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Solution Focus as a Way to Break Through Complexity

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Introduction

Solution focused solution finding processes are not only useful for inducing change in human interactions, they might be applicable whenever one is dealing with a complex system that defies analysis or computation. The article describes one example where it worked.

The Goal – the Situation

Late in 2005, a friend and manager of an agrochemical company called me up to tell me about a difficult situation he was facing with a European Team. The team consisted of international experts with very different expertises, lawyers, technical experts, scientific experts, and regulatory affairs experts. Their goal was to find an optimal company strategy in view of two possibly changing European directives and strategy papers. They had already met a couple of times and although fruitful, it was very difficult to move forward given the high complexity of the issue: Whenever there was a glimpse of a solution in one corner, twenty “yes, buts” raised their ugly heads in the other. The question obviously was, whether solution focus could be helpful in such a situation.

We usually say that solution focused processes are applicable in so many fields because the main issue is mostly human interaction. Be it in business, in therapy, in conflict resolution, or team training, solution focus is a good way of helping people change quickly and sustainably. However, in this case, we were only talking about a limited human relationship component. It was not that the team had difficulties amongst themselves or that they wanted to change their way of working together, they needed to find a promising strategy that would fit with technical, legal, scientific, and governmental parameters.

Theoretical Background

Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote “The belief in causality is the superstition.” Things happen after one another, but that does not necessarily mean that they are bound by laws of cause and effect. If you focus your awareness on a very simple context (thereby blocking out everything else that is happening), cause and effect seem to make sense: I prick a balloon with a pin – it explodes. The closer you look, however, the more complicated it gets. Choosing the scope of the problem influences how we think we can deal with it and how difficult or solvable it appears to us.

Interpersonal relations or psychological problems are very complex if you take into account the whole context. They become so complex and interrelated that even an analysis seems impossible, let alone a solution. This is, in my view, why traditional psychology resorted to classification and diagnoses – simplifications and generalizations to make manageable the unmanageable. This also explains why effective solution finding processes in complex situations are very similar to one another independent of the diagnosis attributed to the problem.

Solution Focus makes it possible to start a change in the desired direction without having to reduce the complexity of the context. Knowing that the context and the influencing parameters are ever changing in human relations, solution focused practitioners do not care to plan and control the solution finding process from realizing that there is a problem to final solution in detailed steps – it is simply not possible.

The problems that solution focus had already proven to work with and the more technical or political problem my client was facing had one thing in common: their complexity and ever changing context. And this is what led us to believe that a solution focused process would be a good means to help the group to move ahead.

The Process

Before we started to work, there was an extensive briefing about the issues at hand. I was sent an impressive stack of legal and technical documentation to read. As solution focused practitioner, I was wondering whether I should actually read all of the information which one could interpret as belonging to the problem and not to the solution. In this case, I decided against my long developed solution focused intuition and read everything diligently. We also had half a day's briefing with the public affairs consultants and the customer to help me understand what exactly "the problem" was.

It later turned out that this was a very useful thing to do. Through talking about the problem and about the attempted solutions, I found my way into the language and grammar of the team and that was very helpful in two ways: One, it made joining the team and collaborating for a solution much easier, there was no irritation about "why is she here" or "she doesn't even know anything about our business, how can she help us"? Two, in the process, I could distinguish between when someone was talking about a solution and when someone was engaging in less useful analysis of why something would not work. Given the highly technical and legal terminology, this would otherwise hardly have been possible to do.

At the team meeting, I gave a short introduction into solution focus and why I think this process would work for this issue. The analogy of the "game of life", a seemingly easy system governed only by a few rules, which is still mathematically intractable, convinced most team members that it would not help to keep analyzing the problem in all its facets and that solution focus could offer a way out. The transparency of the process and its rationale created a lot of trust in the group and immediate collaboration.

After the presentation, the process that we went through could be described as a mixture between Daniel Meier's (2005) solution circle, ideas from Mark McKergow's and Paul Z. Jackson's "The solutions focus", and the structure of an individual solution focused interview:

Goals of the meeting (plenary)

- Fast Forward to final feedback round:
- It is now 15:30, ladies and gentlemen, we are finished with the session. Could you please give me a summary of what you have reached?

Overall goals of the process (two groups)

- Two working groups describing specific, concrete wished for outcomes of the industry regarding the overall process regarding both changing legislations

Scaling – where are you now? (plenary)

- 10 goal was completely reached, 1 the opposite
- A scale on the flipchart
- Each person can put in a sticky dot where they think they are

Platform building working in pairs / then collected and clustered on pin-board

- What is already working a little bit?
- Where are the exceptions to the problem?
- What are your resources?
- Any signposts to solutions?

Looking at the problem from the side of the solution (Whole Group)

- Traditional form of the Miracle Question
- Perspective Changes (How would commission, farmers etc. notice a solution)
- What would the relevant stakeholders see you doing that you are not doing now?
- What would commission be doing?
- What would member states be doing

Small Steps – A Scaling Walk

Action Plans

- Who?
- What?
- When?

Customer Feedback

Three weeks after the very successful workshop, Felix Hirschburger of Resourcefulsearch interviewed the client to find out what had happened in the meantime and what – if anything – had been especially useful in our process. We scheduled the interview after the next group meeting of the client because, as we know with coaching or therapy sessions, the real change happens outside of the interaction with the coach or therapist. In the follow-up interview, the client said that immediately after the session he would have assessed the usefulness of the workshop at a 6 or 7. However, after the next meeting of his group, he saw that a lot had changed and rated the helpfulness of the session at an 8.

“In this case it turned out that when we looked back in the next meeting at the action points that we had taken from the meeting that people had actually followed up on these action points. They had all done it, they were motivated to do something with it.”

When asked what was most useful for the group, the client answered that concentrating on the things that were already working helped the most:

“The most helpful element I thought was that part where people were forced to think about things that do work in the current system. ... we still have people from that group who in current meetings say: “I know I should not say ‘but’” So this approach apparently has staid well with the group. It is a new mindset but it is difficult, especially in this business because there are certain parts in it where it is very hard to find anything that works.”

They also discovered what can be done and what is not possible in complex situations and found an efficient a way to deal adequately with complexity:

“Getting more insight in the fact that when you talk about highly complicated systems or processes that it is useless to try and attempt to analyze the entire causal relationships within that process. If you try to do that, ... you can only feel that you are in control of things if you totally oversimplify the situation. ... You run the risk of losing too many elements out of sight. ... (Understanding) that in combination with the small scaling steps approach is something where I say: Ok, it is really good to acknowledge that you cannot oversee the entire process for the next two or three years -- where do you want to be in the absolute ideal situation and what would be necessary to ever get there. Not try and map out the entire route, because tomorrow there will be a change in another legislation, there will be a change in European government, and then you don't need to be a follower of the chaos theory to understand that any small change can throw the system that you so carefully thought out and that would be very frustrating. So just concentrate on the next few small steps. On the one hand keep your eyes on the goal at the horizon, and at the same time concentrate just on the next few steps you have to make rather than stay sitting there and waste your time on planning the entire route which will change anyway.”

Conclusion

Looking at the possibilities that solution focus solution finding processes offer in other areas than issues of human interaction seems to me a promising area for testing and research. As we are just in the beginning of realizing that this might be possible, I would be very happy about contact and information on other projects and approaches, and of course, about possibilities to see if this will work a second time.

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