

How the Solution-Focusedness of Coaches is Related to Their Thriving at Work

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While more evidence is now emerging on the effectiveness of the solution-focused approach to help clients, little is known about how working in a solution-focused way is related to practitioner thriving at work. A web-survey was administered to 258 coaches. The survey asked respondents about what they do in coaching sessions, what they believe about issues like people, change and helping, and how they view their work. The solution-focused approach was not mentioned in the survey, nor was any other approach. Through two separate pre-studies, however, it was possible to use the independent variables to compute scores for solution-focused coach behaviors (SF Behavior), non-solution-focused coach behaviors (Non-SF Behavior), and agreement with solution assumptions (SF Mindset). Thriving at Work was calculated from three sets of dependent variables which were derived respectively from self-determination theory, the burnout literature, and the work engagement literature. SF Behavior and SF Mindset were positively correlated with each other and with Thriving at Work. These findings suggest that that working in a solution-focused way not only benefits clients but also practitioners. These findings may be useful for improving practitioner thriving and for developing strategies for reducing burnout, employee turnover, and sick leave.

Keywords: solution-focused, coaching, thriving, survey

1. Introduction

The solution-focused approach originated in the field of psychotherapy (de Shazer, Berg, Lipchik, Nunnally, Molnar, Gingerich, & Weiner-Davis, 1986; de Shazer, 1986; de Shazer, 1988; De Jong & Berg, 2008; Walter and Peller, 1992). In this field the approach is generally referred to as solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT). Between 1980 and 1990 solution-focused techniques such as 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) were developed. Over the last decade the solution-focused approach has gained popularity in other fields too, first and foremost in the field of coaching (Author, 2011). Generally, coaching may be defined as the process of a coach helping a client to achieve professional or personal desired

outcomes. Solution-focused coaching is a coaching approach in which a coach supports their clients by viewing and treating them as unique and competent, being responsive to and working with whatever they say, helping them to visualize the changes they want to achieve and to build step-by-step on what they have already been doing that works (Author, 2011).

Since the application of the solution-focused approach is primarily intended to benefit clients, it is only reasonable that most research is focused on establishing the effectiveness of the approach in terms of its efficacy to yield client outcomes. Such an evidence base is now growing. According to Franklin, Trepper, Gingerich, and McCollum (2011), research to date has demonstrated that solution-focused brief therapy has a small to moderate effect size and is the equivalent of

other established treatments. Also some first steps have been taken to establish the evidence of the effectiveness of solution-focused interventions in the context of coaching (Grant & Cavanagh, 2009; Author, 2010).

Although client outcomes justly remain the primary criterion for choosing one coaching approach or another, the effects on practitioners are also important to take into consideration. This is especially the case when different coaching approaches turn out to be equivalent in their efficacy to yield client outcomes. To date, little is known about possible effects of working in a solution-focused way on practitioners themselves.

One study that did examine the effect of working in a solution-focused way on practitioners was done by LaFountain and Garner (1996) who compared solution-focused school counselors with school counselors who used a traditional, problem-focused approach on three components of burnout syndrome (Maslach & Jackson, 1986): (1) emotional exhaustion, (2) depersonalization, and (3) personal accomplishment. The findings of this study were favorable for the solution-focused approach. Solution-focused counselors suffered less emotional exhaustion, experienced less depersonalization, which means that they could work in a way that is more in line with their own views and values, and experienced more personal accomplishment.

The aim of the current study is to explore the relationship between how solution-focused coaches behave and think on the one hand, and the extent to which they thrive at work on the other. Sonenshein, Grant, Dutton, Spreitzer, & Sutcliffe (2008) found

indications that thriving can occur at work during everyday moments, and that thriving is a state rather than a personality disposition (Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005) which implies that it is relatively malleable over time and is socially embedded. The degree to which people are thriving at a given point in time thus depends on the specific tasks they have or circumstances they find themselves in.

2. Method

A web-based survey was designed and administered to 258 coaches. The survey was administered with the following four sections of variables: (1) background variables with respect to number of years of experience coaching, number of clients seen per day and employment status, (2) two sets of independent variables: coach behaviors and coach assumptions, (3) dependent variables intended to measure the thriving of coaches.

2.1 Independent variables (1): pre-study on solution-focused and non-solution-focused coach behaviors

In an attempt to operationalize solution-focused coaching a separate web-based survey was administered to a separate sample consisting of 128 solution-focused coaches (Author, 2012^a). To assess how solution-focused each respondent was, respondents were first asked to report their number of years of experience with the solution-focused approach, and then how intensively they use the solution-focused approach. Then, they were presented with list of 28 descriptions of coach behaviors, 14 of which were intended to describe solution-focused coach behaviors and 14 of which were intended to describe behaviors solution-focused coaches avoid.

Table 1: Statements intended to describe solution-focused and non-solution-focused coach behaviors

Solution-focused coach behaviors (SF behavior)	Non-solution-focused coach behaviors (Non-SF behavior)
1. I focus on topics that clients find useful to talk about (client topic choice)	1. I choose what topics clients and I talk about (coach topic choice)
2. When clients express their views I accept what they have said (client perspective acknowledgement)	2. I analyze, together with clients, what the causes of their problems might be (problem cause analysis)
3. I encourage clients to describe how they want their situation to become (desired situation description)	3. I suggest to clients what the goal of the coaching should be (coach suggested goal)
4. I encourage clients to describe what they want to be able to do differently (positive future behavior description)	4. I analyze how clients have caused their problems (client blame analysis)
5. I accept and acknowledge clients' goals (client goal acceptance)	5. I express disagreement with some of my clients' views (coach-client disagreement)
6. I use the same words as clients have used (language matching)	6. I give clients negative feedback (criticize them on what they have done wrong) (negative behavior feedback)
7. I give clients positive feedback (compliment them on what they have done well) (positive behavior feedback)	7. I ask questions about when clients' problems were at their worst (problem peak focus)
8. I check several times whether our conversation has been useful to clients (client usefulness check)	8. I tell clients that their situation is a bit more serious than they think (problem perception enlargement)
9. I ask questions about what clients have already done that has worked well (exploration of what worked)	9. I explicitly offer advice and solutions to clients (coach-suggested solutions)
10. I respond with understanding to what clients say (coach understandingness)	10. I analyze with clients what type of person they are (personality focus)
11. I explain to clients that what they say or do is normal (normalizing)	11. I say to clients that they need a great deal of change (change need suggestion)
12. I subtly imply to clients that their situation will become better (positive expectation expression)	12. I tell clients about my own personal experiences (coach self-disclosure)
13. I encourage clients to choose which step(s) forward they would like to take (client chosen action)	13. I explain to clients what I think they should do (coach directed action)
14. I let clients decide whether the coaching should be continued or terminated (client continuation choice)	14. I tell clients whether the coaching should be continued or terminated (coach continuation choice)

The respondents were asked: How frequently do you, as a coach, behave as follows? The response scale used was: 1) very rarely/never, 2) rarely, 3) occasionally, 4) frequently, 5) very frequently. Table 2 shows the correlations between the solution-focused

coach behaviors and non-solution-focused coach behaviors on the one hand and length of experience and intensity of use on the other hand.

Table 2: Correlations between SF and NON-SF coach behaviors and length of experience and intensity of use

	Length of experience	Intensity of use
SF behavior		
1. Client topic choice	.31**	.39**
2. Client perspective acknowledgement	.19*	.31**
3. Desired situation description	.28**	.29**
4. Positive future behavior description)	.39**	.41**
5. Client goal acceptance	.25**	.44**
6. Language matching	.26**	.39**
7. Positive behavior feedback	.07	.25**
8. Client usefulness check	.20*	.27**
9. Exploration of what worked	.39**	.35**
10. Coach understandingness	.24**	.42**
11. Normalizing	.03	.09
12. Positive expectation expression	.17*	.19*
13. Client chosen action	.21**	.20*
14. Client continuation choice	.20*	.23**
NON-SF behavior		
1. Coach topic choice	-.06	-.14
2. Problem cause analysis	-.33**	-.42**
3. Coach suggested goal	-.16*	-.32**
4. Client blame analysis	-.31**	-.44**
5. Coach-client disagreement	-.01	-.39**
6. Negative behavior feedback	-.09	-.37**
7. Problem peak focus	-.16*	-.23**
8. Problem perception enlargement	-.01	-.31**
9. Coach-suggested solutions	-.15*	-.45**
10. Personality focus	-.31**	-.36**
11. Change need suggestion	-.16*	-.25**
12. Coach self-disclosure	.02	-.15
13. Coach directed action	-.08	-.48**
14. Coach continuation choice	-.05	-.26**

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

Item 11(normalizing) was the only one of the items intended to describe solution-focused coach behaviors which neither positively correlated with the length of experience and with the intensity of use. Item 7 (positive behavior feedback) only positively correlated with intensity of use. All but two of the NON-SF coach behaviors, item 1 (coach topic choice) and item 11 (coach self-disclosure), were negatively correlated with the intensity of use. Half of the NON-SF coach behaviors were negatively correlated to

length of experience. Calculation of Cronbach's alpha revealed that both the 14 solution-focused coach behaviors ($\alpha = .84$) and the 14 non-solution-focused coach behaviors ($\alpha = .89$) formed reliable scales which are labeled *SF Behavior* and *Non-SF Behavior*. This set of 28 items describing coach behaviors was included in the current survey.

In the current study there was no mention of the solution-focused approach or any other approach, neither in the recruitment of

respondents, nor in the survey itself. Thus, while answers by respondents could be used to calculate SF Behavior and Non-SF behavior scores, respondents themselves were never explicitly primed to think about the solution-focused approach or any other approach.

2.2 Independent variables (2): pre-study on solution-focused coach assumptions

A second pre-study tested a second set of independent variables: the assumptions of the coach (Author, 2012^b). A web-based survey

was administered to another sample consisting of 134 solution-focused practitioners to test a proposed set of nine solution-focused assumptions. The degree to which the respondents could be called solution-focused was established by asking about their number of years of experience with the solution-focused approach and how intensively they use the solution-focused approach. Respondents were then asked to report to which degree they agreed with nine statements, which are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Descriptions of nine assumptions intended to describe the solution-focused mindset

Assumptions (SF Mindset)	Variable label
1. People prefer to choose for themselves what they initiate and they want to control as much as possible what they do	Need for autonomy
2. People prefer to be competent, view themselves as competent and they are already competent to some extent	Need for competence
3. People want to have and build meaningful and caring relationships with other people and want to do things that make a positive difference to others	Need for relatedness
4. There is always already a beginning of the desired situation on which further progress can be built	Existence of past success
5. People change best by taking actions, one step at a time, and reflecting on and responding to the consequences of those actions so that an intelligible pattern eventually starts to form	Stepwise change
6. Positive behavior descriptions, both in the future and in the past, irresistibly trigger positive behaviors	Positive behavior descriptions
7. Treating clients as cooperative, no matter how resistant they may appear, is the quickest and most promising way to encourage further cooperation	Cooperativity
8. Working within the client's frame of reference, without confrontation or blame and without imposing an expert view on the client is the quickest and most promising approach to help the client develop an ever more constructive, realistic and useful perspective	Client perspective
9. Focusing on identifying and amplifying what works, rather than on explanations in terms of personal characteristics and problem causes, is the quickest and most promising way to help clients make progress	Focus on what works

Table 4 shows the correlations between the level of agreement with the nine assumptions and intensity of use and length of experience.

Table 4: Correlations between the level of agreement with the nine assumptions and length of experience and intensity of use

	Length of experience	Intensity of use
1. Need for autonomy	.24**	.33**
2. Need for competence	.33**	.35**
3. Need for relatedness	.10	.30**
4. Existence of past success	.26**	.26**
5. Stepwise change	.16*	.32**
6. Positive behavior descriptions	.20**	.27**
7. Cooperativity	.26**	.31**
8. Client perspective	.23**	.30**
9. Focus on what works	.32**	.47**

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

Intensity of use of the solution-focused approach correlated positively with levels of agreement for all of the nine assumptions suggests. Length of experience correlated positively with levels of agreement for all the nine assumptions except for assumption 3 (need for relatedness). These findings suggest that these variables effectively describe a solution-focused mindset. Computation of

Cronbach's alpha (.90) showed that these items can together be used as an internally consistent scale which will be labeled *SF Mindset*.

2.3 Dependent variables: Thriving at Work

Table 5 shows the dependent variables.

Table 5: Dependent variables

Components of Thriving at Work	Underlying construct	Theoretical basis
1. I am satisfied with my work	Overall satisfaction	
2. I experience a sense of choice and psychological freedom in the things I do and initiate in my work	Need for autonomy	Self-Determination Theory
3. I feel competent in my work	Need for competence	
4. I feel attached to the people I work with	Need for relatedness	
5. I feel emotionally exhausted by my work	Emotional exhaustion	Burnout syndrome (Maslach & Jackson, 1986)
6. I feel like I am watching myself without being able to control my situation	Depersonalization	
7. I experience personal accomplishment	Personal accomplishment	
8. I experience high levels of energy and mental resilience while working	Vigor	Work Engagement research
9. I feel strongly involved in my work, and experience inspiration and challenge	Dedication	
10. I feel fully concentrated and time passes quickly while I am working	Absorption	

The choice for items 2, 3 and 4 is based on a Self Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT researchers have found evidence for three universal basic human needs: (1) the need for autonomy, which is the perception of experiencing a sense of choice and psychological freedom in the initiation and continued engagement in one's actions, (2) the need for competence, which is the perception of being effective in dealing with the environment, and (3) the need for relatedness, which is the sense of being cared for and connected to other people. Fulfillment of these basic needs has been shown to have important cognitive, affective and behavioral benefits such as greater engagement, learning, creativity, positive adjustment and mental health (Deci & Ryan, 2002). In Author (2010) it is argued that the strategies, principles and interventions of the solution-focused approach have the effect of supporting the perception of autonomy, competence, and relatedness of clients. It is therefore interesting to explore whether using the solution-focused approach is also associated with basic needs fulfillment of coaches.

Spreitzer & Porath (in press.) propose an integrative model of human growth at work which identifies how the three components of self-determination (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) mediate the relationship between key elements of the social context (including decision making discretion, broad information sharing, a climate of trust and respect, & performance feedback) and thriving at work (which, they say, has vitality and learning as key markers). Thus, the fulfillment of the three basic needs induces thriving.

Items 5, 6, and 7, are based on the burnout components by Maslach and Jackson (1986) which were used by LaFountain and Garner (1996). Inclusion of these items is to replicate their findings that solution-focused counselors suffered less emotional exhaustion, felt that they could mean more for their clients, and experienced less depersonalization.

Items 8, 9, and 10 are based on the work engagement literature (Bakker and Leiter, 2010). Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, and Bakker (2002) view work engagement as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of

mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. These authors define these concepts as follows: (1) vigor is having high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties; (2) dedication is being strongly involved in one's work, and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge; and (3) absorption is being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work. These three items can be seen as related to vitality which, according to Spreitzer and Porath (in press.) is a key marker of thriving.

It was expected that (1) the more the coaches agreed with the nine solution-focused assumptions, the more they would report solution-focused coach behaviors, and (2) the less they would report non-solution-focused coach behaviors. Also, it was expected that (3) the more coaches reported agreement with the solution-focused assumptions, the more they would report to be thriving at work, and (4) the more solution-focused coach behaviors they would report, the more they would report to be thriving at work.

3. Results

First, an exploratory factor analysis using a principal component extraction and Varimax rotation was performed on all solution-focused and non-solution-focused coach behaviors which resulted in 8 factors which were not clearly interpretable. A factor analysis on the solution-focused coach behaviors led to a four factor solution which explained 54% of the variance. These factors could be interpreted as: (1) 'client-directedness', (2) 'success focus', (3) 'positivity', and a fourth factor which was less clearly interpretable. Cronbach's alpha for each of these factors was too low for them to be used as reliable scales.

Then, Cronbach's alpha was computed for the solution-focused coach behaviors (.76) and for the non-solution-focused coach behaviors (.83). As was the case in the pre-study scale scores could be computed for these two scales. These scales are labeled *SF*

Behavior and *Non-SF Behavior*. Based on the results of the pre-study item 11 (normalizing) was left out of the SF Behavior scale and items 1 and 11 (coach topic choice and change need suggestion) were left out of the Non-SF Behavior scale.

Next, Cronbach's alpha was computed for the solution-focused assumptions variables (.81) and a scale score was calculated for this scale, too. This scale was labeled *SF Mindset*.

An exploratory factor analysis using Varimax rotation with Kaiser Normalization on the dependent variables yielded a two factor solution which explained 50% of the variance. Factor 1 could be interpreted as *Thriving at Work* and factor 2 could be interpreted as *Disengagement* (see table 6). Only factor 1 could be used as a scale ($\alpha=.85$).

Table 6: Principal Component Analysis on dependent variables

	Factor loadings	
	Component 1	Component 2
10. Overall satisfaction	.691	-.319
11. Need for autonomy	.655	-.312
12. Need for competence	.702	-.124
13. Need for relatedness	.249	-.346
14. Emotional exhaustion	.033	.791
15. Depersonalization	.,161	.679
16. Personal accomplishment	.654	-.090
17. Vigor	.744	-.056
18. Dedication	.746	-.139
19. Absorption	.746	-.071

Items 2, 3, and 4, measuring basic needs fulfillment also formed a reliable scale ($\alpha=.73$), whereas items 5, 6, and 7, based on

the LaFountain & Garner (1996) study (.56) and 8, 9, and 10 based on the work engagement literature (.56) did not.

Table 7: Two-tailed Pearson correlations between scale score based on independent and dependent variables

	SF Behavior	Non-SF Behavior	SF Mindset
1. SF Behavior	1	-.21**	.57**
2. Non-SF Behavior	-.21**	1	-.32**
3. SF Mindset	.57**	-.32**	1
4. Thriving at Work	.41**	-.048	.30**
5. Basic need fulfillment	.31**	-.02	.37**
6. Overall satisfaction	.27**	-.03	.20**
7. Need for autonomy	.30**	-.09	.33**
8. Need for competence	.25**	-.02	.23**
9. Need for relatedness	.15*	.11	.26**
10. Emotional exhaustion	-.17**	.06	-.15*
11. Depersonalization	-.16*	.06	-.05
12. Personal accomplishment	.27**	-.07	.15*
13. Vigor	.34**	-.03	.19**

14. Dedication	.34**	.01	.21**
15. Absorption	.43**	-.14*	.32**

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

Table 8 shows the two-tailed the independent variables scales and the intercorrelations between the independent dependent variables and dependent variable variables scales and the correlations between scales.

Table 8: Two-tailed Pearson correlations between independent variables and Thriving at Work

SF Behavior	Thriving at work
1. Client topic choice	.18**
2. Client perspective acknowledgement	.16**
3. Desired situation description	.24**
4. Positive future behavior description)	.22**
5. Client goal acceptance	.26**
6. Language matching	.18**
7. Positive behavior feedback	.19**
8. Client usefulness check	.19**
9. Exploration of what worked	.21**
10. Coach understandingness	.32**
11. Normalizing	.09
12. Positive expectation expression	.14*
13. Client chosen action	.24**
14. Client continuation choice	.23**
NON-SF Behavior	
1. Coach topic choice	-.06
2. Problem cause analysis	.00
3. Coach suggested goal	-.18**
4. Client blame analysis	.02
5. Coach-client disagreement	.01
6. Negative behavior feedback	-.01
7. Problem peak focus	-.01
8. Problem perception enlargement	.06
9. Coach-suggested solutions	.06
10. Personality focus	.06
11. Change need suggestion	.06
12. Coach self-disclosure	-.04
13. Coach directed action	-.22**
14. Coach continuation choice	-.04
SF Mindset	
1. Need for autonomy	.26**
2. Need for competence	.17**
3. Need for relatedness	.30**
4. Existence of past success	.18**
5. Stepwise change	.33**
6. Positive behavior descriptions	.08
7. Cooperativity	.23**
8. Client perspective	.11
9. Focus on what works	.23**

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

SF Behavior and SF Mindset are strongly positively correlated. Also, both SF Behavior and SF Mindset are negatively correlated to Non-SF Behavior.

SF Behavior is positively correlated with all dependent variables, except for emotional exhaustion and depersonalization with which it is negatively correlated. SF Mindset is also positively correlated with all dependent variables except emotional exhaustion with which it is negative correlated and with depersonalization with which it is not correlated.

As table 8 further shows all but one (11. Normalizing) of the solution-focused coach behaviors are positively correlated to Thriving at Work. All but two (8. Client perspective and 6. Positive behavior descriptions) of the solution-focused assumptions are also positively correlated to Thriving at Work. Of the non-solution-focused coach behaviors all but two were unrelated to Thriving at Work. Coach suggested goal and Coach directed action were negatively correlated to Thriving at Work.

4. Discussion

Both SF Behavior and SF Mindset were associated with both overall Thriving at Work, with basic need fulfillment, and with all underlying individual components of Thriving at Work.’

This study also found that solution-focused coaches suffer less emotional exhaustion, experience more personal accomplishment and experienced less depersonalization which can be seen as a confirmation of findings by LaFountain and Garner (1996).

It is good to point out that the solution-focused approach to coaching overlaps with several other coaching approaches, such as humanistic coaching approaches, appreciative inquiry coaching, and motivational interviewing. Because of this overlap between the solution-focused approach to coaching and other approaches it should be acknowledged that the findings of this study, at to some

extent, also apply to other coaching approaches.

This being a correlational study, it must be clear that no causal inferences can be drawn from these findings. Alternative explanations of the found correlations are possible such as reverse causation or bidirectional causation. For example, it may be possible that experiencing high Thriving at Work makes one more open to the solution-focused assumptions which are rather positive and optimistic in nature.

Nevertheless, these findings are encouraging and suggest that that working in a solution-focused way not only benefits clients but also practitioners. Hopefully they are useful for improving practitioner thriving and for developing strategies for reducing burnout, employee turnover, and sick leave.

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