

Book reviews

Solution Focused Practice: Effective Communication to Facilitate Change

Guy Shennan

Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 224pp,
ISBN 978-0-230-35912-3, £16.99

Review by John Brooker

Guy Shennan has written *Solution Focused Practice* as a comprehensive guide to Solution Focused (SF) conversations for those in social work, counselling, coaching and supervision. It also has many interview examples for people in other roles such as teachers, nurses and therapists.

Though experienced in using SF with teams as a facilitator /team coach since 2004, I have none of these roles, yet am confident that those who do will find it meets this aim admirably. Guy's thesis is that any conversation can become an SF one, whether planned or unstructured, and he sets out his case for this in a well written and jargon-free format.

Whilst this book is not written for facilitators, I was attracted to it because I:

- Wanted to learn tools from the therapy / counselling field to apply to my work
- Am interested in the use of SF questions in conversations as the building blocks of change, an interest inspired by therapists such as Chris Iveson of Brief.

I was, therefore, delighted to find that it answered many long-standing questions I have had about certain aspects of SF and

provides much that I can use in my work. While appreciating that our work in organisations has its roots in therapy, reading this book has made me appreciate how much organisational practitioners can learn from those in the support professions.

Guy has much experience, yet speaks with the voice of a fallible and pragmatic practitioner. He assures the novice that SF tools work admirably in the vast majority of conversations, yet is honest enough to admit that they sometimes don't work. Even so, he provides the reader with the confidence to try them out, reassured that if they are not successful, no harm will be done. Indeed, I found myself in an impromptu coaching session recently and was grateful I had read this book.

My only criticism is that the book is rather densely packed in places, which makes reading it more difficult. I would prefer to see shorter paragraphs, particularly in the introduction.

That said, there is very much to like:

- It is well structured and clearly signposted
- Whilst this book could be used as an academic textbook (it has many academic references), Guy writes in plain English. This is a major plus point for the many SF practitioners who will read this in a second language, although there are a few colloquialisms that might confuse the non-English speaker, e.g. “hang on” (as in “wait”) on page 2
- The references to SF history are particularly helpful to explain some of the less obvious points about SF. For example, on page 52, the explanation of how the miracle question developed and why some practitioners opt to use the preferred future answered a long-standing question of mine
- The use of many transcript examples (the therapist has an advantage over team coaches here) clearly shows how questions can have an impact on a client. Helpfully, Guy shows examples of times when questions do not provide the expected response and how he deals with such situations

- The summaries at the end of the chapter are well written and very helpful, as are the questions designed to help the reader reflect
- The Appendix of Questions is useful as a primer for the inexperienced.

I particularly liked his analogy on page 31, where he equates “contracting” with getting into a taxi and the driver asks where you want to go. Until the client gives the answer, the taxi driver (the SF practitioner) cannot move forward.

Questions I would like to discuss with Guy

The book provoked some questions that I would like to ask Guy and might be of interest to people reading this review. I hope that we might persuade Guy to feature in an SFCT telephone call to discuss them.

1. In some transcripts, on occasion, you do not give the person time to think before asking your next question. You address this with the comment that as coaches and counsellors we *create* our questions and therefore will sometimes adapt them as we say them. How do clients react to this?
2. You make the potentially controversial comment on page 12 that a few SF questions asked during a conversation lasting a few minutes can be as valuable as a therapy session lasting close to an hour. Would non-SF therapists agree with you?
3. One difference between facilitating a group and counselling a client is the time available to elicit detail. Another is that we deal with several people, not just one. How much detail can a team facilitator elicit in realistic terms?
4. On page 54 you recommend using the word “notice” as a neutral alternative to feeling, thoughts and actions. Would “sense” be a better alternative for those who are not particularly visual? I appreciate this is an NLP concept.

5. On page 111 you advise not asking “What could you do to move to one point further up the scale?” Instead asking “What might you notice if you moved one point further up the scale?” In groups the latter question often elicits a description of what “they” (someone else) would be doing. Therefore, I often ask individuals what they will do to move the team one point up the scale. Does this happen with individuals in counselling situations?

In Summary

This is an excellent book that taught me much about using questions in conversations, not only with individuals but also with teams. For those readers who facilitate or team-coach team workshops, I highly recommend that you add it to your collection of SF books alongside those that are more focused on working in organisations, such as *The Solutions Focus* (Jackson and McKergow, 2007), *Solution Focused Team Coaching* (Dierolf, 2014) and *Team Coaching With the Solution Circle* (Meier, 2005). This will provide a really good all-round approach for SF facilitators and team coaches. For those who work in the support professions, I recommend you read it because I am sure that it will be of immense value to you.

References

- Dierolf, K. (2014). *Solution Focused Team Coaching*. Frankfurt: Solutionsacademy Verlag.
- Jackson, P. Z., and McKergow, M. (2007). *The Solutions Focus: Making coaching & change SIMPLE*. (2nd ed.). London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
- Meier, D. (2005). *Team Coaching with the SolutionCircle*. London: SolutionsBooks.