

# An examination of “problem-solving” versus “solution-focused” facilitation styles in a corporate setting

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Gass and Gillis (1995) recently described two different paradigms for facilitating client change in adventure experiences: *problem-focused* facilitation and *solution-focused* facilitation. While both approaches are interested in resolving client problems, the difference between these approaches lies in the manner in which clients achieve change.

As outlined in Table 1, problem-focused facilitation looks to solve problems by closely investigating their causes, determining what can be done to reduce their influence on clients (e.g., “What keeps the problem going?”; “Who did what when the problem starting occurring or became worse?”; “How can the group work harder on reducing the problem?”). Problem-focused facilitators often investigate who or what sustains the problem, when and where it occurs, why it has continued to be a problem, and how clients can try harder to overcome the problem. Problem-focused facilitators generally assist clients by learning as much as possible about the problem and then work with clients to eliminate these problems.

As also seen in Table 1, *solution-focused* facilitation does not ignore the presenting problems, but strives to bring about their resolution by helping clients identify, construct, and implement solutions to the problem. In this approach, facilitation centers around: (1) identifying what clients want (i.e., solutions) rather than what they don't want (i.e., problems); (2) looking

for what is currently working for clients rather than what is not; (3) emphasizing what clients are doing already that is useful, stressing client strengths; and (4) assisting clients in doing something different (i.e., solutions) instead of investing in something that isn't working for them (i.e., problems) (e.g., Berg, 1994; Waller & Peller, 1992). A solution-focused facilitator often looks for “exceptions” to the problem (e.g., when or where the problem doesn't occur, investigating why the problem doesn't happen) and establishes how clients can work differently, rather than harder, to accomplish more.

In their article, Gass and Gillis (1995) illustrate how problem-focused and solution focused facilitators might approach the issue of communication differently through the technique of “scaling.”

For example, after completing an experience a facilitator asks a group to evaluate how they communicated using a scale from 0-10, with “0” representing a total lack of communication and “10” being totally successful. After considering their effort, the group rates their effort as a “5.” To assist the group in developing their communication skills, a problem-focused facilitator would center clients' attention on identifying, investigating, and eliminating those problematic elements that prevented the group from obtaining a score of 6, 7, or higher. A solution-focused facilitator

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would ask the group to consider those positive elements that “made” the score a “5,” prevented the score from being lower (e.g., a “3” or “4”), and focus on building those attributes to increase the evaluative score (e.g., “Nice job—what were the things you did to make the score a ‘5’ and not a ‘4’ or ‘3’?”). The facilitator could also ask the group the things they will be doing differently to receive a score of “6” or “7” for communication (e.g., “What small thing could you do as an individual to make your score move from a ‘5’ to a ‘6’?”, “What will you be doing differently as a group when your group is at a ‘6’ or a ‘7’?”). (p. 67)

The problem-focused approach appears to be much more common as a method of facilitation in adventure programming. One reason for this may be that most experiential learning theories emphasize problem solv-

based on successful efforts rather than by opposing structures that are generating client failure.

The purpose of this study was to test the assumptions and models proposed by Gass & Gillis (1995) with corporate groups, comparing problem-focused and solution-focused facilitation approaches in use with functional and dysfunctional corporate groups. The hypothesis being tested was that the solution-focus facilitation would be effective with all groups, but particularly beneficial with the dysfunctional group.

### Methodology

The functionality of two North American corporations was identified by a pair of organizational development specialists using detailed diagnostic interviews and needs assessments. The first, a real estate company, was found to possess high levels of functional behavior (e.g., its members showed they got along well, enjoyed their work, shared information,

**Table 1:** Comparisons between problem-focused and solution-focused facilitation approaches

#### Problem-focused Facilitation Approach

- centers on reducing the “problem”
- looks at what clients are doing “wrong”
- emphasizes what clients don’t want
- highlights what could be done better
- seeks to eliminate negative client weaknesses
- interested in “why” the problem happens (e.g., what “causes” & “maintains” the problem)

#### Solution-focused Facilitation Approach

- centers on enhancing the “solution”
- looks at what clients are doing “right”
- emphasizes what clients do want
- highlights what is already being done well
- seeks to accentuate positive client strengths
- interested in when the problem doesn’t happen (e.g., exceptions to the problem)

ing as a key element in their process (e.g., Boud, 1985, 1993; Friere, 1985; Hart & Silka, 1994; Kolb, 1984; Walsh & Golins, 1976; Wright, 1983). Another reason may be cultural: many facilitators in Western cultures currently use paradigms that resolve problems by encouraging clients to draw out and analyze negative attributes/feelings rather than center attention on increasing positive attributes/feelings that occur as a means of developing group goals (e.g., Tham, 1996).

In their article, Gass and Gillis (1995) suggest that solution-focused approaches offer an empowering alternative to the norm of problem-focused approaches in therapeutic settings. They also conclude that solution-focused approaches should work with other forms of adventure programming and experiential learning, particularly with corporate clients. They infer that solution-focused approaches may work best with groups who are experiencing a high degree of dysfunctional behavior (e.g., those denying or resisting change), since this approach seeks to generate change

and supported new processes). The second, an accounting firm, was found to possess low levels of functional behavior (e.g., its members showed they did not like one another, found work to be objectionable, withheld resources from one another, and sabotaged newly established procedures).

Subjects in the study were a collection of employees with various positions and roles within their respective corporations. The subjects from the functional corporation were divided into three groups of approximately 20 members. The subjects from the dysfunctional corporation were divided into three groups of approximately 23 members. Of these total six groups, four (two from each corporation) contained a random assignment of workers. Two of these four (one functional, the other dysfunctional) were facilitated with a problem-focused approach and the remaining two (dysfunctional and functional) were facilitated with a solution-focused approach.

The last two groups (one from each corporation)

contained a purposeful selection of upper management (directors and vice-presidents) only. These two groups received a very different program aimed at investigating their roles for reintegrating and supporting employees from the other groups when they returned to work. Although a very important part of the training intervention, these two groups were excluded from the research design *a priori* because they could not be randomly assigned.

All groups underwent very similar corporate adventure training programs consisting of group initiative activities held at a conference center. The four experimental groups received the same activities (with slight modifications to fit their disparate cultures) in the same order over a 2-day period. During the treatment period, facilitators utilized their respective approaches (i.e., problem-focused or solution-focused facilitation).

Subjects (n=86) were given the long version of the Team Development Indicator (TDI-1) one month before and two months after the training treatment. The TDI has been shown to have face validity (Kormanski & Mozenter, 1987), an equivalent reliability of 0.95 between two alternate versions (Bronson, Gibson, Kichar & Priest, 1992) and a criterion related validity of 0.98 with other versions of the TDI (Priest & Lesperance, 1994). The TDI-1 is composed of 100 items typical of the behavior found in high performing teams. Subjects responded to the instrument by marking the percent of time their group exhibited each behavior on a scale of 0% (never) to 100% (always). The instrument was index scored by averaging the scores on all items (Bronson, 1990). Following this procedure, the mean index scores of the TDI-1 were subjected to three factor (2 X 2 X 2) ANOVA seeking differences over the two test times (before and after), between facilitation approaches (problem-focused or solution-focused), and across groups (functional and dysfunctional). Scheffe tests were used for post hoc analysis and a one way ANOVA was used to examine differences across average change scores.

## Results

The study achieved a 75% return rate (n = 17, 15, 17, and 16 per group, respectively). An average of five surveys per group were not returned, in all cases due to workplace constraints (e.g., subjects away from the office, had too much work to do to complete surveys). Changes in teamwork as measured by mean scores for the TDI-1 are graphically presented in Figure 1.

A three factor ANOVA identified interaction (F=11.11; p=0.0011) among all three factors: test time, functionality, and facilitation approach. While all four experimental groups experienced gains in teamwork,

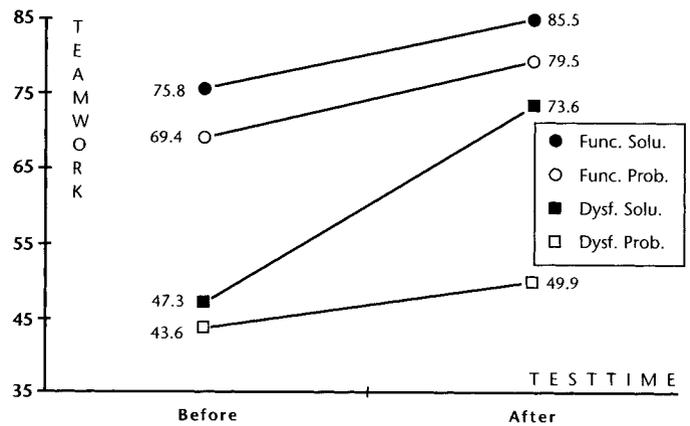


Figure 1: Graph of mean changes in teamwork (TDI-1 scores) for the four experimental groups over test time.

the greatest change was found with the dysfunctional group using the solution-focus approach.

## Discussion

On initial examination, one might assume the dysfunctional group given solution-focus facilitation increased because it had plenty of room to improve (e.g., regression factors). However, a second look shows that the dysfunctional group provided with the problem-focused facilitation experienced a relatively small amount of change by comparison. As seen in Figure 1, the solution-focused approach clearly made a difference for the dysfunctional group, bringing its level of teamwork almost equivalent to the two functional groups. Change experienced by the solution-focused dysfunctional group ( $\Delta = +26.3\%$ ) was significantly greater than for any of the other three groups ( $F = 14.65$ ,  $p = .0001$ ). Not only was this amount statistically significant, but the change is also *practically* significant (i.e., increasing a group's teamwork by one quarter of its full potential is an enviable outcome!). The question remains: what is so effective about the solution-focused approach as opposed to the problem-focused approach with dysfunctional groups?

One plausible explanation for such a difference is the "type" of change experienced by the groups (i.e., first or second order change).<sup>1</sup> In examining the four groups, it seems there was greater change within this group because there was the greatest "news of a difference" (e.g., de Shazer, 1988) from their belief system. For example, the functional groups who demonstrated success were probably able to access problem solving and solution-oriented elements congruent with their paradigm structure (i.e., either facilitation approach empowered the utilization of problem-focused or solu-

tion-focused strategies already in existence within their functional team structure). The dysfunctional group who received problem-solving facilitation demonstrated success in utilizing elements of "problem solving" with the adventure experience to produce nominal increases in team building. All of these efforts seem to point to first order change (e.g., see Waltzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974).

However, the dysfunctional group who received solution-focused facilitation demonstrated a different type of change in their success. This group, already mired in a "problem-focused" state, was presented with a different way to approach change through solution-focused facilitation. Being successful required a new way of conducting change—a literal "change in the way they changed." The change in this process, or second order change, produced a higher degree of change than any of the other paradigms of change (i.e., first order change) experienced with the other three groups.

A metaphoric example of the difference between first and second order change may help illustrate this concept further. First order change produces change within a structured system using the same set of rules and components. This can be like pedaling a bike up a steep hill without shifting gears. As the hill becomes steeper, the bicyclist must work harder within the structure of that gear ratio, using techniques that enable her/him to keep from falling over and reach the top of the hill (e.g., stand up, pull on the handlebars, exert more pressure on the pedals). However, say that as the hill steepens and the gear ratio becomes inappropriate or dysfunctional for this task, the bicyclist shifts gears to a more appropriate ratio. Using the new set of "rules" dictated by the more functional gear ratio, the bicyclist exerts the same amount of effort yet progresses up the hill much more effectively. This "shift" is analogous to second order change, working in a different and new way by changing the structure of the system. First order change uses "more of the same" rules to produce change; second order change creates transformation by changing the way change is achieved (Waltzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974).

Note that one type of change is not better than another; the situation dictates what will work best for the particular client. For some clients it may be wise to shift to a lower gear ratio (or get off the bike and walk), while others may have the structure and resources where staying in the same gear to achieve their objective is the most effective way to achieve functional

change (i.e., first order change).

Why didn't the solution-focus facilitation work better than the problem-focus facilitation with functional groups? Functional groups generally possess the ability to access more elements/resources when trying to affect change, while dysfunctional groups generally have quite fewer (note: whether these abilities are real, perceived, or both). It may be that either facilitation approach possesses plenty of "material to work with" in bringing change to functional groups. Each approach would capitalize on those elements of success that might work best within the particular focus being applied. The problem-focus would build on first order change elements: more working the same way. The solution-focus would build on second order change elements: finding a way to work differently. Since the groups are functional either situation would work well and hence, there was no significant difference between these two groups in the relative amounts of change in the study.

It is also important to note that the subjects were tested two months after the training program. Perhaps this length of time gave an opportunity for subjects to consider and integrate changes more successfully into their situation.

## Conclusions

In summary, this study established that problem-focused and solution-focused approaches appear equally effective at increasing teamwork in *functional* corporate groups. It also demonstrated that neither approach appears more influential in bringing client change with functional corporate groups.

Problem-focused facilitation, however, seems less effective with *dysfunctional* corporate groups, while there was overwhelming evidence in this study that solution-focused facilitation was extremely successful at raising teamwork for dysfunctional corporate groups. Practitioners working with dysfunctional corporate groups are encouraged to consider utilizing solution-focused facilitation techniques. A flow chart outlining these procedures, modified for corporate groups and based on the work developed by de Shazer (1988) and Waller & Peller (1992), is provided in Figure 2.

As seen in Figure 2, the construction of client goals in solution-focused processing is formed by identifying and amplifying what is already working for clients. In this process, facilitators go through a series of progressive steps to acquire information concerning solutions

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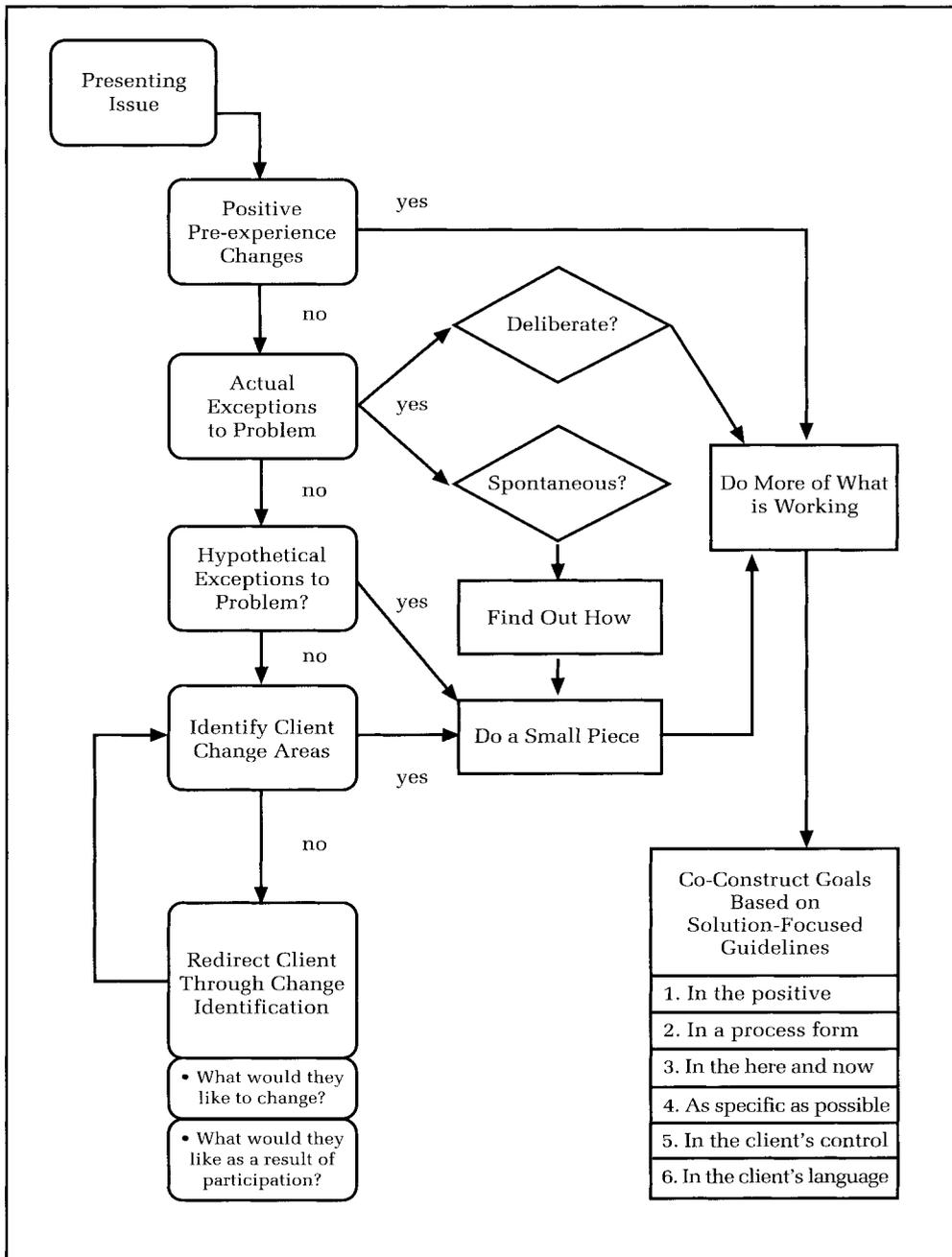


Figure 2: Diagram of solution-focused processing

for clients' problems. Sources from where this information can be extracted, in the following progressive order, include: positive pre-experience changes, actual exceptions to problems, hypothetical exceptions to problems, client change areas, and asking clients what they would like to change.

Once such information is obtained, accentuating "what is working" can lead to the development of solution-focused goals, based around the model established by Waller & Peller (1992). These principles include creating goals that are: (1) in the positive; (2) in a process

form; (3) in the present; (4) as specific as possible; (5) in the client's control; and (6) in the client's language.

Further research is required to strengthen the generalizability of the findings of this study to the field as a whole. One concern of this study is the influence of the particular facilitators used in the study. It is plausible that the capabilities of the facilitators interacted with the treatment; meaning that the ability of a facilitator to deliver the solution-focused facilitation has just as much, if not more, to do with beneficial changes as does a particular technique. While such an external validity dilemma is an issue in all such research studies of similar design, and not just limited to this study, it is only reduced as a plausible threat through replication in other settings with other facilitators with similar results.

Further study is also encouraged to examine the interaction of these approaches with other clientele, such as school groups or youth-at-risk populations. While there are obvious parallel systemic structures in functional and dysfunctional groups, monitoring the effect of the interaction of specific characteristics needs to be examined.

Also note that this study was conducted with North American corporations. Using such solution-focused procedures with different cultures may require modifications, or may serve a valuable medium for integrating cross-cultural techniques. Interested professionals are encouraged to follow integration efforts that take a "learning perspective" (e.g., Garvey, 1996; Santini, 1996; Tham, 1996) to assist their efforts.

## Notes

1. Briefly stated, first order change is change within a given system where the system's rules and principles remain unchanged. Second order change is change of the system itself, where change is a result of using an entirely new system of principles for bringing about change. For further reading, readers are encouraged to review sources like Waltzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, R. (1974).

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