

What Solution-Focused Coaches Do: An Empirical Test of an Operationalization of Solution-Focused Coach Behaviors

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In an attempt to operationalize solution-focused coaching a web-based survey was administered which was filled in by 128 solution-focused coaches. To assess how solution-focused each respondent was, respondents were first asked to mention 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. The question was: How frequently do you, as a coach, behave as follows? All but one of the items intended to describe solution-focused coach behaviors indeed correlated positively with the length of experience and with the intensity of use. All but two of the items intended to describe behaviors solution-focused coaches avoid indeed correlated negatively with the length of experience and with the intensity of use. Both the 14 solution-focused coach behaviors and the 14 non-solution-focused coach behaviors could be used to form reliable measuring scales.

What is solution-focused coaching?

The solution-focused approach is the approach that is based on the work of Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg and their colleagues of the Brief Family Therapy Center (de Shazer, 1988). Solution-focused coaching may be defined as an approach in which a coach supports 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 (Visser, 2011).

Of course, 'solution-focused' is just a label. Labels are necessary. They keep communication efficient by enabling us to briefly refer to complex phenomena without having to elaborate each and every time on the many underlying facets of the phenomenon. But the use of labels also has a peril: if they are often used it can seem that we know exactly what we mean each time we use them and that we agree on what they refer to, without this being the case. This is especially relevant for concepts like 'solution-

focused' because they are dynamic concepts. As time proceeds, we learn and subtle and less subtle changes in the underlying meanings of concepts may occur. That is why it is important, from time to time, to pose the question: what is the phenomenon the label is referring to? How do we operationalize it?

Operationalizing solution-focused coaching can be done in several ways. One way is to check what starting points, or assumptions, the practice is based on. Put differently: what is the solution-focused mindset? An empirical test of a set of nine assumptions intended to describe the solution-focused mindset has recently been done (Visser, 2012). That empirical test indicated that these nine assumptions effectively describe a solution-focused mindset.

Another way to operationalize solution-focused coaching is to define what solution-focused coaches do and what they don't do. For that purpose, a web-based survey was administered which was filled in by 128 solution-focused coaches.

Method

Measuring how solution-focused the respondents were

To measure how solution-focused each respondent was, the survey also checked 1) the number of years of experience with the solution-focused approach, and the 2) how intensively the solution-focused approach was used. This was done by asking the following two questions:

1. *Years of experience*: When did you, as a coach, start to use the solution-focused approach? (The solution-focused approach is the approach that is based on the work of Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg and their colleagues of the Brief Family Therapy Center). Response options: 1) I don't use the solution-focused approach, 2) I started using it recently, 3) I started using it recently, 4) I started using it recently, 5) I started using it long ago (>10 years ago).
2. *Intensity of use*: How intensively do you use the solution-focused approach? Response options: 1) I don't use the solution-focused approach (or hardly ever use it), 2) I combine it with other approaches, 3) I (nearly) always use the solution-focused approach.

Getting descriptions from respondents of what they do and don't do as coaches

Then respondents were presented with list of 28 descriptions of coach behaviors, 14 of which were solution-focused behaviors and 14 of which were behaviors solution-focused coaches would avoid. The question was: How frequently do you, as a coach, behave as follows?

The list of descriptions of coach behaviors was based on a theoretical analysis of factors underpinning solution-focused coach behaviors, based on the solution-focused literature, which was subsequently operationalized. Four theoretical factors were formulated:

1. *Client choice support* which refers to helping the client to choose the topic of the

conversation, helping the client choose the goal, accepting the goal formulation of the client, helping clients to choose their own steps forward, and having clients decide about whether or not the coaching should be continued.

2. *Client perspective utilization* which refers to acknowledging the perspective of the client, avoiding confrontation with the client, using the clients keywords, checking whether the client finds the coaching useful, showing understanding and avoiding self-disclosure.
3. *Success-behavior inquiry* which refers to avoiding problem cause analysis, helping clients to describe the desired situation (including positive future behaviors of clients themselves), avoiding blame, exploration of what has worked, avoiding focusing on situations in which the problem was at its worst, and avoiding a focus on personalistic explanations.
4. *Positive expectation expression* which refers to normalizing, deliberately expressing positive expectations, avoiding that the perception of the problem be enlarged, avoiding suggestions that drastic change is needed, positive behavior feedback, and avoidance of negative behavior feedback.

Many of these items are not unique to the solution-focused approach; they can also be found in several other coaching approaches. But the presence of the combination of these solution-focused coach behaviors and the absence of the non-solution-focused coach behaviors is thought to characterize solution-focused coaching.

A list of 14 items was made to describe what solution-focused coaches would do and another list of 14 items to describe what solution-focused coaches would deliberately not do. In the survey itself no reference to the solution-focused approach or any other approach was made.

The table below describes the two lists of items. Between brackets are brief descriptive labels for each of the items.

Table 1: Questions referring to solution-focused and non-solution-focused coach behaviors

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

Expectations

A first expectation was that the Solution-focused coach behaviors would correlate positively with the length of experience and with the intensity of use. A second expectation was that the non-solution-focused coach behaviors would correlate negatively with the length of experience and with the intensity of use. A third expectation was that both the 14 solution-focused coach behaviors and the 14 non-solution-focused coach behaviors could be used to form reliable measuring scales

Results

An exploratory factor analysis was done on the coach behaviors variables, using a principal component extraction and Varimax rotation. This resulted in a six factor solution which

explained 61% of the variance and which did not correspond well to the four theoretical factors which mentioned above (client choice support, client perspective utilization, success behavior inquiry, and positive expectation expression). The factor analysis did not yield an easily interpretable structure of the data.

Next, Cronbach's alpha was calculated to test the internal consistency of respectively the solution-focused coach behaviors and the non-solution-focused coach behaviors. For the solution-focused coach behaviors Cronbach's alpha was .84, for the non-solution-focused items it was .89. Because these alpha values indicate a good internal consistency of both scales composite scores were calculated for these two scales. Further, correlations were calculated between coach behaviors and years of experience and intensity of use.

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Table 2: Correlations between solution-focused coach behaviors and years of experience and intensity of use

	Items intended to describe solution-focused coach behaviors	Years of experience	Intensity of use
1.	I focus on topics that clients find useful to talk about (<i>client topic choice</i>)	.31**	.39**
2.	When clients express their views I accept what they have said (<i>client perspective acknowledgement</i>)	.19*	.31**
3.	I encourage clients to describe how they want their situation to become (<i>desired situation description</i>)	.28**	.29**
4.	I encourage clients to describe what they want to be able to do differently (<i>positive future behavior description</i>)	.39**	.41**
5.	I accept and acknowledge clients' goals (<i>client goal acceptance</i>)	.25**	.44**
6.	I use the same words as clients have used (<i>language matching</i>)	.26**	.39**
7.	I give clients positive feedback (compliment them on what they have done well) (complimented me on what I had done well) (<i>positive behavior feedback</i>)	.07	.25**
8.	I check several times whether our conversation has been useful to clients (<i>client usefulness check</i>)	.20*	.27**
9.	I ask questions about what clients have already done that has worked well (<i>exploration of what worked</i>)	.39**	.35**
10.	I respond with understanding to what clients say (<i>coach understandingness</i>)	.29**	.42**
11.	I explain to clients that what they say or do is normal (<i>normalizing</i>)	.03	.09
12.	I subtly imply to clients that their situation will become better (<i>positive expectation expression</i>)	.17	.19*
13.	I encourage clients to choose which step(s) forward they would like to take (<i>client chosen action</i>)	.21*	.20*
14.	I let clients decide whether the coaching should be continued or terminated (<i>client continuation choice</i>)	.20*	.23*

* p<.05, ** p<.01

These results show that, as expected, most items correlate positively with years of experience and intensity of use. Intensity of use is positively correlated with more of the items and also slightly more strongly correlated with the items.

Only item 11 (normalizing) is neither significantly correlated with years of experience nor with intensity of use. Cronbach's alpha, when again calculated with this particular item removed, was .85.

Table 3: Correlations between non-solution-focused coach behaviors and years of experience and intensity of use

	Items intended to describe behaviors solution-focused coaches would avoid	Years of experience	Intensity of use
1.	I choose what topics clients and I talk about (<i>coach topic choice</i>)	-.06	-.14
2.	I analyze, together with clients, what the causes of their problems might be (<i>problem cause analysis</i>)	-.33**	-.42**
3.	I suggest to clients what the goal of the coaching should be (<i>coach suggested goal</i>)	-.16	-.32**
4.	I analyze how clients have caused their problems (<i>client blame analysis</i>)	-.31**	-.44**
5.	I express disagreement with some of my clients' views (<i>coach-client disagreement</i>)	-.01	-.39**
6.	I give clients negative feedback (criticize them on what they have done)	-.09	-.37**

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wrong) (criticized me on what I had done wrong) (<i>negative behavior feedback</i>)		
7. I ask questions about when clients' problems were at their worst (<i>problem peak focus</i>)	-.16	-.23*
8. I tell clients that their situation is a bit more serious than they think (<i>problem perception enlargement</i>)	-.01	-.31**
9. I explicitly offer advice and solutions to clients (<i>coach-suggested solutions</i>)	-.15	-.45**
10. I analyze with clients what type of person they are (<i>personality focus</i>)	-.31**	-.36**
11. I say to clients that they need a great deal of change (<i>change need suggestion</i>)	-.16	-.25**
12. I tell clients about my own personal experiences (<i>coach self-disclosure</i>)	.02	-.15
13. I explain to clients what I think they should do (<i>coach directed action</i>)	-.08	-.48**
14. I tell clients whether the coaching should be continued or terminated (<i>coach continuation choice</i>)	-.05	-.26**

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

As this table shows only a few of these items are significantly negatively correlated with years of experience while most of them are with intensity of use. Only items 1 (coach topic choice) and 11 (change need suggestion) aren't significantly correlated with either of these variables.

Cronbach's alpha, when again calculated with these two items removed, remained .89. Scale scores were computed for the scales solution-focused coach behaviors and non-solution-focused coach behaviors. Table 4 shows the correlations between these two variables and years of experience and intensity of use.

Table 4: Two-tailed Pearson correlations between solution-focused coach behaviors and non-solution-focused coach behaviors and years of experience and intensity of use

	Years of experience	Intensity of use
Solution-Focused Coach Behaviors	.466**	.522**
Non-Solution-Focused Coach Behaviors	-.297**	-.574**

(** p<.01)

Discussion

This study shows that the proposed set of 28 items can be used as a way to operationalize and measure the degree to which coaches work in a solution-focused way. Of the set of 14 items intended to describe solution-focused coach behaviors, only item 11 (*normalizing*) did not correlate positively with how solution-focused respondents described themselves in terms of years of experience and intensity of use. Why this is the case is not clear. As the solution-focused literature shows, normalizing is one of the standard techniques which solution-focused professionals use. Perhaps the formulation of the item was not exactly right. Instead of having used the word 'explain', a better choice might have been 'suggest' or the phrase 'subtly suggest'. These alternative formulations may do

more justice to the not-knowing posture which characterizes the solution-focused approach.

Of the set of 14 items intended to describe behaviors which solution-focused coaches avoid, only two items, 1 (*coach topic choice*) and 11 (*change need suggestion*), did not correlate negatively with how solution-focused respondents described themselves in terms of years of experience and intensity of use. It is not clear why these two items were exceptions.

Operationalizing solution-focused coaching can both be useful for educational purposes and for research purposes. This study has provided some insight into how solution-focused coaching can be operationalized.

References

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