

Dierolf, K. (2007). **Solution Focus tackles complexity**. In McKergow, M. & Clarke, J (Ed.), *Solutions Focus Working. 80 real life lessons for successful organisational change* (pp. 105–119). Cheltenham: Solutions Books

Co-author: Kirsten Dierolf

Organisation: Bayer CropScience

It's one thing to know how to reach out effectively. It's quite a different thing to know what the goals should be. In this chapter, SF methods help a world leader in innovation to navigate a useful and sustainable path through scientific, technical and regulatory complexity.

Bayer CropScience is one of the world's leading innovative crop science companies, working in the areas of crop protection, nonagricultural pest control, seeds and plant biotechnology. Based in Monheim, Germany, the company has a global workforce of about 18,800 and annual sales of about €6 billion. It is represented in more than 120 countries.

The European Commission was drafting new legislation affecting the agro-chemical industry and the company had appointed a consulting company to help it make sure that its interests were taken into account in the drafting process. The consultants were very helpful in advising on the mechanics of stakeholder involvement — how and where to do it — but not so helpful in identifying the message that they wanted the European Commission to take on board.

Strategy and legislation

Hans Mattaar, the European Regulatory Strategy Manager, called Kirsten Dierolf to tell her about a difficult situation he was facing.

He had a team of international experts with very different fields of expertise: lawyers, marketing experts, scientific experts and regulatory affairs experts. Their task was to find proposals to put to the European Commission working on a Thematic Strategy on the Sustainable Use of Pesticides and on new legislation about bringing plant protection products to the market.

Of course, Hans welcomed a System that improved safety - to have a regulatory regime for the authorization of plant protection products which protected man, animals and the environment. Moreover, he wanted to respond in a constructive, thoughtful way to the topic, resisting the more common knee-jerk responses from the industry - very technocratic, answering science with science. His focus was on what the legislation should want to achieve as far as Bayer and its sector of the industry were concerned. This required some different thinking and creativity using all the different competences in the team.

The team 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 way forward in one corner, twenty 'yes, buts' raised their ugly heads in the other.

Hans had met Kirsten before, and heard about the Solutions Focus approach from her. The ideas made sense to him as he met problem focused thinking all the time. He was also concerned that his team members, with their academic and scientific backgrounds, often lost sight of the big picture.

The idea of trying the approach appealed to him and so he called Kirsten: could Solutions Focus be helpful in such a situation?

Solutions Focused processes are applicable in so many fields because they are mostly about human interaction. Be it in business, in therapy, in conflict resolution, or team training, solutions focus is a good way of helping people change quickly and sustainably. However, in this case, they 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. Rather they needed to find a compelling message to influence the European Commission in drafting strategy and legislation about the use of pesticides and other plant protection products. This message needed to take into account the safety of plant protection products, the interests of Bayer CropScience and the plant protection industry in general and, of course the interests different fields of the European regulatory bodies. Hans' team and the lobbying experts and regulatory experts knew how to reach out, but were not so sure what messages they should be conveying.

Platform building

Before Kirsten started to work, she was extensively briefed about the issues at hand: She was sent an impressive stack of legal and technical documentation to read. She says:

As a solution focused practitioner, blessed with a beginner's mind and remembering that every case is different, 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 solutions 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. By talking about the problem and about the attempted solutions, she found the way into the language and grammar of the team and that was very helpful in two ways:

- 'It made joining the team and collaborating with them 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?'
- I could distinguish between when someone was talking about a way forward 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 impossible to do.'

This is an important point. Although Solutions Focus practitioners are not interested in problems for their own sake, it is important to listen to clients talking about them. It enhances the consultant's credibility (by learning the language, jargon and history) and it demonstrates that the consultant is listening with interest and concern. Of course, the consultant is listening - with interest and concern - for hints about what the client wants. Traces of this are usually there, hidden in all the details of problem talk. Kirsten says:

“Whenever I have the feeling I don't know enough about the problem, I turn it into wondering about what they want.”

Solutions focused, not problem phobic

Just because Kirsten is solutions focused does not mean that she is problem phobic. It's important to listen carefully to the story of the problem for two reasons, neither of which is related to finding information about the problem to solve it. Firstly, it helps to join with the clients in the project. Secondly, there will be traces of a solution-narrative to be noticed and amplified later - hints about what's wanted, useful strengths, times when things are better and so on.

The Workshop

Kirsten had a day with the team. There were eight or nine people from different disciplines and from all over Europe (Spain, Germany, UK, Netherlands, Belgium)

She started with a short introduction to the approach using the analogy of the 'game of life' (see for example <http://www.bitstorm.org/gameoflife>). The computerized game consists of a collection of cells which, based on a few mathematical rules, can appear, survive or die in each succeeding time period. Depending on the initial conditions, the cells form various patterns throughout the course of the game. This is a complex yet non-complicated System governed by only a few rules and yet it is mathematically intractable - there is no quick way to work out how or when System will settle into a stable configuration. The only way to find out is to let the System work itself through one step at a time.

Analyzing the present cannot predict the future

The Game of Life shows the futility of trying to determine the future by analyzing the present. If this is not possible in such an apparently simple system, why should we expect our complicated world to be different? All we can do is act now, see what happens and adjust accordingly. SF offers a way to choose how to act now, and to build an whatever useful change occurs.

If there is no short cut to predicting the fate of cellular automata following simple rules, what makes us think that we can predict the outcome of infinitely more complex human situations?

We may know how public affairs activities work - someone talks to someone else; some people are influential, some people know how to use this influence constructively... But we cannot know in advance exactly what the outcome will be - we just have to wait and see! -

This straightforward analogy convinced most team members that it would not help to keep analyzing the problem in all its facets and that solutions focus methods could offer a way out.

People may or may not want to know the theory

In this case Kirsten found it useful to make explicit the futility of analyzing the problem. In general this is not necessary, but in this environment and working with people accustomed to a technical and analytical method she found it useful.

Kirsten then led the team in a series of activities following the structure of an individual solution focused interview, based on the work of Daniel Meier (2005) and of Paul Z Jackson and Mark McKergow (2002)

Goals for the meeting

It is useful to start work of this kind by setting expectations for the day - and setting them high! Asking what people hope to achieve during a session is a great way to concentrate minds on the task in hand - and to head off any misunderstandings about the objectives from the beginning. Kirsten first invited the whole team to fast forward to the final feedback round at the end of the day and said '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 achieved?' Answers were 'to get new ideas', 'to start developing a product', 'some content', 'think outside the box' and 'follow a structured and creative process.' Most people were comfortable with this rather surprising beginning - some team members seemed not so used to it, but interactions were lively.

Stakeholder Outreach Goals

The team then broke into two working groups, one addressing the strategy document (Thematic Strategy on the Sustainable Use of Pesticides) and the other working on the new legislation governing bringing plant protection products to the market. Each group was asked to come up with specific, concrete desired outcomes from the industry's point of view and the viewpoint of the other relevant stakeholders. -

The groups developed very interesting details of the goals. The group working on Thematic Strategy formulated a few goals such as 'minimizing risks for health and environment and being recognized for the effort to do so', 'Avoiding illegal use of plant protection products', and 'reducing impact of plant protection products by innovation' and already linked these to goals of the European Authorities and other stakeholders. The group working on plant protection products formulated 'strict regulatory standards favoring innovative and safe products', 'being recognized as a provider of enabling technology for healthy crops', and a 'predictable, consistent regulatory process' and also already linked the goals to the respective other stakeholders.

Goals are not the Future Perfect

These goals are a useful part of building the platform. They are statements of what is wanted in the future. The other future aspect of SF practice - the Future Perfect - is different. In that process, people describe a world where the goals have been achieved with particular reference to the differences so created. Both have their places in skillful practice, and the distinction is well brought out here.

Scaling - where are you now?

The whole team was brought back together to exchange and enlarge on each other's work and then Kirsten asked where people thought they currently stood on a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 meant that they had found which content to push for and they knew how they would like the legislation to go and it was incorporated in the legislation and 1 meant the opposite. She drew a scale on a flip chart and invited individual members to put a sticky dot on what they thought the appropriate point on the scale was. The results were between 3 and 5.

Counter finding

There was no discussion of the actual numbers on the scale. The important thing was that everyone thought something of what they wanted was already incorporated in the drafts and the legislative

process. This simple fact was a rich source of information. Working in pairs, the team worked questions like these:

- Describe recent successes with regard to finding what you want and communicating it to authorities

What helped? What else?

- What is working well? What are the 'exceptions to the problem'
- Can you identify 'signposts to solutions'?

Their answers were noted on post-it notes, put onto a pin-board, and then the team grouped common ideas together. This raised the energy, enthusiasm and optimism and led Kirsten to ask the Miracle Question:

The Future Perfect

She asked the whole team to

'Just suppose .. that after we finish here today ... and you fight the traffic, hop on a plane and go home... and do all the things you have to do this evening... and finally go to bed ... and go to sleep. And while you're asleep, a miracle happens ... and all your problems concerning these issues are resolved, just like that. But the miracle happened in the middle of the night and you didn't see it happen. How would you know, when you woke up, that a miracle had happened?'

This led to a series of good, coherent ideas, which Kirsten captured on a flip chart. She then widened the scope of the miracle by bringing in other perspectives (the Commission, member states, the farmers who buy Bayer products and other stakeholders):

- How would other stakeholders know that a miracle had happened? • What would they see you doing that you are not doing now?
- What would they be doing?

It's never too late to talk about the miracle

Kirsten has used the Future Perfect tool quite late in this process. Notice how she widens the picture to bring in other perspectives. The process expands the group's perspective in an interesting way.

Small Steps -

To decide on some small steps in the right direction, Kirsten used the idea of scaling in another way. This time, she introduced a 'Scaling Walk'. She marked out a scale from 1 to 10 (10 being the miracle) in the room and asked the participants- to stand at the appropriate point on the scale to show their perception of where the company was now. She encouraged some more counter-finding conversation at this point and then asked everyone to say what they would notice if they were one step higher on the scale. This very quickly led to do-able, concrete action plans with responsible persons for each action. Examples were finding alliances in and outside the company or drafting a new and easier regulatory process.

These were recorded on a flip chart, with details of who was going to do what and when they would report. Contrary to normal experience, all the actions were completed to the agreed point before the follow-up meeting 4 weeks later. This meeting happened without Kirsten, as it was technical and needed no further support from her side. Kirsten says: 'It is my aim to make myself superfluous as quickly as possible.'

What would one point higher look like?

Expanding on the description of 'one point higher' is a very useful tactic. The phrasing that Kirsten uses, to ask about what people would notice, is significant. This invites a description in which, rather like the Future Perfect, the people have not had to take action - they simply have to think about what they would notice was different. This usually acts as a helpful springboard to picking some small actions.

Feedback from the workshop

Six weeks after the first workshop, Felix Hirschburger of Notice Resourcefulsearch interviewed Hans Mattaar to find out what had happened in the meantime and what - if anything - had been especially useful in how the workshop was run. The interview was arranged after the team's follow-up meeting because, in common with coaching and therapy sessions, the real change happens after meeting the consultant. In the follow-up interview, Hans said that immediately after the session he would have assessed the usefulness of the workshop at a 6 or 7 and was a bit disappointed with the outcome, but he was very happy with the next session and then rated the helpfulness of the original session at 8. He said: "When we looked back at the action points that we had taken from the meeting, it turned out that people had actually followed up on these action points. They had all done it, they were motivated to do something with it." He was surprised about the lag, but explained it by likening the regulatory process to turning the wheel on an oil tanker - it takes time to respond. The signs that things were moving were apparent in the second meeting where he detected a new approach to the project.

When asked what was most useful for the group, he replied 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 lasted well with the group. It is a new mindset but it is difficult, especially in this business because there are certain areas where it is very hard to find anything that works.'

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

'Getting more insight into the fact that when you talk about highly complicated systems or processes, 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 oversimplify the situation. ... You run the risk of losing too many elements from view. ... I now understand that it is really good to acknowledge that you cannot oversee the entire process for the next two or three years - to decide where you want to be in the absolute ideal situation and what would be necessary to ever get there. There is no point in trying to map out the entire route, because tomorrow there will be a change in

some other legislation, or there will be a change in European government. 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 could be very frustrating. So just concentrate on the next few small steps in the right general direction. 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 sitting there and wasting your time on planning the entire route which will change anyway.'

Stay out of 'ant country'

The idea of 'one eye on the horizon, the other on the ground in front' sums up an important element of SF practice. You can know what you want (the horizon) and what's next (the ground in front). The territory in between, memorably described as Ant Country by scientists Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen, is unknowable in detail in the same way as Game of Life. Attempting to foresee it in detail is to put energy and attention where it is least useful.

On a more personal level, Hans said

'One thing I personally learned from this is to not try and go too fast. I have a tendency to want to see the final position on the chessboard before I make the next move, so taking it a step at a time requires some effort. I am trying to learn to decide which direction I want to go, and try to keep the horizon AND the ground in mind. I used to rush to the goal and then miss the big hole in front of me!

Later reflections

For the purposes of this book, we interviewed Hans Mattaar nine months after the workshop. From this later perspective, his reflections are interesting. He comments that the workshop was a small part of a very long process which is still ongoing. It is not easy to keep this kind of approach alive throughout the project, or to train younger regulatory staff to accept that there is more than just to map science in doing a good job! However, the approach is still bearing fruit:

"I hear people saying things that I would not have heard five years ago. Not just because of a single workshop, but this gave me a handle on things as to how to tackle it. I am trying to cascade this down into the company. The way that a different kind of approach is brought to a group is crucial to how they pick it up and use it. This worked quite well with this group. For me it was very important to have the next meeting to fully appreciate the change it had brought to the group.'

[- J These comments are very interesting. As Solutions Focus practitioners we notice that the asking for client feedback serves more purposes than a client satisfaction survey aimed at improving our own practice. It is a positive intervention in itself, serving as a reflective tool for the client and helping to

- reinforce learning
- aid reflection and review
- give rise to more insights
- create ripples through the client's organization

SF as a practice of simplifying

This case shows the strength of the Solutions Focus approach in messy and complex situations. One way of described SF practice is as a way of simplifying a situation in a novel way. The usual way of dealing with complexity is to compare what's happening with some kind of schema or model, which in turn suggests what to do. The medical process of diagnosis and many models of personality and business work in this way. The SF approach is not to fit the situation to a pre-determined framework but instead to reduce complexity by overlooking aspects which do not relate to what is wanted. This usually means paying less attention to the problem and its cause.

Kirsten has insightful comments about the theoretical underpinning to solutions focus work. This is her perspective on the topic:

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. (For example what made me prick the balloon, why this balloon, who blew it up in the first place, etc. etc). 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.

Solutions 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, Solutions Focused practitioners do not attempt to plan the whole change process from start to finish in detailed steps - it is simply not possible.

'The problems that Solutions 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 solutions focused process would be a good means to help the group to move ahead.'

Taken at this level, the possible use of SF ideas in areas other than issues of human interaction becomes clearer. It seems these could be a promising area for testing and research.

References

Robert Axelrod (2001): *Harnessing Complexity*, Basic Books
Steve De Shazer (1994): *Words Were Originally Magic*, Norton
James Kennedy (2001): *Swarm Intelligence*, Morgan Kaufman

Daniel Meier (2005): *Team Coaching with the Solutioncircle*, Solutions Books

Paul Z Jackson and Mark McKergow (2002): *The Solutions Focus*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing

Gunther Schmidt (2004): Liebesaffären zwischen Problem und Lösung, Carl Auer

Jan Stewart and Jack Cohen (1997): Figments of Reality, Cambridge University Press

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1973): Philosophical Investigations, Prentice Hall -

Websites:

Garne of life - <http://www.bitstorm.org/gameoflife/>

Conversations with: Louis Cauffman, Jenny Clarke, Felix Hirschburger, Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kirn Berg, Mark McKergow

Kirsten Dierolf M.A., founder of SolutionsAcademy, is an organisational developer, trainer, and coach working mainly for the banking, pharmaceutical industry, information technology and automotive industries. She teaches at two German business schools and is the proud mother of 3 sons and 2 tomcats. Her interests are her work, archery, juggling, classical music, and literature.