

WLMP report 5

# **The Use of the Solution Focus Work Method**

By Leif Holmberg



The Work Life Mobility Programme, WLMP, is run by the Swedish Public Employment Service and aims at building and sharing knowledge on work life mobility in the new EU member countries and candidate countries. Website: [www.arbetsformedlingen.se/wlmp](http://www.arbetsformedlingen.se/wlmp)

This is the fifth published report in a report series with results, overviews and other materials from themes and projects within the framework of the Work Life Mobility Programme. The reports are independent from each other, but they are all considered to be of general interest.

## WLMP-report 5

*The use of the Solution Focused Work Method* by Leif Holmberg on commission by the Work Life Mobility Programme

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## Introduction

Since a few years back, Arbetsförmedlingen uses the Solution Focus dialogue method in its work. The method aims to actively involve the job-seeker in finding a solution to her/his work situation. At the same time, the job-seeker learns a method which will help them to effectively manage other problem situations which they may find themselves in, now or in the future.

The solution focus dialogue method is built on a special interview methodology based on the job-seeker herself formulating objectives and solutions to their job choice and search questions. The method concentrates on the present and the future. The specially designed interview process/question technique directs the job-seeker away from the past and away from problems towards the future and the goals they have formulated. This process can take a varying amount of time, depending on the job-seekers' needs. The method can be applied individually or in group.

The solution focus short term therapeutical method was developed at the Brief Family Center (BFTC) in Milwaukee, USA starting in the 1970s by Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg and Scott Miller, among others.

This report briefly describes how to use the solution focus method.

# What is solution focus?

The solution focus work method is built on three pillars:

1. a perspective, an approach
2. a number of tools in a structured form
3. a handicraft in the form of dialogue skills and questions

## 1. A perspective, an approach

What thoughts, ideas, views and values lie behind the solution focus concept? Maybe the most important basis is that it is the person who experiences the problem who is also the person who is best equipped to identify the solution or solutions! Since the person may not yet be able to express clearly the best solution, our task is to help the person to find their way to being able to identify and express the solution. It is the person experiencing the problem or challenge which know themselves the best and thus best placed to find a solution, not anyone else.

The solution focused approach has been inspired and influenced by many different theories and ideas, primarily cognitive psychology theories.

A summary of the basic elements of this view includes the following:

- Reality can only be perceived subjectively
- It is impossible to understand cause and effect in relationships between people
- One does not need to discuss problems in order to solve them
- Speaking about solutions to problems solve the problems
- There are always exceptions to problems
- Each and every person has the ability to find their own solutions

If we further distill these views into the solution focus method form, then the work method is characterized by the following elements:

- **DO MORE OF THAT WHICH WORKS**
  - Find out what works/has worked before as it provides clues to finding a solution. It is easier to build on that which already works instead of creating something new!
- **IF IT DOESN'T WORK, DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT!**
  - Don't keep repeating mistakes
- **DON'T FIX WHAT ISN'T BROKEN!**
  - Respect the job-seekers views as to what their problem is, and isn't – don't let your own values colour the analysis.
- **DON'T KNOW PERSPECTIVE**
  - I don't know the answers to the other person's problems.

## 2. A model, a structure

The other aspect of the solutions focused work method is how we actually apply this basic approach to the everyday reality that we experience. A structure for our meeting, dialogue with the job-seeker or with our work team can be described based on four pillars.

### **P for Platform/Problem/Project**

#### **Platform**

Clarify:

- Purpose of the visit/meeting/contact with the PES (Public Employment Service)/dialogue/work team meeting
- Expectations for the visit/contact with the PES/dialogue/work team meeting
- Framework – time

Start by letting the person describe her problem, for example the reason why she has approached you in the first place. How does it affect her? How has she tried to solve the problem? Listen to see if you it has worked (better) before.

#### **Problem**

- confirm, not neglect!
- we don't try to solve!
- we don't need to know the reasons behind!
- exist but our focus is on solutions.

#### **Reformulate the problem/complaint into a project**

- formulate a "solvable" problem – from "can't" to "what else?"
- what is possible? (resources)

#### **G for Goals**

Someone has said "Behind every problem there is a frustrated dream".

It is this dream that you can help the other person to realize by raising questions that makes the person start to talk about their dreams and hopes. What are their goals? How do they want to have it instead? What is the advantage of change? What difference will it make?

We try to focus **on what it is like once the goal has been achieved!**

#### **E for Exceptions**

The solution focus approach proceeds from the following premises:

- There are always exceptions
- Even small exceptions are important
- Each exception holds the key to a solution
- Exception cases have the advantage of building on something that the person has already done

Exceptions are cases where the problem does not arise

- What works (already)?

- When does what you want to happen actually happen right now? (even if just a little bit)

Exceptions are about resources that exist now and can be used in the future.

With the help of questions we can help persons to become aware about what they have done and what has worked. The next step is to try to help them to discover how this success can become a strategy for achieving further success. Becoming aware of one's own success strategy is more important than the solution/exception itself!

### **S for Scales/Steps**

- Avoids seeing things in terms of black and white
- Creates conditions for evaluating success – focus on resources/exceptions
- Creates a process and breaks it down into steps along the way
- Gives concrete and simple information about the here and now and next steps

Scales are easy to grasp. They get the process started and function as a "swiss army knife"! The most important aspect of scales is to explore exceptions = existing resources and the process which gets started in the desired direction.

## **3. A number of tools – primarily questions**

The solution focus work method has, as mentioned previously, been influenced by both philosophical and psychological theories. A way of thinking which has strongly influenced the solution focus method is the *Socratic Questioning* which was developed by the philosopher Socrates and used by him in teaching. He argued that people have all the knowledge they need already within themselves and the role of a good teacher is to ask questions which can help pupils find this knowledge within themselves!

### **Other useful questions in the solution focus dialogue**

#### **Questions which highlight changes that have already taken place**

A basic premise of the solution focus approach is that changes are constantly occurring. What has happened since the last time the person was in contact with the Employment Service? The aim is to consciously focus attention on changes that have taken place and the small steps the person has already taken when allowing the person to begin their story.

#### **Hypothetical questions and future questions**

Hypothetical questions or future questions help the person to focus on the future when the problem and the problem has been solved. The most important thing is to NOT focus on problems "here and now" but rather dare to think and describe how they want things to be instead.

#### **Questions about exceptions: Highlighting current and previous successes**

Even if the person's problems are big, it is not very likely that the problems have always been equally big. There are always differences/exceptions! (an important axiom in the solution focus approach). It is important for the employment service officer to help

identify and highlight these exceptions. By discussing exceptions in detail, they become more “real”. By focusing on successes, the discussion can move towards how these exceptions can be repeated.

### **Scale questions**

There are different types of scales. The three most common are the situation scale, preparation scale and the confidence scale.

**Situation scale** – where is the person right now

**Preparation scale** – how prepared is the person to do what they say they need to do

**Confidence scale** – how confident is the person in their ability to achieve their goals

Scale questions mean that the job-seeker assesses their problems, involvement and confidence on a scale from 0 to 10. Scale questions are, just like all other questions, designed to provide information about the job-seeker’s situation and to motivate, encourage and intensify the change process. The advantage of scale questions is that they clarify for everyone where the job-seeker is right now in their overall process towards achieving their goal(s).

### **Coping questions and resource questions**

Sometimes, a person has had such painful or difficult experiences that they have difficulty seeing any opportunities. The future looks dark in their eyes. Efforts to motivate them don’t work. Asking questions about exceptions seems wrong. Instead of sinking down into hopelessness, the employment officer should try to get the job-seeker to describe how they “just barely” manage to cope with the situation. “Coping questions” highlight and clarify what the job-seeker has done to manage their unemployment situation/pain/crisis. These small steps to “just barely” get by form the foundation for what they need to continue to do. However small these steps may seem, it is exactly these steps which they should do even more of and on which a successful strategy can be built.

### **Difference questions**

All information is about differences.

Differences can be about time: past – present – future. They can also be about persons and happenings. Difference questions help the job-seeker to formulate, clarify what differentiates this situation from another one.

# Summary

The solution focus model is comprised of three parts which can be exemplified in the diagram below.

## Perspective, approach

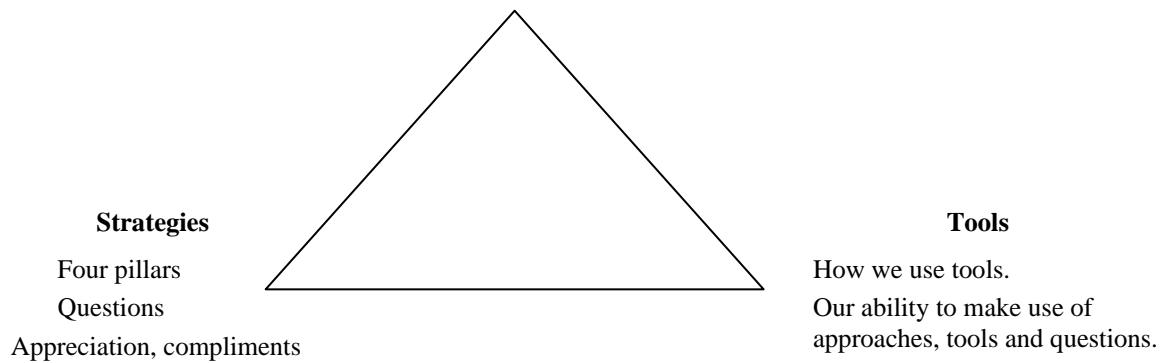
It is the person who is struggling with the problem who also has within them the solution to the same problem!

You don't need to know the cause of the problem – focus instead on finding a solution!

Talking about solutions to problems solves problems!

Everyone has the resources to solve their own problems.

"Not knowing" position







This report of the Work Life Mobility Programme presents a short summary on the Solution Focused Work Method.

The Work Life Mobility Programme, WLMP, which runs from 2007 to 2009, is a cooperation project with all the new EU Member States and the Candidate countries. The WLMP is run by the Swedish Public Employment Service.