

# Peer-reviewed Papers

## Testing the Association between Solution-Focused Coaching and Client Perceived Coaching Outcomes

**Drs. Coert Visser MMC**

### Abstract

*This paper describes a survey study into the association between SF behaviours of coaches and clients perceived coaching outcomes. A web-based survey was administered with 200 clients of coaches. The survey consisted of a list of 28 coach behaviours, 14 of which were SF behaviours and 14 of which were behaviours SF coaches would avoid. Clients were also asked to describe on several dimensions how effective the coaching had been. SF coach behaviours were strongly positively associated with positive coaching outcomes. Non-SF coach behaviours were moderately negatively associated with positive coaching behaviours. A multiple regression analysis was done, which gave insight into which specific coach behaviours were predictive of coaching success. The paper closes with some reflections on the implications of this study and with suggestions for follow-up research.*

### Introduction

Over the last few decades, coaching has become a well-known practice in organisations. Coaching is the process of a coach helping a client to achieve professional or personal desired outcomes. Clients may either have taken the initiative to visit a coach themselves or they may have been

Address for correspondence: Oranjelaan 24, 3971 HH Driebergen, The Netherlands

sent by someone else, for example their manager. Under the umbrella of coaching falls a wide range of applications and approaches. Some examples of applications and aims of coaching are conflict resolution, improving task performance, career development, team building, and resolving personal problems. According to Grant and Cavanagh (2011), most coaches do not have explicit training in the behavioural sciences and do not tend to use coherent theoretical approaches or scientifically validated techniques and measures. While there is a strong call for evidence based interventions in many professional fields and the coaching literature has grown a lot, empirical evidence about what works in coaching is still limited.

#### *Coaching research still in its infancy*

Grant and Cavanagh (2011) report that of the 360 peer reviewed papers which have been published between 2000 and 2009, only 30% were about empirical studies. Many of these empirical studies were not outcome research but surveys or descriptive studies into the nature of coaching, investigations into organisations' use of coaching, or examinations of different perceptions of coaching. The authors found 81 coaching outcome studies which have been done since 1980, of which 27 were case studies, 40 within-subject studies, and 15 between-subject studies. There were 11 outcome studies which used a randomised controlled design and which have indicated that coaching can indeed improve performance in various ways. Four of these were in the medical or health area, four were in life or personal coaching and three were about coaching in the workplace (Deviney, 1994; Duijts, Kant, Van den Brandt, & Swaen, 2008; Grant, Curtayne, & Burton, 2009). For instance, Grant et al., (2009) found that 'short-term solution-focused, cognitive behavioural executive coaching' consisting of four coaching sessions over 10 weeks increased resilience and workplace well-being and reduced stress and depression.

### *Solution-focused brief therapy*

The SF approach may be defined as one in which a practitioner, for example a coach or therapist, supports clients by viewing and treating them as unique and competent, being responsive to and working with whatever they say, helping them to visualise the changes they want to achieve and to build step-by-step on what they have already been doing that works (De Jong & Berg, 2008; Walter & Peller, 1992). SF professionals use a range of techniques of which the most well-known examples are scaling questions (de Shazer, 1986), the miracle question (de Shazer, 1988), coping questions (Lipchick, 1988), exception-seeking questions (de Shazer, 1985) and past success questions (de Shazer, 1985). The SF approach had its origin in the field of psychotherapy but has gained popularity in coaching over the last decade. In the field of psychotherapy the approach is generally referred to as solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT). SFBT was first mentioned in the literature by de Shazer, Berg, Lipchik, Nunnally, Molnar, Gingerich, and Weiner-Davis (1986). The first controlled study of SFBT outcomes appeared in 1993 (Sundstrom, 1993).

### *The evidence base for solution-focused brief therapy*

Research into the effectiveness of the SF approach in psychotherapy is beginning to show some encouraging results. More than 48 studies and two independent meta-analyses have been published. The quality of the studies is steadily improving (Franklin, Trepper, Gingerich, and McCollum, 2011). Over the last two decades, four review studies have been done. First, Macdonald (1994) reviewed eight reports on naturalistic follow up studies from different countries, done under the umbrella of the EBTA, the European Brief Therapy Association. This review consistently showed approximately 70% of clients reporting that their goals had been met or that they had improved significantly. Second, Gingerich and Eisengart (2000) published

a systematic qualitative review of bibliographic databases, dissertations, and bibliographies of identified research. They analysed 15 studies, of which 5 were well-controlled. All of the 15 studies showed positive outcomes of SFBT. Third, Stams, Dekovic, Buist, and De Vries (2006) carried out a meta-analysis of 21 published studies and dissertations. Both strong and weak designs were included in this meta-analysis (with in total 1,421 participants). The results showed a positive and small-to-medium size effect of SFBT. The authors noted that this effect was achieved in less time than in other therapies. Fourth, Kim (2008) performed a meta-analysis of 22 studies. Studies were grouped into the following three problem-categories: externalising behaviour problems, internalising behaviour problems, and family or relationship problems. Overall, SFBT showed small but positive treatment effects, but only for internalising problems was a statistically significant effect found ( $p < .05$ ). The authors noted that these modest effects might be explained by the fact that, on the whole, dissertations showed much lower effect sizes than other published studies. Overall, the intervention fidelity, which is the degree to which the intervention which is being evaluated is actually and properly delivered to clients as intended, of the dissertation studies seemed to be lower than in the other studies due to the fact that in these studies therapist had received much less training.

Summarising the research to date, it can be said that SFBT has been demonstrated to have a small-to-moderate size and to be the equivalent of other established treatments. Empirical evidence of the effectiveness of SF interventions in the context of coaching has not yet been established.

### *Aim of this study*

The purpose of this study is to take a small step in the direction of building knowledge about the effectiveness of SF practice in coaching. Specifically, the study's aim is to test two principal expectations. First, it is expected that an SF approach to coach-

ing is associated with greater client satisfaction about the coaching process. A reason for this expectation is that SF coaches take the perspective of the client seriously, whatever they bring forward, which is expected to make the client feel appreciated and understood. Also, the process is likely to lead the client to feel more autonomous and competent because the questions by the coach help clients identify solutions which are based on their own previous experience. Second, it is expected that an SF approach to coaching is associated with greater client satisfaction of goal attainment. The reason for this expectation is that because the SF approach leads to 'self-found internal solutions' these solutions seem more likely to be implemented by clients. Because these solutions are based on their own experience, clients are expected to feel more motivated to act upon them.

This study uses a questionnaire with questions which aim to identify SF coach behaviours. It needs to be acknowledged upfront that the SF approach to coaching overlaps with several other coaching approaches, such as humanistic coaching approaches, appreciative inquiry, NLP, and motivational interviewing. Neither the SF approach nor any of these other approaches is unique. One reason they share certain principles and techniques is that good ideas often emerge and evolve at different places at roughly the same time. Another reason is that as approaches evolve, they tend to influence each other. Pioneers of each of the approaches mentioned here to some extent knew about the work of the others. Because of this overlap between the SF approach to coaching and other approaches it can be said that the findings of this study, at least partly, also apply to other coaching approaches.

## **Method**

A survey was designed for former clients of coaches which consisted of four sets of variables: 1) background variables, referring to the background of the coaching process; 2) independent variables consisting of items which describe in behavioural terms what the coach did during the coaching process; 3) dependent variables consisting of items

describing the client-perceived outcomes of the coaching; and 4) personal variables referring to age, gender, and job of the respondents.

### *Background variables*

The following background variables were included. First, the question was asked whose idea it was to visit a coach: was it the client's own idea, was it someone else's initial idea or did they think of it together? Second, the question was asked who chose the coach: was it the client, was it someone else, or did they choose together? Third, the question was asked how the client initially felt about the coaching on a 5-point scale ranging from 'very negative' to 'very positive'. Fourth, it was asked what the initial reason of the coaching was. The options with this question were: 1) with the content and execution of my work; 2) with a personal goal/problem; 3) with my relationships with other people; 4) other. Fifth, it was asked how long the coaching lasted on a 5-point scale ranging from briefer than 1 month to longer than 2 years.

### *Independent variables: coach behaviours*

In order to identify SF coach behaviours a list of items was made to describe what SF coaches do and don't do. For this purpose, a theoretical analysis was made, based on the SF literature, of factors underpinning SF coach behaviours which was subsequently operationalised. A first theoretical factor was *client choice support*, which refers to helping the client to choose the topic of the conversation, helping the client choose the goal, accepting the goal formulation of the client, helping clients to choose their own steps forward, and having clients decide about whether or not the coaching should be continued. A second theoretical factor was *client perspective utilisation*, which refers to acknowledging the perspective of the client, avoiding confrontation with the client, using the client's keywords, checking whether the client finds the coaching useful, showing understanding and

avoiding self-disclosure. A third factor was *success-behaviour inquiry*, which refers to avoiding problem cause analysis, helping clients to describe the desired situation (including positive future behaviours of clients themselves), avoiding blame, exploration of what has worked, avoiding focusing on situations in which the problem was at its worst, and avoiding a focus on personalistic explanations. A fourth factor was *positive expectation expression*, which refers to normalising, deliberately expressing positive expectations, avoiding that the perception of the problem be enlarged, avoiding suggestions that drastic change is needed, positive behaviour feedback, and avoidance of negative behaviour feedback. As has been acknowledged before, many of these items can also be found in several other coaching approaches. But the presence of the combination of all of these items characterises SF coaching.

For the purpose of the survey any use of familiar SF jargon, such as the miracle question, or scaling questions, was avoided in order to avoid any explicit association of the items with the SF approach or any other approaches, so that respondents would not be influenced by the suggestion that this survey was intended to prove the efficacy of one or another approach.

A list of 14 items was made to describe what SF coaches would do and another list of 14 items to describe what SF coaches would deliberately not do. In the survey itself no reference to the SF approach or any other approach was made. The table below describes the two lists of items. Between brackets are brief descriptive labels for each of the items.

**Table 1** Questions referring to SF and non-SF coach behaviours

<i>SF coach behaviours</i>	<i>Non-SF coach behaviours</i>
1. The coach focused on topics that I found useful to talk about ( <i>client topic choice</i> )	1. The coach chose what topics we talked about ( <i>coach topic choice</i> )
2. After asking about my views, the coach accepted what I had said ( <i>client perspective acknowledgement</i> )	2. The coach analysed with me what the causes of my problem might be ( <i>problem cause analysis</i> )
3. The coach encouraged me to describe how I wanted my situation to become ( <i>desired situation description</i> )	3. The coach suggested to me what the goal of the coaching should be ( <i>coach suggested goal</i> )
4. The coach encouraged me to describe what I wanted to be able to do differently ( <i>positive future behaviour description</i> )	4. The coach analysed how I had caused the problem ( <i>client blame analysis</i> )
5. The coach accepted and acknowledged my goal(s) ( <i>client goal acceptance</i> )	5. The coach disagreed with some of my views ( <i>coach-client disagreement</i> )
6. The coach used the same words as I had used ( <i>language matching</i> )	6. The coach gave me negative feedback (criticised me for what I had done wrong) ( <i>negative behaviour feedback</i> )
7. The coach gave me positive feedback (complimented me on what I had done well) ( <i>positive behaviour feedback</i> )	7. The coach asked questions about when my problems were at their worst ( <i>problem peak focus</i> )

8. The coach checked several times whether our conversation was useful to me (*client usefulness check*)
  9. The coach asked questions about what I had already done that had worked well (*exploration of what worked*)
  10. The coach responded with understanding to what I said (*coach understandingness*)
  11. The coach explained that what I said and did was normal (*normalising*)
  12. The coach subtly implied that my situation would become better (*positive expectation expression*)
  13. The coach encouraged me to choose which step(s) forward I would like to take (*client chosen action*)
  14. The coach let me decide whether the coaching should be continued or terminated (*client continuation choice*)
8. The coach told me that my situation was a bit more serious than I thought (*problem perception enlargement*)
  9. The coach explicitly offered advice and solutions to me (*coach-suggested solutions*)
  10. The coach analysed with me what type of person I am (*personality focus*)
  11. The coach said I needed a great deal of change (*change need suggestion*)
  12. The coach told me about his/her own personal experiences (*coach self-disclosure*)
  13. The coach explained to me what I should do (*coach directed action*)
  14. The coach told me whether the coaching should be continued or terminated (*coach continuation choice*)

*Dependent variables: client satisfaction and client perceived outcomes*

The following three general questions about client satisfaction and client perceived coaching outcomes were asked: 1) How satisfied are you with the process of the coaching?; 2) How satisfied are you with the attainment of the coaching goal(s)?; 3) If your manager was involved in the choice for coaching, how satisfied was your manager with the overall results of the coaching? Likert scales were used for these items, with answering options going from 1) 'very dissatisfied' to 5) 'very satisfied'. Also respondents were asked to indicate on Likert scales, ranging from 1) 'this became much worse' to 5) 'this became much better' what effect the coaching had on the following items:

1. My satisfaction with my work/job
2. My satisfaction with my organisation/company
3. My satisfaction with my personal relationships
4. My ability to adjust in stressful situations
5. My ability to think flexibly
6. My ability to be creative
7. My ability to learn new knowledge
8. My ability to persist at difficult tasks
9. Other people's appreciation of me

*Sample*

A Dutch and an English version of the survey were administered online. Respondents were mainly recruited through social network sites and blogs. In an attempt to get access to a larger and more diverse sample a leverage and snowball sampling approach was followed. People were asked to pass on the request to participate in their personal networks, for example by 'retweeting' it on twitter.com, and existing respondents were asked to recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances, too.

## Results

The survey was taken by 200 respondents, 88 men and 112 women. In 68% of the cases it was the client's own idea to visit a coach. In 13% of the cases, it was someone else's idea and in 19% they thought of it together. 66% of the clients chose the coach themselves, in 24% of the cases someone else chose the coach and in 10% they did it together. 50% of the clients were initially positive about the coaching, 28% very positive, 4% negative, and 18% neither negative nor positive. In 35% of the cases the initial reason was work-related, in 46% it was related to a personal issue, in 10% it was relationships related and in 10% it was related to other topics. 47% of the coachings lasted for 1–5 months, 27% took 5–12 months, 12% took less than 1 year, 12% took 1–2 years, and 2% took more than 2 years.

Clients who had taken the initiative to take up the coaching themselves were more satisfied than those who had not come up with the idea themselves. They were more satisfied both with respect to satisfaction with the process ( $F=3.94$ ,  $p=.021$ ) and with goal attainment ( $F=6.85$ ,  $p=.001$ ). Clients who had chosen the coach themselves were also more satisfied than those who had not autonomously chosen the coach. They were more satisfied both with respect to satisfaction with the process ( $F=6.97$ ,  $p=.001$ ) and with goal attainment ( $F=6.21$ ,  $p=.002$ ). Initial positivity about the coaching was significantly correlated to process satisfaction ( $r=.22$ ,  $p=.001$ ), goal attainment satisfaction ( $r=.18$ ;  $p=.01$ ) and client perceived satisfaction ( $r=.33$ ,  $p=.006$ ). Neither the initial reason for the coaching nor its duration was associated with client satisfaction and client perceived outcomes.

### *Coach behaviours*

An exploratory factor analysis, using a principal component extraction and Varimax rotation on the independent variables resulted in a six factor solution which explained 56% of the variance. These factors did not correspond well to the four theoretical factors which were mentioned in the article (client

choice support, client perspective utilisation, success-behaviour inquiry, and positive expectation expression). Because these found factors could not easily be interpreted and because the number of factors did not help to reduce the data set in a practical manner, these factors were not used in the further analyses. Cronbach's alpha was computed to check the internal consistency of respectively the *SF coach behaviours* and the *non-SF coach behaviours*. Cronbach's alpha for the SF coach behaviours was .84, for the non-SF items it was .83 which indicates a good internal consistency of both scales. This allowed for the computation of a composite score of the extent to which coaches showed SF coach behaviours and of a composite score of the extent to which they showed non-SF coach behaviours.

### Outcomes

An exploratory factor analysis using *Varimax Rotation with Kaiser Normalization* on the dependent variables resulted in a two factor solution which explained 58% of the variance. Factor 1 could be interpreted as (client) work satisfaction and factor 2 was a broader factor which could be interpreted as satisfaction with own functioning. These two factors were used as additional dependent variables.

**Table 2** Principal Component Analysis on outcome variables

	<i>Factor loadings</i>	
	<i>Component 1</i>	<i>Component 2</i>
Job satisfaction	.294	.812
Organisation satisfaction	-.018	.903
Relationship satisfaction	.524	.433
Ability to adjust	.705	.074
Flexible thinking	.757	.125
Creativity	.688	.220
Ability to learn	.798	.032
Persistence	.745	.176
Appreciation by others	.498	.303

In the further analyses, the following five dependent variables were mainly used: client process satisfaction, goal attainment satisfaction, client perceived manager's satisfaction, work satisfaction and satisfaction with own functioning. The table below shows the two-tailed correlations between these five dependent variables and SF and non-SF coach behaviours.

**Table 3** Two-tailed Pearson correlations between independent and dependent variables

<i>Independent variables</i>	<i>Dependent variables</i>				
	<i>Process satisfaction</i>	<i>Goal attainment</i>	<i>Manager's satisfaction</i>	<i>Work satisfaction</i>	<i>Own functioning</i>
SF Coach Behaviours	.73**	.59**	.47**	.36**	.49**
Non-SF Coach Behaviours	-.22**	-.20**	-.25*	-.08	-.10

(\*\*  $p < .01$ )

As the table shows, strong positive correlations were found between the combined SF coaching behaviours and all five dependent variables. The combined non-SF behaviours were negatively correlated with the dependent variables, but only three of these correlations were statistically significant. The results in table 3 only refer to the correlations between the composite variables of respectively the combined SF coach behaviours and combined non-SF coach behaviours. They reveal nothing about the contribution of individual coach behaviours. It is likely that not all SF coach behaviours contribute positively to positive outcomes and some might even contribute negatively. Also, it is probable that not all non-SF coach behaviours contribute negatively to positive outcomes and some might even contribute positively.

To get insight into the associations between individual coach behaviours and outcomes, stepwise multiple regression analyses were done. These regression analyses might reveal that specific configurations of variables consisting of both SF and non-SF items are predictive of positive coaching

outcomes. Regression analyses were done with the same five dependent variables as criterion measures. Table 4 summarises the findings.

**Table 4** Multiple regression analyses

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>R<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>Predictors</i>
Process satisfaction	.76	Client topic choice ( $\beta = .30^{**}$ ) Positive behaviour feedback ( $\beta = .20^{**}$ ) Client chosen action ( $\beta = .13^*$ ) Exploration of what worked ( $\beta = .12^*$ ) Desired situation description ( $\beta = .13^*$ ) Coach understandingness ( $\beta = .13^*$ ) Coach continuation choice ( $\beta = -.11^{**}$ )
Goal attainment	.63	Desired situation description ( $\beta = .28^{**}$ ) Coach understandingness ( $\beta = .23^{**}$ ) Client chosen action ( $\beta = .17^*$ ) Client topic choice ( $\beta = .16^*$ ) Manager's satisfaction .60 Coach understandingness ( $\beta = .39^{**}$ ) Client continuation choice ( $\beta = .36^{**}$ )
Work satisfaction	.45	Client usefulness check ( $\beta = .15^*$ ) Coach topic choice ( $\beta = -.20^{**}$ ) Exploration of what worked ( $\beta = .12$ ) Problem cause analysis ( $\beta = .17^*$ ) Language matching ( $\beta = .15^*$ )
Own functioning	.55	Positive future behaviour description ( $\beta = .27^{**}$ ) Coach understandingness ( $\beta = .13$ ) Negative behaviour feedback ( $\beta = -.19^{**}$ ) Problem peak focus ( $\beta = .16^*$ ) Positive behaviour feedback ( $\beta = .16^*$ )

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ )

Process satisfaction was predicted by client topic choice, positive behaviour feedback, client chosen action, exploration of what worked, desired situation description, coach understanding-ness, and coach continuation choice. This last coach behaviour was negatively associated with process satisfaction. Predictive of goal attainment were the following variables: desired situation description, coach understanding-ness, client chosen action, and client topic choice. Manager's satisfaction, as perceived by the client, was predicted by coach understanding-ness and client continuation choice. Work satisfaction was predicted by client usefulness check, coach topic choice, exploration of what worked, problem cause analysis, and language matching. Predictive of the client's satisfaction with own functioning were positive future behaviour description, coach understanding-ness, positive behaviour feedback, negative behaviour feedback, and problem peak focus. The latter two had a negative regression weight. From this list of variables in the regression equations, only two variables from the non-SF behaviours list had positive regression weights: problem cause analysis and problem peak focus.

## **Discussion**

This study's first main expectations were that an SF approach to coaching is associated with greater client satisfaction about the coaching process. The second main expectation was that an SF approach to coaching is associated with greater client satisfaction of goal attainment. Both of these expectations were confirmed. The study showed the combined SF coach behaviours were strongly associated with five aspects of coaching outcomes as perceived by clients: process satisfaction, goal attainment, manager's satisfaction, work satisfaction, and own functioning. Also, coaching behaviours which SF coaches deliberately avoid, non-SF coach behaviours, were investigated. The combined non-SF behaviours were moderately negatively correlated, in particular with process satisfaction, goal attainment, and client perceived manager's satisfaction.

As has been acknowledged, these findings do not apply to SF coaching exclusively, but also to some extent to other coaching approaches which overlap with SF coaching, such as humanistic coaching approaches, appreciative inquiry, NLP, and motivational interviewing. More important than how coaching approaches are labelled and to find out which one is best is the question of what works in coaching. Therefore a more specific look at which combination of coach behaviours is associated with positive outcomes is more informative than abstract discussions about labels.

A closer look at specific associations between coach behaviours and client perceived outcomes showed that several SF coach behaviours were predictive of positive coaching outcomes: coach understandingness, client continuation choice, client topic choice, desired situation description, positive future behaviour description, positive behaviour feedback, client chosen action, language matching, client usefulness check, and exploration of what worked. The number of non-SF coach behaviours that was predictive of positive outcomes was smaller. Three coach behaviours were, as expected, negatively associated with coaching outcomes: coach topic choice, negative behaviour feedback, and coach continuation choice. Two non-SF coach behaviours were, contrary to this study's expectations, positively associated with coaching outcomes: problem cause analysis and problem peak focus.

#### *Contribution and limitations of this study*

While an absence of an association between SF coach behaviours and coaching outcomes would have been a clear indication of an absence of a causal relationship, the now found positive relationship between SF coach behaviours provides no evidence for a causal relationship. Associations in the hypothesised direction are an encouraging indication of the efficacy of SF coaching. But different explanations of these associations cannot be ruled out, like confounding variables, reverse causation or bi-directional causation.

Identifying patterns of correlation is, however, an essential step in the building of an evidence base. Descriptive theories formed on the basis of correlational research may be tested in laboratory and field experiments which may eventually lead to statements of causality regarding effectiveness of coaching interventions.

This study has several other limitations. First, there is as yet limited consensus about what specifically defines SF coaching. While research into SF therapy is maturing, research into SF coaching still is very much in its infancy. The field of coaching itself is not yet well defined or well researched. This study, therefore, cannot link to any well-developed nomothetic network. Second, the stepwise multiple regression analysis which was used in this study should be interpreted cautiously. The levels of explained variance of the models produced in this sample, with its limited size, are likely to be too high. These models should be tested in other samples in order to refine them. The use of the multiple regression analysis in this study is primarily interesting for identifying some predictive models rather than for estimating an accurate level of explained variance. A final limitation of this study is related to the dependent variables being only clients' judgements. Although clients were asked to describe separately what happened in the coaching and what the outcomes of the coaching were, there may have been hidden influences of factors not measured. For instance, they may have partly, and perhaps unconsciously, been influenced in their outcome scores by their implicit theories on what proper coaching should be.

Several other survey studies may be interesting as a follow-up of this study. One example is a study into how coaches are themselves affected by the way they view their work and by the way they work. Very little research has been done on this. Another example is a study like the current one, focused on a different professional context, like therapy or education. Survey-based research may be inspired by developments in micro-analytic research. Micro-analysis is a research approach which analyses on a micro level what

professionals do as opposed to what they report they do. Finally, several types of experiments may be useful to conduct. Randomised controlled experiments are among the most informative and important. They require generally accepted definitions of approaches which are tested and can provide convincing evidence for the efficacy of approaches. They do not, by definition, clarify much about which elements of an approach contribute to which extent to its efficacy. More basic, elementary, research may be necessary to learn more about the latter.

This study offers some encouraging findings about the usefulness of SF coaching and overlapping approaches. Further research is needed before causal statements can be made about its efficacy.

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