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## **SOLUTION-FOCUSED MANAGEMENT: BACKGROUND AND ADVANTAGES**



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## Abstract

The new field of Solution-Focused Management (SFM) is both conceptually simple and relatively easy to master. By its very designation alone, *solution*-focused, this newcomer to management practice has a naturally intuitive appeal for managers in today's accelerated business milieu. Problem analysis is time consuming. Solution discovery is far briefer. The problem-focused approaches invite the importation—and occasional implantation—of experts who have experience with the identified problem (and therefore, actually, a subtle vested interest in it). A focus on solutions is completely different. Singularly brief and practical, SFM specifically bypasses problem analysis in order to move as rapidly as possible to effective solutions. It also emphasizes the swift identification and utilization of personnel who can serve as solutions resources already at hand within any organization. As a result, the SFM model is exceptionally cost-efficient in its application. Moreover, it is neither ideological nor particularly theoretical. Its small set of basic interventions are simple, remarkably powerful, and surprisingly effective. They are therefore both very easy to learn and highly useful to know. All of these features taken together make SFM especially well-suited for management practice under business conditions prevalent at the onset of the twenty-first century. The author offers an initial orientation to SFM by: a) outlining the background from which it has arisen while positioning it with respect to other important influences upon management with which it may be contrasted; and b) describing the benefits of the model for CEOs, executives, and managers. The article opens with a review of the forces which have called SFM forth into the turbulent world of contemporary management practice. It closes with four predictions regarding SFM's future prospects—and the prospects of those who learn to use it well. [35 refs.]

## **SOLUTION-FOCUSED MANAGEMENT:**

### **Background and Advantages**

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Something revolutionary is now happening in management practice – something which has its origins in psychotherapy. It is not the first time this has happened. Management practice has strong historical and operational connections to the profession of psychotherapy. In fact, the two fields have long shared significant crossover features which make some of the methodological approaches of each relevant to the operational procedures of the other (Anderson, Kratochwill, & Berger, 1986; Palisano, 1989; Schein, 1987).

This time, however, the consequences are likely to be unprecedented. Within the last ten years, driven both by market forces and by sensitivity to the quantum impact paradigm shift now under way in the social sciences, a new therapeutic methodology has arisen which is also highly effective for dealing with today's complex organizational challenges. Referred to as the solution-focused approach, and known to psychotherapists as Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), it specifically bypasses problem analysis in order to move as rapidly as possible to effective solutions. The designation for the crossover of this new approach into management practice is "Solution-Focused Management" (SFM).

The task of this paper is to provide a basic description of the SFM model and the significant advantages it offers CEOs, executives, and managers who learn to use it well. That task begins with a brief review of the forces which have called SFM forth into the turbulent world of contemporary management practice. This will help to explain the origin and nature of its fundamental principles as well as to contrast SFM with older management approaches which are presently still in use.

### **BACKGROUND AND ORIGINS OF SFM**

In 1982 Kenneth J. Gergen published *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge*, a work which clarifies the nature of the paradigm shift now underway in business management as well as in the social and physical sciences. One of his major points was that until recently a common

touchstone of twentieth century civilization had been its virtually universal faith in knowledge acquired through science (Gergen, 1982). It is of course a hallmark of science that it stipulates a problem and by focusing on the problem arrives inevitably at its eradication through a process of trial and error over time. But now, according to Gergen, there is “a profound alteration taking place in both the concept of knowledge and of science—an alteration that may prove to be as significant as the Copernican revolution, the emergence of Darwinism, or the development of Freudian theory” (Gergen, 1982, vii). That alteration is the recognition of the social construction of knowledge and information—such that “the substance of the behavioral sciences undergoes continuous change” and “the knowledge engendered by the sciences is not fundamentally objective”(ix).

Gergen is not alone in his assessment. Srivastva and Cooperrider concur, stating that “the deepest assumptions of society and science are shifting at the same fundamental level that they did at the time of the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century” (Srivastva and Cooperrider, 1990, p. 6). In consequence, they argue, the chances are that almost any adult alive today has been exposed to greater forces of world change than individuals from any other age as far back as the Fall of Rome (Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1990). It is just such individuals who make up the cultural, social, business, and government organizations that comprise a contemporary technological society’s institutions—and it is just such individuals who manage them. Among the challenges they now face are: an incessant and ever-increasing expansion in information technology; a continual shifting of economic markets due to advancing globalization; and a constant merging of divergent social, national, and corporate cultures (Ludema, Wilmot, and Srivastva, 1997). The result has been an almost chaotic managerial “arena of multiple values, temporary relationships, and multi-interactive consequences” so turbulent that many organizations have become “fraught with schisms of all kinds” (Srivastva and Cooperrider, 1990, p.16). Naturally, the adaptations required by such challenges demand equally ceaseless and rapid innovations.

In fact businesses and other competitive organizations now feel the press of time as never before (Sorenson, 1997). The rapid rate of change has created an unprecedented atmosphere of agitation, commotion, and confusion in which information frequently grows irrelevant before organizations have had it long enough to be able to apply it (Bourgeois and Eisenhardt, 1988). In consequence, appropriate adaptations often cannot be adequately anticipated, to say nothing of their

being well implemented. By the time a problem has caused sufficient difficulty to have been identified, there is little time remaining for its lengthy analysis—and even less for its resolution through the method of trial and error over time. Nor is there time for outside experts to become sufficiently familiar with the firm's operations to be able to eliminate the problem before it worsens exponentially. Moreover as Gergen's (1982) research suggests, the very idea of focusing on a problem per se—as though it must necessarily contain concrete, independent answers within itself—actually hinders its solution. We have in fact already moved from the information age to an age of innovation.

Despite considerable discussion of these manifold challenges and the paradigm shift to which they are related (Berquist, 1993; Bourgeois and Eisenhardt, 1988; Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987; Daft, 1988; Sorenson, 1997; Srivastva and Cooperrider, 1990), organizations have been generally slow to orient themselves effectively to the new scheme of things. Traditional approaches have been maintained despite declines in their efficiency. This is partly because the old paradigm, while in decline, is not wholly dysfunctional. As Sarason & Lorentz (1998, p. 13) point out, “paradigm shifts do not necessarily mean that what has been replaced was completely wrong.” Then, too, the size and past successes of larger organizations in particular have insulated them to some extent from the highly charged atmosphere in which smaller profit and nonprofit enterprises must operate today.

Now, however, the management field has begun adopting a new concept from psychotherapy, the solution-focused approach, and adapting it to business applications. The most recent in a historical line of models borrowed from the interactive therapies, it promises to be the most significant of all.

### **Historic Crossovers Between Psychotherapy and Management**

There is nothing novel about the transfer of ideas from psychotherapy into management practice. It is entirely in keeping with management's past tradition of turning to psychotherapy as a resource for new thinking. Nor is the relationship unidirectional. Concepts and practices have flown back and forth between the two professions, in part because of situational similarities common to both. An obvious case in point might be the circumstantial parallels between a manager

mediating conflict resolution involving two department heads and a therapist engaged in marriage counseling.

In recent years, however, a more deliberate and thoughtful systematic collaboration between the disciplines of therapy and management has arisen. One feature of this new trend is the growing application to therapy of team approaches primarily developed in the management context. The ad hoc psychological treatment team in which one of the members is a psychiatrist (Busch & Gould, 1993), other allied professional (Connell, Whitaker, Garfield, & Connell, 1990), or even a lay person (Haber, 1990) is but one example. In any case it is quite clear that, inasmuch as they both deal with helping people to make things better, psychotherapy and have management share a quite a bit of common ground.

Significant commonalities are clearly recognizable in the comparison of Schein's process management model to Rogers' Client-Centered Therapy (CCT) (Coghlan & McIluff, 1995), and the relevance of several other therapeutic approaches to the business context is equally evident (Kets de Vries, 1996; Kushnir & Malkinson, 1993; McClendon & Kadis, 1991). Interest in this area has grown sufficiently that several fairly recent studies have already addressed the contributions of various therapeutic approaches to management practice: psychoanalysis (Schein, 1987; Kets de Vries, 1996; Levinson, 1996); Rational-Emotive Therapy (Criddle, 1993; Klarreich, 1993; Kushnir & Malkinson, 1993; Lange & Greiger, 1993; Morris, 1993); family therapy (Boverie, 1991; McClendon & Kadis; Smith, Salts & Smith, 1989); Reality Therapy (Bruce, 1984, 1986); and Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (Furman & Ahola, 1992).

Only the solution-focused model, however, seems to offer a general approach to management that is both eminently practical and effective for conditions prevalent at the onset of the twenty-first century. Naturally, then, managers who wish to add to their inventory of intervention strategies will find it very important to understand the business applications of the solution-focused model. In order to provide a contrast between that approach and other management alternatives based on psychotherapy, a brief overview of recent studies will be useful.

## **Therapeutic Models Currently Applied to Management Practice**

### **Psychoanalysis**

Of all the well-known clinical approaches that have been applied to the business context, perhaps the least cited and least used approach is psychoanalysis. In fact the relevance of psychoanalysis as a general approach to management practice seems questionable given the long-standing disagreement among professionals in psychology and related fields as to the general validity of many aspects of Freudian theory in the first place. Nonetheless, within the framework of organizational psychology, psychoanalytic character constructs have been used in the personality assessment of business professionals for some time (Kets de Vries, 1996). Other psychoanalytic concepts have also been applied to management in various ways at various times—one notable example being Schein's (1987) application of the concept of perceptual distortion to his Observation, Reaction, Judgment, Intervention model of intrapsychic information processing.

### **Family Systems Theory**

Several other therapeutic models seem more plausible, however, as approaches to management practice. Among these, the application of family systems theory to management seems appealing (Boverie, 1991; McClendon & Kadis, 1991; Smith, Salts & Smith, 1989). The idea that work-based relationships parallel or even mimic those of the nuclear family, for instance, seems a reasonable enough common sense notion. Nothing in the current literature, however, presents any practical methodology for applying systems theory to management per se. Boverie (1991) provides a persuasive argument that Family Systems Therapy can be applied to the workplace with a few modifications. She summarizes six systems therapy techniques, some ways in which they are relevant to the workplace, and how they might be useful in business interventions. She does not, however, explicitly state the process by which a manager might apply these concepts in actual business interventions.

### **Rational-Emotive Therapy**

Another intuitively appealing therapeutic approach to management practice is Rational-Emotive Therapy (RET). In this approach, people are shown how to think more rationally and less

catastrophically, and to be less influenced by their emotions in general. As a directive approach, RET would seem to fit well with the traditional diagnostic role of the manager who is able to specify a problem within the organization and recommend a remedy. It should be kept in mind, however, that some researchers have come to believe that the diagnostic role should be enacted only when more client-centered “helper” roles (i.e., process management) are not appropriate (Schein, 1987). Despite this reservation, a number of RET advocates (Criddle, 1993; Klarreich, 1993; Kushnir & Malkinson, 1993; Lange & Greiger, 1993; Morris, 1993) seem to have made concerted efforts to promote the value of RET for managers.

### **Client-Centered Therapy**

Sometimes called the “Rogerian” or “person-centered model,” Client-Centered Therapy (CCT) is intended, on the other hand, as an essentially nondirective approach. Client-centered therapists place a premium on developing rapport with those who come to them through the expression of empathy and an attitude of “unconditional positive regard” (Rogers, 1961, pp. 283-284). To accomplish this, they rely on active listening in order to demonstrate attentive interest and on reflective paraphrasing in order to check their understanding of what a person has just said. Both techniques serve to make it clear that the individual’s own views are important to the therapist.

The client-centered approach is designed to help groups and individuals resolve conflicts without the imposition of the therapist’s personal values. In the business world, Schein’s (1987) process model has some parallels to CCT (Coghlan & McIluff, 1995), but the process approach is nevertheless more directive than CCT. Schein’s model does not emphasize client-centeredness strategically in the way CCT does. Instead, the person-centered element serves primarily as an initial tactic, generally restricted to the first session or two and is employed to guide people—albeit indirectly—towards using particular processes in addressing organizational problems. This may not appeal, however, to managers who are not already highly proficient in person-centered interaction. Furthermore, it gives the manager no specific tools for keeping personnel effectively focused on solutions.

## **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy**

Properly applied, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is somewhat more promising in that regard. Like rational-emotive therapists, cognitive-behavioral therapists have developed clinical interventions for bringing about appropriate personal perceptions of self and environment. This is referred to as cognitive restructuring. Schein (1987) adapts cognitive restructuring to his process model and employs related CBT techniques (e.g., the redefining of situations as less threatening, or more urgent, etc.) in the service of organizational change. In applications beyond process, however, the CBT approach can appear to offer no more than what many might regard as “positive thinking”—especially if the manager is not particularly proficient with it. Moreover, despite whatever usefulness it may have in the way of changing someone’s situational perceptions, the CBT model tends not to provide the manager with any effective tools for influencing how people act upon the complexities of their business environments.

### **A Common Disadvantage of Currently Applied Therapeutic Modalities**

The approaches discussed thus far all share one significant disadvantage: they are inherently problem-focused. One serious consequence of problem orientation is that people can easily become bogged down by the nature of the problem itself, instead of finding ways to do something about it. Another, even worse, result occurs when groups or individuals who are encouraged to focus on a specified problem become so confused about how to resolve it that they end up believing it cannot be resolved at all (de Shazer, 1985). For reasons such as these, many therapists today are turning to the new solution-focused approach specifically because it generates quick progress through attention to strengths and solutions (Furman & Ahola, 1992), thereby avoiding the delays caused when one gets tied up in the analysis of defects and problems.

### **The Solution-Focused Approach**

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) is a distinct modality within the developing brief therapy paradigm. It has come to prominence in response to new economic challenges facing therapists today (Worthington, 1996), many of which are the same as those confronting managers, CEOs, and other executives—all of whom are affected by a developing cultural preference for

speedy delivery of services and outcomes. Brief therapy in general is “defined by a time limit,” conducted by “an active therapist,” and predicated on “the development of a chief focus” (Hersh, 1988, p. 55).

The primary thrust of SFBT is toward solutions rather than problems per se. It is a fast and effective method for time-limited interventions involving attainable goals. Its aim is to help clients set their own goals, evaluate their own progress, and eventually achieve their own objectives (de Shazer, 1985). The practical emphasis of SFBT, along with its stress on speed and client initiative, makes its crossover to the organizational-industrial format as SFM very attractive—provided that the personnel involved are competent in their line of work and are (at least potentially) motivated toward change. This approach assumes that every problem has an exception in which the problem did not occur or in which the problem has been successfully dealt with in the past. The main idea is to help people discover what they did right when they were successful in the past, and encourage them to try to do it again. By succeeding in this, they discover at least one workable solution.

### **Critical Elements of the Solution-Focused Approach**

Sklare (1997) has identified several solution-focused principles which are all directly applicable to SFM:

1. “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” (pp. 8-9);
2. “If it doesn’t work, don’t do it” (pp. 8-9);
3. “Once you know what works, do more of it” (pp. 8-9);
4. Focus on talking about solutions, not problems (p. 9);
5. Every problem has exceptions that can become solutions (p. 10);
6. Small changes lead to larger ones (p. 11);
7. “We all have what it takes to resolve our difficulties” (p. 11);
8. “Avoid problem analysis” p. 12);
9. “Focus on the present and the future” (p. 13);
10. “Focus on actions rather than insights” (p. 14).

*With respect to SFM one additional principle should be added here:*

11. Don’t let management theory interfere with effectiveness.

It is important to note that while the principles behind SFM are very simple, they are not in the least simplistic—and although they are easy to apply, a certain amount of training is usually required before managers can excel at SFM. It is not difficult, after all, to wander away from even the simplest of principles without training in their application.

## **ADVANTAGES OF SOLUTION-FOCUSED MANAGEMENT**

Some of the very reasons that the solution-focused approach has attained its current success in the field of psychotherapy are also excellent arguments for its application to management practice. Managers and other executives can easily recognize the issues involved when they are presented in sound management terms.

### **SFM is Atheoretical**

In contrast to other management approaches, SFM is essentially atheoretical and nonideological. Appreciative Inquiry (AI), for instance, appears to have an almost transcendental agenda of world salvation through organizational change (note in particular the descriptions of AI in Srivastva and Cooperrider, 1990, pp. 9, 118, 119, 121). Solution-Focused Management has no such agenda. Although both AI and SFM have roots in social constructionism, the closest SFM comes to a theory is the idea that company personnel can produce the solutions to their own problems. The solution-focused manager's task is therefore to keep them on track. Another example, the process approach, is deeply imbued with social process theory—which complicates the management task with an assumed need to “understand” the change process in each situation. From the SFM perspective, understanding the process is far less important than finding and doing things that work quickly and well.

The SFM model is therefore much better suited to situations in which it is important to get needed changes rapidly under way. Additionally, because it is atheoretical, using SFM in given situations does not necessarily entail surrendering favored theories overall. While that may prove efficacious in the long run, it is by no means a requirement. Thus, when preferred, SFM can be used in ways that complement a manager's traditional approach without competing with it.

## **Time is of the Essence**

An increase in the number and severity of management problems is a natural byproduct of the current business climate. The pace of social and corporate change is one of ever-increasing acceleration and there is no reason to expect it to slow down any time soon (Gleick, 1999). The consequent pressure to increase productivity while limiting production time has therefore greatly intensified in recent years (Sorenson, 1997). Old-style approaches to fixing problems do not function as well under present conditions as they may have in the past. Problem analysis is time consuming—yet time itself has now become a major issue. Solution discovery is far more effective. Singularly brief and practical, SFM specifically bypasses problem analysis in order to move as rapidly as possible to workable solutions. Another aspect of its superior utility is the swift identification and recruitment of resources already at hand within any organization. As a result, the SFM model is exceptionally time-efficient—and thus cost-efficient—in its application.

## **SFM Is the Least Invasive Approach**

Problem-focused approaches have another major drawback in addition to the delays and general “clunkiness” involved in their use in the high risk, fast paced world of business today. They invite the importation—and occasional implantation—of experts who have experience with the identified problem (and therefore, actually, a subtle vested interest in it). The ability to keep issues in house is important for managers in competitive organizations in which knowledge is power and the less outsiders know, the better it is for the company and its executives. There is much to be said for the idea of a single manager or a very small team working within a specified narrow scope instead of calling in a consulting group which may tend to camp out and enlarge its enterprise.

Solution Focused Management concentrates on the expansion and transfer of current and past successes to identified problems—applying what is already working to what needs to work better. Even in-house managers trained in SFM therefore need not intrude upon any but the specific operation in which solutions are needed. They do not require anything like “a greater grasp of the organization as a whole” in order to “integrate implemented changes.”

Furthermore, because the budget-friendly SFM emphasis on the value of present personnel as ready resources eliminates the need for outside consultants, it also saves the costs of their services. The SFM model is thus both the least invasive and most economical approach available today.

### **Sharing of Expertise**

Another excellent advantage of SFM is that the solution-focused manager can easily impart some of the basics of the approach to other selected personnel. In this way the organization gains not only a solution to the problem at hand, but also a solution orientation for other problems later on. It is reasonable to expect that some trained SFM managers within an organization will be used cooperatively as internal consultants for concerns elsewhere in the company and as mentors for others who are interested in what SFM has to offer. Solution-Focused Management thus fulfills in part and in its own way Kantor's (1994) call for greater attention to "collaborative advantage" in business relationships.

### **CONCLUSION**

The focus on solutions rather than problems represents the future of American management practice. Solution-Focused Management is both conceptually simple and easy to perform. It is neither ideological nor particularly theoretical. Its small set of basic interventions are remarkably powerful and effective. They are singularly time-efficient, and involve no costs other than those associated with initial management training in SFM techniques. Emphasizing the swift identification and utilization of resources already at hand within a given firm, division, department, or task group, SFM avoids not only the expense but also the potential invasiveness of outside consultants. Solution-Focused Management therefore answers the needs of organizations adjusting to the new innovation age with its many unanticipated difficulties.

Four predictions follow easily from the facts presented in this paper. First, it seems clear that the multiple practical advantages of SFM will cause many experienced management professionals to recognize the value of the model. A second prediction is that newcomers to management will see SFM as an excellent means of distinguishing themselves early in their careers. Third, CEOs, executives, and managers will need to move as quickly as possible to become proficient in

SFM in order to stay ahead of competitors who will soon be using it to their own advantage. Lastly—and most importantly—those who learn to use SFM well are likely to be the leaders who rise higher and more quickly than those who do not—simply because they will be able to produce the best results in the shortest time.

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