the impact of solution-focused (SF) training in an industrial setting. Not only is the research carefully carried out, the study is also controlled by comparison with another similar factory in the same organisation. This paper is therefore a most valuable part of the research into SF work in the sphere of business and management.

The paper is written by those who did the research. It does not mention the names of those who actually carried out the SF training, the impact of which was then investigated. The training was carried out by Björn Johansson and Urban Norling. We reproduce the paper here in honour of Björn's contribution as well as to remind the SF community of this key piece of research. More information about this work, including details of the SF training itself will appear in the next issue of InterAction.

Keywords: solution-focused training, coaching, evaluation, productivity, leadership, performance indicators, effects, study, research

Introduction

Recently the transfer of the “solution-focused approach” (de Shazer, 1988) into the field of management can be seen in many applications in HR-Management, leadership, team-management, marketing and sales and so on (McKergow & Clarke, 2005, Berg, Szabo, 2005, Lueger, 2006). But there are

only few studies which investigate the effect of solution-focused work in organizations (see Sparks, 1989 for effects on leadership behaviour) and up to now there has been no research concerning the effects on productivity in organizations.

The following research study was carried out at the PEF – University for Management, Vienna. The study examines the effect of solution-focused leadership training on behaviour and productivity which was carried out in the first part of the year 2005 at a Norwegian production plant in the fast-moving consumer goods industry. The target group of the training is shift leaders at middle management level responsible for operations in the area of production and maintenance, who are in charge of 72 shop-floor workers.

The goal of the present study was to accompany a solution-focused leadership training and coaching programme, which was meant to deliver the first results in some areas within a short time and to measure the changes in behaviour of the training participants. The objective was to establish how far this type of leadership training is able to actually bring about changes in behaviour and productivity with the purpose of meeting the growing challenges presented by management development training as well as the demands on the effectiveness of training measures.

Evaluation and solution-focused training approach

The training was conducted by two Swedish trainers according to the theoretical and practical paradigm of the solution-focused approach, which was developed at the Brief Family Therapy Center (de Shazer & Berg). This approach has its roots in psychology and psychotherapy. Nevertheless, the ideas that are central to the solution-focused approach have been launched into the world outside the boundaries of therapy and have been applied to different contexts. A trend can be observed in using this method more and more in a business environment, as one of the biggest advantages is that it works with small steps which offer significant changes that can be noticed after a short period. However, brevity is not the

original aim of this approach. The concept of helping people create solutions and enhance the way organizations and companies work appears to be useful also in the area of management development, even though this presents a totally new development in the area of business.

The training was assessed on the basis of the evaluation model of Donald Kirkpatrick (Kirkpatrick, 1959), which enables trainers to verify the consequences and the effects of the training on four levels, namely reaction, learning, behaviour and results. The present research firstly intended to find out what were the effects of the above-mentioned training in relation to behaviour and productivity.

The following hypotheses were examined and are the aims of this evaluation study:

The solution-focused leadership training will cause a difference in several dimensions in the interaction between the training participants and their subordinates (-> behaviour).

Considering the level of results, improvements are expected as the goal of the company for the training is the improvement not only in leadership behaviour, but rather in several dimensions of results according to the evaluation concept of Kirkpatrick (-> productivity indicators).

Training goals

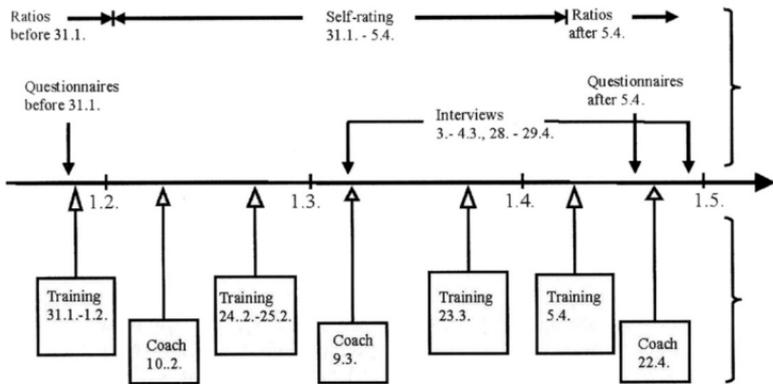
As the vision of training effects has been defined, the goals for the training were developed both from the company's and from the trainers' point of view. The company's aims for the solution-focused training derived from overall goals according to the strategy of the company and especially in the area of production.

Deriving from the company goals and the solution-focused approach, the trainers built up the goals and the structure for the solution-focused training. Their aim was to educate and coach key personnel responsible for production in solution-focused methods and ideas. The goal for the training and coaching of key staff was to be able to measure different effects in human resources among employees on production

lines. This training aimed to produce positive results, both in aspects of human resources and production figures.

Structure and timetable of the leadership training and evaluation instruments

In order to achieve the evaluation goals, the evaluation design encompassed three different instruments: qualitative interviews, self-rating forms and questionnaires (including subordinate perception of 55 employees and self-perception of the trained team leaders). Productivity ratios of the management information system offered hard figures on the level of results in the production. Measurement of the instruments was done before, during and after the training, starting in January and ending in June 2005. The timetable of the training sessions and the evaluation is shown in the following table:



Concerning the level of results, five different ratios, “returns by customers”, “absence”, “loss of packaging material”, “faults in production” and “the Overall Equipment Efficiency”, were used to find indicators for differences due to the solution-focused training. All these figures have in common that they depend on various different factors. Therefore, a Swedish production plant, using the same production process, was ideal as a control group for the interpretation of the development of these five ratios.

Results of the evaluation study

Concerning changes on the level of leadership behaviour due to the solution-focused training, five different dimensions, “communication”, “time management and workload”, “motivation and satisfaction”, “leadership abilities” and “employee competence and integration” have been investigated.

The dimension of communication, consisting of the parameters “communication style”, “giving feedback” and “information flow”, was strongly influenced in a positive way by the solution-focused leadership training. The training affects changes in several aspects which were consistently visible in all evaluation instruments. Concerning the communication style, indicators for a considerable change in communicating differently or even “solution-focused” are observable in the self-ratings, interviews and questionnaire. The subordinates of the team leaders perceive an improvement with a tendency towards significance. Giving more and different feedback was another goal in the self-rating set by the team leaders. Indicators for a high increase for this aspect are given in the interviews, with a tendency to significance in the perception of the subordinates. In general, they valued the frequency and not the quality of the feedback given. Evidence for an improvement towards a better communication flow is mainly provided in the interview section. As the team leaders worked on the improvements of communication on different levels, no change was recognizable from the subordinates’ point of view.

The change in communication can be illustrated in the perceptions of the trained team leaders deriving from the interview series in this paragraph: “[. . .] *I ask them (questions) in another way than before [. . .] when the people are answering you can see the difference . . . they seem to like that better and they answer me much better [. . .]*”. They worked on different aspects of positive communication: “[. . .] *I have a different tone, a little different attitude when I talk to them, a little bit more positive when I speak to people and I think they notice that [. . .]*” even if it does not

seem to be that easy to transfer it into practice because “[...] to ask questions in a different way [...] it is very difficult, you have to practice, practice and practice [...]”. The focus in the aspect of giving feedback was especially on giving positive and individual feedback: “[...] give more positive response to each, not to the whole group [...]”. This is mirrored in the significant increase in the rating of the employees in the questionnaires. The superiors also tried to build on already existing positive actions of the employees according to the basic assumptions of the solution-focused approach by giving positive feedback to them and consequently they assume an increase in productivity: “[...] one evening I went to her and said, yesterday the OEE was very good. It is the best I have seen [...] then I saw a smile [...]”. Another intention of the participant in giving feedback was to “[...] open this wall [...]” and effect better communication between them and their employees.

Covering the topic of “*time management and workload*” the results are controversial at first glance. On the one hand the team leaders worked on structuring their daily work differently and more effectively and it seems that they have succeeded. On the other hand both target groups of this questionnaire, the training participants and the employees, stated that their workload increased. This can be traced back to more reflecting communication of the training participants and to the implementation of a total production management system during the time of measurement.

The participants stated that they were now able to structure their working routines in a better way and “[...] planning [...] their shift in a different way” instead of a “[...] burn-out start [...]”. They also “[...] leave other stuff aside and focus on what I am hired for doing”. Despite the slightly increased level of workload according to the questionnaires, the participants have a lower stress level according to the interviews: “[...] Now I come home at the same time but I am not so tired when I come home [...] I have solved the problems in a different way [...]”; “so that’s much easier [...]”; “[...] I

feel more comfortable now [. . .]; “*feel my working situation is much easier*”. For a more detailed insight into this area it would be interesting to carry out further studies which concentrate on time management and workload in connection with a solution-focused leadership training.

In the area “*motivation and satisfaction*”, the evaluation instruments give less information about changes. No significant changes could be recognized within the results. Probably the announcement of a possible reduction in staff in the context of the company negatively influenced this dimension during the same period.

When analysing the dimension of “*subordinate competence and integration*”, some effects are indicated. Even the team leaders are delegating more tasks to their subordinates and, according to the interviews, value the competence of their subordinates a little bit higher, they stated in the questionnaire that they are less competent. The team leaders also integrated their subordinates more in the decision-making processes. This is illustrated in the interviews through examples. Looking at the questionnaires, slight improvements can be observed but no significance occurs. Concerning proposals for improvement made by the subordinates, the self-ratings show that the team leaders want to create an atmosphere that enables this and they tended to implement their proposals for improvements to a higher extent. In the interview examples are provided and the subordinates notice, due to the questionnaire, a slight but not significant improvement.

As a result of the solution-focused leadership training, the training participants feel more comfortable in their role as team leaders, according to observations from the interviews and the significant results of self-perception in the questionnaires. A significant increase in their *leadership abilities* due to the evaluation of their subordinates was observable and can be highlighted as a *major change in the level of behaviour*. The following figure illustrates the significant change (level of significance 0.057) in rating of the question “*How do you rate the abilities of your superior to fulfil his current position?*” assessed by the subordinates of the training participants.

		date of measurement	
		before the training	after the training
very satisfying	amount	2	3
	% at the date of measurement	3.6%	5.5%
satisfying	amount	14	23
	% at the date of measurement	25.5%	41.8%
neutral	amount	23	19
	% at the date of measurement	41.8%	34.5%
dissatisfying	amount	14	9
	% at the date of measurement	25.5%	16.4%
very dissatisfying	amount	2	1
	% at the date of measurement	3.6%	1.8%
total	amount	55	55
	% at the date of measurement	100.0%	100.0%

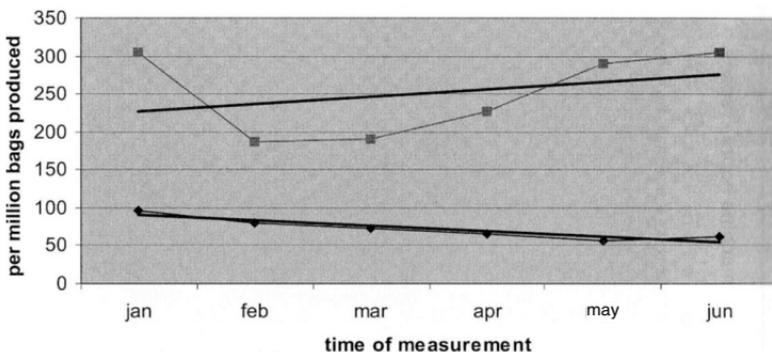
The above-presented result will be underlined with statements of the team leaders out of the interview series: “In my position as a leader it feels better, absolutely”; “I feel the job as a team leader is a little bit easier to do”; “[. . .] I got more self-confidence, since I started the course”; “I am more self-confident [. . .]”. Nearly every one of the training participants feels more self-confident and therefore more comfortable in his role. This is mirrored in the results of the questionnaire. Feeling more comfortable as team leader has not necessarily any influence on the leadership abilities. However, the interviews illustrate that the team leaders changed their leadership behaviour, which was also valued by their subordinates (compare the above figure). On the one hand they spread the idea behind the solution-focused approach as “[. . .] teaching them (employees) to face solutions instead of trouble”. On the other hand they act differently, meaning that they “[. . .] changed some of my behaviour, because when we are discussing something and they attack me with something, I just do not attack back, instead I discuss it with the people. We can discuss this in a good way, not fighting about this”. The interaction between the training participant and the employees changed: “[. . .] before I said: ‘You should know that!’ all the time. Now I try to help them more about the way they feel, so I can take small steps to make them understand what I mean”.

Referring to the level of results, according to Kirkpatrick’s approach it can be stated that in two areas, “returns by customers” and “faults in production”, a high effect and reduction due to the solution-focused training can be observed,

whereas in “absence” a low effect and “loss of packaging material” no effect could be recognized. This perception can be traced back, on the one hand, to the change of the development of these ratios within the management information system compared to the control group during the time of measurement. On the other hand, many examples were found showing an improvement in these areas in the qualitative interviews.

A team leader illustrated the example where a woman who is in charge of filling the product on the line solved the problem of chips with too much spice. She suggested mixing it with other, spice-free chips in order to receive a good quality product. “[. . .] it was a good idea and we don’t have to throw it away. [. . .] So she saved money for the company”. The participant does not exactly know if the circumstances in which the woman comes up with this idea for improvement can be traced back to a more open atmosphere and therefore to the solution-focused training. But he stated that communication had improved between him and the woman since attending the solution-focused training.

This example is also connected to other results and may be regarded only as an indicator, as some of the training participants also mentioned that they perceive their English as not sufficient to offer all examples of change. However, an improvement (bottom-line with a downward trend) compared to the development in the control group (top-line with an upward trend) in the area of returns by customers is clearly observable.



Another example mentioned by a training participant is connected to the ratio of “absence”. The team leaders revived a so-called sick-leave café. Its expectations are illustrated in the following statement: “[. . .] *It’s very important to meet them, because if they are away from work for a long time and when they are ready to work again, they are afraid to start to work. And if we talk once a month then you have the connection with them.*” and the reaction “*It’s very good. Because one other person who was here now and had never been at this café before and he was nervous, so when he went he smiled.*”

This *example* shows that the team leader comes up with or revives certain ideas and in their implementation the solution-focused approach helped them and gave them more self-confidence in doing things. Summarizing, it can be said that the reduction or absence cannot be directly traced back to the solution-focused training even if the team leaders work on it, as sick leave also depends on many exogenous factors.

According to the interviews, a change in behaviour can be observed, as the team leaders deal differently with the mistakes made by their subordinates. They try, through this different, solution-focused manner, to remind the subordinates of their responsibilities. “*A concrete example is, if they forget to put the date on the packages. Before I was ‘Hey, you have to do that. What have you done!’ Now I try to say ‘What have we done? What can we do to make it better?’ [. . .]*”. Such changes in behaviour may also lead to a reduction of material used and therefore cost, in the long run. The following figure shows the results concerning the development of faults in production in the company examined.

The overall ratio of “Overall-Equipment-Efficiency” (OEE) showed no changes during the study. It is to be assumed that this ratio is influenced to a higher extent than the other ratios by various factors. However, some examples described during the interview series are indicators that possible future impacts of this training on productivity may be recognized: “*A practical improvement on the line was a person who came up with how to improve the seasoning process to the super-chips – pellet chips – how to improve the seasoning because when you put the*

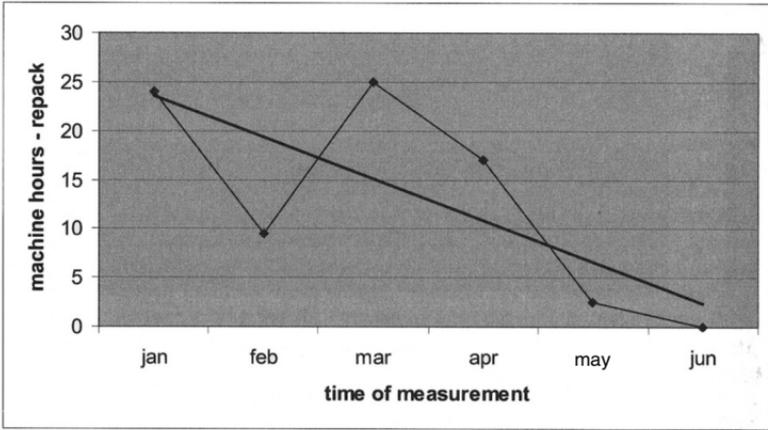


Figure: Faults in production – analysis (without control group)

seasoning in, dust comes out and you have to clean all this area. And someone came up with an idea how to improve it, to have a better control of the dust, to keep it down – this big thing that’s going around. So the maintenance guys had them make a drawing of what this should look like. One thing led to another and that’s how they improve – by picking up ideas from the employees. That happened last Thursday.”

The illustrated example indicates small improvements in the area of productivity, as these developments were implemented a short time before the last interview series were carried out; it can be assumed that more improvements will follow. The effects may be mirrored in the productivity ratios with a certain time-lag.

Conclusion

Summarizing the results, it can be recognized that the solution-focused leadership training carried out in the production plant creates significant improvements on the level of leadership behaviour as well as on the level of hard facts like productivity. Concerning the leadership behaviour, the results are consistent with the study of Sparks (Sparks, 1989). However, the results can be seen as first indicators and further studies have to be

conducted because the sample of the trained managers was small.

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