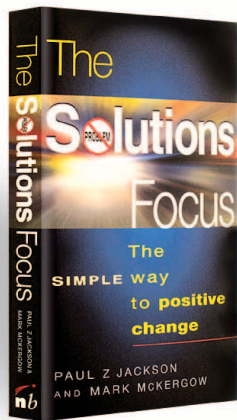


SOUNDVIEW Executive Book Summaries®



By Paul Z. Jackson and
Mark McKergow

The Simple Way to Positive Change

THE SOLUTIONS FOCUS

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Traditional approaches to problem-solving assume a cause and effect between problems and solutions. The Solutions Focus outlines a different way to attain goals that focuses on solutions not problems; the future not the past; and what to do as opposed to who to blame.

To illustrate, we'll take an example in this summary: traffic jams on a highway caused by drivers abruptly changing lanes. The drivers behind the lane changers quickly apply the brakes, setting off a chain reaction that causes traffic down the line to come to a standstill. Examining the problem (drivers changing lanes) doesn't lead to a solution — there's not much you can do about the lane changers. Instead, the traffic authority in question applied a Solutions Focus mindset to find the solution (lowering speed limits during rush hour).

In The Solutions Focus, authors Paul Z. Jackson and Mark McKergow give you the tools to head straight toward workable answers for your business or enterprise.

CONTENTS

Key Principles and Tools For the Solutions Focus

Pages 2, 3

Solutions, Not Problems

Pages 3, 4

Inbetween — The Action Is in the Interaction

Page 4

Make Use of What's There

Page 5

Possibilities — Past, Present and Future

Page 6

Language — Simply Said

Pages 6, 7

Every Case is Different

Page 7

Organizational Change

Page 8

What You'll Learn In This Summary

✓ **The SIMPLE Model.** The Solutions Focus methodology is built around a framework of six principles:

1. Solutions, not problems;
2. Inbetween — the action is in the interaction;
3. Make use of what's there;
4. Possibilities — past, present and future;
5. Language — simply said; and
6. Every case is different.

You will learn how to apply each of these principles to your own problems.

✓ **The Solutions Focus Tools.** You will understand how to apply certain Solutions Focus tools to help you implement the six principles of the SIMPLE model. The Solutions Focus Tools are: platform, future perfect, counters, scaling, affirmation and small actions.

THE SOLUTIONS FOCUS

by Paul Z. Jackson and Mark McKergow

— THE COMPLETE SUMMARY

Key Principles and Tools For the Solutions Focus

What is the “Solutions Focus”? The answer isn’t complicated. The Solutions Focus is a different approach to solving workplace problems and focuses on a positive method of dealing with organizations, teams and people. The Solutions Focus means avoiding the pointless search for what causes problems and instead provides a direct route that leads to a solution. In other words, the focus is on solutions (not problems), the future (not the past) and on what’s going well (rather than what’s gone wrong). This approach can be summarized in the phrase: “Find out what works and do more of it.”

Assumptions

There are a number of key assumptions and principles that underpin solution-focused work:

- **Change happens all the time; Your job is to identify and magnify useful change.**
- **There is no one right way of seeing the world.**
- **A detailed understanding of the problem doesn’t translate into a solution.**
- **The solution’s clues are there in front of you; You just have to see them.**
- **Intelligent small changes can have bigger impacts later on.**
- **It is important to stay solution focused, not solution forced.**

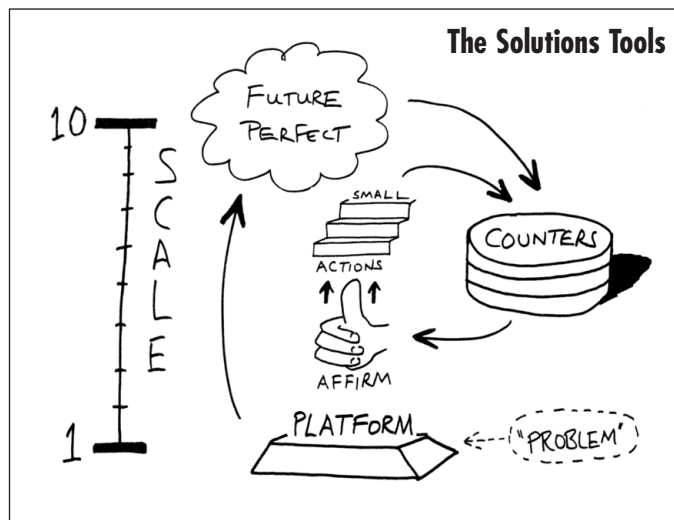
The Simple Model

The Solutions Focus methodology is built around a framework of principles known by the acronym SIMPLE. The six principles of the model are as follows:

1. Solutions not problems.
2. Inbetween — the action is in the interaction.
3. Make use of what’s there.
4. Possibilities — past present and future.
5. Language — simply said.
6. Every Case is Different.

The Power of Simplicity

Every facet of SIMPLE is important, but the choice of acronym is deliberate. We choose simplicity because if we find a way that works then there should be no need



to make something more complicated than it already is. No matter how impressive sounding complexity or complication, organizations should strive for simplicity, directness and effectiveness.

The Solution Tools

The next six articles in this summary take each principle of the SIMPLE model in turn. As you read through these articles, you will encounter six solutions tools that help you apply the SIMPLE principle and achieve the solution you are seeking.

The first of these tools is the **Platform**. The Platform is a point of departure for the process of searching for what works. You need to establish the Platform early to support the changes that you are going to make.

(continued on page 3)

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Key Principles and Tools for the Solutions Focus

(continued from page 2)

You must next define the **Future Perfect**. This tool describes in detail a future *without* the problem that you are trying to resolve.

As you travel from the Platform to the Future Perfect, you need to accumulate **Counters** along the way. Counters are any resources, skills, know-how and expertise that will help you move toward the solution. Later in this summary, we'll see how asking the right questions can help uncover the counters that point toward a solution.

Your Counters will typically line up along a fourth solution tool: a **Scale** that helps you measure progress on your path to a solution.

Another important tool is **Affirmation** — to recognize, value and affirm the contributions that people are making in the solution search.

Finally, **Small Actions** are key in finding solutions. Often these small actions will push you further toward a solution by helping you discover new Counters.

The illustration on the previous page shows one path or sequence toward a solution using the tools. However, different situations might emphasize different tools. For example, the solution to a strategic problem might be revealed by defining the Future Perfect. For another problem, finding Counters is the key step. ■

Solutions Not Problems

By focusing on solutions, you can encourage solution talk, negotiate solvable problems and establish who are change customers.

Problem Talk and Solution Talk

You enter the space of problem talk whenever you ask the client to tell you more about their problems, say what they feel are causing the problems, elaborate on when it's worst, find who's responsible for the problem and describe problems that are spawned by the problem.

Solution-based proponents need to avoid problem talk. Problem talk, according to the Solutions Focus, actually does very little in solving the problem and in fact may make the problem worse and even more insurmountable. Focus on the solution and the first signs of it appearing. This can shortcut many hours of fruitless delving into the problem.

Potential Pitfall: Too Much Problem Talk

A major challenge for a Solutions Focused practitioner is figuring out a way to keep the conversation focused on positive solutions and not negative prob-

lems. This is when you need to build a Platform from which you launch the search for a solution.

To build the platform you need to stop the problem talk by asking questions that embrace positive solutions. Such questions include:

- **What do you want to accomplish today?**



- **Will you be aware if you've made progress?**

- **What is the payoff for solving this problem?**

- **Are you confident that**

something can be done about this?

- **What skills and resources have you used to solve similar problems?**

- **What works for you generally?**

The last question is important in uncovering the counters that might lead to solutions, as we will see in the article on "making use of what's there."

Potential Pitfall: No Customer for Change

One of the big tricks for the Solutions Focus consultant is figuring out who in the organization is actually open minded about beneficial change. A Solutions Focus consultant can try to drive a group toward a solution but that usually irritates the client. A better way is for the consultant to drive the group toward offering the right solutions for themselves.

Keep it SIMPLE: "Who is the customer for change?" It is possible to influence your clients even if they're not interested in positive changes.

For example, Peter Ackroyd is a safety management consultant who finds himself in challenging situations. His tactic is to figure out who among his clients are Greens, Ambers or Reds. Greens are open-minded to new ideas and change. Ambers are hesitant about change and Reds are fairly hostile to new ideas. Needless to say, Ackroyd always looks for the Greens and looks to work directly with them. The Ambers will go along eventually and the remaining Reds will probably submit to peer pressure, according to Ackroyd.

Potential Pitfall: Trying to Solve An Unsolvable Problem

Do you know what you want? The question might surprise you, but it is often needed when discussing problems. Many people are adept at describing what they don't want, but only have a vague idea of what they do want.

Is your solution described in vague or fuzzy language? Will you be able to tell if your problem has been solved?

This is where the Future Perfect tool is important. Imagine that you were to awake tomorrow and your

(continued on page 4)

Solutions Not Problems

(continued from page 3)



problem had completely disappeared. What would your world look like? What would be different? (Think in detail, not vague changes.) What will you be doing and saying differently? What will be the first

small signs that the problem has disappeared?

The purpose of these questions is to elicit a specific image of the Future Perfect. Now you are no longer focused on the past and on problems. You have turned your focus to the future and the solution. ■

For another example of the solutions approach, go to:
<http://my.summary.com>

Inbetween — The Action is In the Interaction

The key to understanding solutions is understanding what happens inbetween the people involved, as opposed to people in isolation or to a particular party. This systems approach was first written about more than 25 years ago. Systems have elements that are “inbetween their component parts.” For example, leadership is something that is created between the behaviors of two people.

There are a number of advantages to thinking this way:

- **Individuals aren't blamed for what are in reality systemic problems.**
- **You get a more realistic feel for how the organization works.**
- **You get a broader sense of how to generate positive solutions.**
- **It allows you to approach wider systemic flaws as opposed to indefinite causes.**

Systems Thinking

Peter Senge is the foremost spokesman for the idea of using systems thinking for organizations. His views were outlined in a book called *The Fifth Discipline*.

For example, under his systems analysis, the correct way to understand a company's problems is to understand how a company's management and CEO think and learn. That's because managers act as designers of the company's informal “rules, strategies and policies.”

These tacit rules of an organization — appropriate dress, who gets internet access, public rewards for good work, etc. — emerge somewhat on their own. The Solutions Focus offers a way of putting together the ideas of emergence and system dynamics in a useful

way: In exploring complex interactions between people, there is a useful maxim to follow: the action is in the interaction.

Organizations As Interactional Systems

The assumption of a systems approach is that everything in an organization is interdependent with everything else. In other words, the Solutions Focus change agent is wary of attributing causal fault with one person or policy. How this actually works in practice was used during a study of traffic problems in London's packed M25 highway.

The cause of the traffic jams was related to drivers abruptly changing lanes. In fast-moving traffic, a driver abruptly changing lanes causes drivers behind the car to brake to avoid hitting the car switching lanes. This braking action ripples backward, with cars braking harder and harder to avoid the car in front. Eventually, the traffic toward the back is at a standstill.

This is a problem that can't be solved; drivers are going to continue changing lanes. What actually worked was a systemic change. It was found that if you actually slowed down speeds during rush hour, the overall traffic moved faster and more efficiently. Note that this solution — slowing down traffic — does not address the ‘cause’ of the problem — abrupt actions by the drivers. It simply allows those actions to occur without undesirable consequences.

Behavior Emerges Unpredictably

The goal of the “solutionist” is to allow people to make the small changes they can in order that bigger and better results might follow. For this to happen, the Solutions Focus coach has to believe in the freedom of the individuals that he's working with. Without freedom, no small changes can be made. And without small changes and steps, no larger overall changes can be accomplished.

For example, from 1914 through 1918, the British Pubs were ordered to close at the same time, which resulted in people drinking all they could before closing hour and then subsequently crawling home through the streets and getting into a number of nasty fights.

While drinking was the cause of the problem, the eventual solution had nothing to do with drinking (prohibition had demonstrated that attempting to eliminate drinking was doomed to failure).

Instead of attempting to fix the problem of drinking, the government used systemic thinking to arrive at the solution: more freedom for the pub owners to control their closing hours. This new freedom eliminated the systemic tide of overdrinking and subsequent fights. ■

For another example of interaction in action, go to:
<http://my.summary.com>

Make Use of What's There

There are often clues to possible solutions to the problem in front of you — you simply might not see them. This is why you must learn to make use of what's there — to recognize that there may be much in what you already have that can be useful in building the Future Perfect.

There are a number of benefits of working with what's there:

- **What is already there is meaningful.**
- **The very process of caring about what workers say will make them feel more valued.**
- **It provides you with a positive entryway toward looking for positive solutions.**
- **It prevents you from imagining things that aren't there.**
- **This method will force us to root our solutions in what is already in front of us.**

Frankly, the alternative to this is looking for what isn't there, for example deficits, shortcomings, weaknesses, lack of cooperation from others. This is not a positive way to initiate positive solutions and it's not a necessary precursor for positive change.

Everything is a Useful Gift

One way to make sure you use what's already there is to adopt a mindset that “everything is a useful gift” — including the negative. The idea keeps you open-minded about every element of the work environment that you're exposed to.

For example, instead of thinking that the boss is brusque, you would take the positive attitude that the boss is very concerned about his or her time, and then you would work that into your solution analysis.

Accumulating Counters

Your goal at this stage of the process is to accumulate Counters.

A Counter, one of the Solutions Focus tools, is anything that will help you move toward a solution (one dictionary definition of a counter is a small disc used in bargaining). By accumulating counters, you are putting together a stack of “what's there” to help you build the solution.



Counters might include:

- **examples of the solution happening already;**
- **evidence of parts of the solution happening** (see example above right);
- **skills and resources that will help create the solution; and**

Cool Glasses, or How to Recognize Parts of a Solution in Front of You

A Zeneca chemical plant in Italy gives us an example of a solution partially happening — also an effective counter in the search for a solution.

Workers at this chemical plant resisted efforts to have them wear safety glasses. A problem focus would have examined the problem by investigating, for example, the cause of eye-damaging accidents or trying to understand why workers would be willing to risk their health.

The problem was resolved, however, when someone noticed that the solution was already partially occurring. Specifically, this person asked, “When are our workers willing to wear glasses?” The answer: when the glasses were cool, fashionable sunglasses.

The plant developed safety glasses with mirror shades, and the result was unequivocal: The workers not only began wearing the safety glasses immediately, they even kept them on when they left the plant!

- **cooperation from others involved.**

Honda's Bikes: A Solution Already Happening

For example, Honda's strategy for entering the U.S. market was to offer large motorcycles, since this was what U.S. customers seemed to want. The strategy was not working: Honda's big bikes were not selling.

Meanwhile, however, the Honda staff brought over for their own pleasure their smaller motorcycles — and people kept asking the staff where they could find similar bikes. This unsolicited interest was the solution happening in front of their eyes: sell small, not big, bikes. Fortunately for Honda, someone recognized this counter and the solution to which it pointed.

Build Cooperation—Or Expect Resistance

It should be pointed out that the Solutions Focus is a cooperative one. When you're starting the process you want to, frankly, agree with the client about his or her perceptions about the workplace.

For example, if it's clear that your client's workplace is a mess, and the client thinks it's tidy, you agree with the client. Later, try to find out what definitions are being used.

A consultant who uses the SIMPLE approach has to accept what the clients say or the approach won't work. Also, try to anticipate cooperation not resistance. If you encounter resistance to change, suspect that you are generating it and ask what you could do instead. ■

Possibilities—Past, Present and Future

Possibilities are central to progress. It's impossible to have a better future if you haven't already imagined it first, then worked toward it. When you don't work with possibilities, it's almost impossible to create smart change. The alternative path, knowing the failure of the past and the uncertainty of the future, leads to the negative route of accusation and "stuckness." It's much more helpful to focus on how matters can be different as opposed to how you failed in the past.

Possibilities Past

If there are victories or mythic triumphs that are a part of a company's past, then they should be remembered in order to handle the challenges of the future. Trumpet the fact that "our company survived the depression and therefore we shall thrive during the late '90s recession." It makes a big difference when an executive who has weathered tough times is leading you as opposed to one who has never achieved a significant victory.

Possibilities Present

The positive future can only be arrived at if there are positive trends in the present. When you're using this method, always concentrate on the positive things that a client is doing. For example, instead of dwelling on the problem of a writer who can't write because of time or distractions, get the writer to focus on when he or she actually gets writing done. This way the writer can use this information to replicate positive results. Solutions-focused questions lead to a story of possibility.

Possibilities Future

If you don't create the concept of the perfect future for the client then they will be less likely to reach the outcomes they want, know what they want, recognize it when it's happening and take the necessary steps to make those forecasted events come true.

Much of this has to do with the power of positive expectation. There was a study by researcher Robert Rosenthal several decades ago that proved this idea. He went to a class and randomly picked 20 percent of the students and told the teachers that these students had true potential to grow and excel. A year later it turns out that those randomly selected students outperformed their peers. This proves that positive expectations can yield positive results.

Offering Compliments

During this possibilities stage of the SIMPLE model, you will want to use the solutions tool of Affirmed. Make sure to look back on what's helping already, compliment yourself and others on whatever you're doing well and



use this affirmation as a stepping stone to action. Don't underestimate the power of a compliment. You will be surprised how you can reinforce the Solutions Focus by catching people doing things well and quietly mentioning them: "I like the way you did that," or "I enjoyed your work on that." ■

Language — Simply Said

The benefits of simpler language and words are threefold: creates a better chance that the participants will effectively communicate with each other, means more precise communication, and results in a "reduction of impressive sounding nonsense." There are also dangers inherent in using Big Words or complicated terms in describing situations. Those dangers are also threefold: big words often impede progress, you are not using people's own language, and you create the danger of labels and generalities.

Scaling

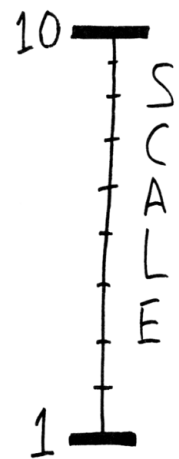
Scaling, in which you determine the progress of your efforts to reach a solution, is an effective tool for explaining the situation in exact terms. For example, you might begin with the question: "On a scale from 1-10, where 10 is the perfect future, where am I now?"

Scaling not only helps you communicate your situation, it also helps you analyze your progress. In order to answer the question above (for example, "I am at 3"), you will need to examine your situation carefully. If you are at 3, then what helped you get past 1 and 2? And what would take you a small step (say one point) higher?

The point is not to ask yourself, "How do I go from 3 to 10?" If you knew that, you'd already be at or near 10. The point is to understand what it takes to progress along the scale — to move from 2 to 3, then from 3 to 4 and so on.

Potential Pitfall Words Are Personal

Different people define the same words differently. One man's "terrorist" is another man's "freedom fighter" even though the same person might be involved in the same activities. Likewise, some companies have "idle daydreamers" and other companies employ



(continued on page 7)

Language—Simply Said

(continued from page 6)

“imaginative creators.” Remember to always accept the words of the clients at face value. Your goal is to first accept the client’s words and then try to direct the conversation to what can be accomplished and solved. Always make sure that you’re moving toward answers and solvable problems.

Potential Pitfall: Words Are Not the World

Be careful when using words like “organization” and “teamwork.” Organizations, in the context of the SIMPLE philosophy, should be thought of as interactional systems where there are many starting and stopping points.

To see how this works, the consultant should ask the clients how they define “good teamwork.” The consultant should then move toward figuring out the small steps necessary for the client’s team to move toward the goal of whatever the optimum of “good teamwork” happens to be.

Don’t turn something dynamic, like teamwork, into something that’s static. Likewise, whenever you talk about changing a company’s “corporate culture” remember that you’re trying to define specific interactions and activities. In other words, if you want to change your organization’s culture, a promising start is to select some simple words to describe how people go about their affairs. ■

Every Case is Different

The primary maxim of Solutions Focus is, “Find what works and do more of it.” One important idea of this maxim is figuring out what we mean by “works” and what specific aspects of the present situation appear to be helping, sustaining, and exemplifying this working. This will lead you to the secondary maxim of the Solutions Focus: “Stop doing what isn’t working and do something different.”

Following these two maxims will lead to a number of positive developments, such as:

- **Better chance of reaching desired results.**
- **More relevance to the people involved.**
- **More apparent ownership of successful change actions.**
- **Enthusiastic rollout of ideas as results quickly occur.**
- **The avoidance of inappropriate theories and models.**

In other words, doing more of what works and less of what doesn’t is a way of finding the solution that fits

the particular problem you are trying to avoid — instead of trying to use a one-size-fits-all theory or methodology.

Other Pitfalls

In addition to avoid applying theories that don’t fit the specific case, you must also avoid the pitfalls of:

- knowing too much and not being open-minded about the reality in front of you;
- relying too much on experts; and
- being “solution forced rather than solution focused.”

Jazz pianist Art Tatum used to look for the bad notes in pianos he played on the road in order to play around with them and use them. You have to approach each business the same way: Appreciate what makes each organization unique.

Appreciate what makes each organization unique.

Small Actions

When you’re doing more of what works and less of what doesn’t, focus on the small steps and small actions that move you toward a solution. Small actions is the final of our six solution tools.

Don’t try to make dramatic and sudden progress. Instead, attempt the small changes that are the most likely to succeed or the easiest. These are also actions that can be undertaken tomorrow and are specific and clearly defined.



For example, golfers who want to hit a ball from 50 feet out don’t aim for the pin; they learn to aim for a line a few feet from where the ball is. Likewise, a thriving start up had big plans for blue chip clients and community activities. But they first decided that they had to decide upon what companies to mail letters to and what meetings to arrange.

After the Small Steps—More Counters

After you’ve made your small steps, it’s important to determine how effective your small actions were. Your main intent is to find what works. And what actually works may not be what you expected. Start the review of all small actions with the questions of “What’s better?” and “How did I do that?” Other questions that you ask should include what effects did you notice, who has noticed the small actions, and what do you think should happen next? ■

For an example of the power of small steps and counters, go to: <http://my.summary.com>

THE SOLUTIONS FOCUS: APPLICATIONS

The Solutions Focus can be applied to problems in a variety of domains — for example, organizational, coaching and team issues. The article below and at right focus on the first two types of issues. A discussion of team solutions can be found in the Inside Info section for this summary at <http://my.summary.com>. ■

Organizational Change

The Solutions Focus approach to organizational change includes defining the future perfect, finding counters, and taking small actions — all in a SIMPLE way. In organizations, this means you figure out what works by acting, questioning and watching.

Keep in mind that the “organization” is usually a group of people who are organizing themselves and their work. Your job as the Solutions Focus coach or manager is to figure out how the culture of a business and organization actually works.

How the Solutions Focus Tackled Problem Passwords

Employees at many companies have problems memorizing passwords — especially if the passwords change frequently — and this was no different at one particular Welsh company.

To resolve this problem, the company could have taken the problem-focus approach of asking, “Why can’t people remember long lists?” or “What gets in the way of them remembering changes to passwords?”

Instead, the managers used the Solutions Focus method and asked instead how they could make a more memorable password system. They asked: “What do people easily recognize and remember?” These solutions-focused questions eventually led to the solution: faces. Many people have problems remembering long strings of letters and numbers. But people have an innate ability to recognize faces.

Today, whenever a person logs on to a computer screen, the user sees nine faces and has to spot the position of his or her first password face. Increased security is generated by using multiple screens — the first screen features the first password face, a second screen feature the second password face, and so on.

The entire password system has become more reliable and faster. Trials proved that the system worked very well and calls to the help desk for forgotten passwords decreased appreciably. The company introduced the system on the Internet in 2001. ■

For another example of the application of the Solutions Focus to organizations issues, go to: <http://my.summary.com>

Coaching Solutions

Coaching is one of the most popular applications of solutions-focused work in organizations. The Solutions Focus has origins in psychotherapy, and like therapy coaching takes place within small groups or even just two people. Coaching proves a potent mix when combined with the Solutions Focus. Here’s how coaches can use the SIMPLE method to achieve solutions:

- ✓ **Solutions, not problems:** Remember to steer the conversation toward solutions. This doesn’t mean that you ignore problems, but that you work toward getting the subject to think in positive outcomes and solutions. It’s nothing new that a coach concentrates on positive goals, but the Solutions Focus states: “there is rarely any sense of emphasizing a problem or starting with what’s wrong.”
- ✓ **Inbetween—the action is in the interaction:** When you’re a coach you are on the lookout for positive and helpful interactions. Your goal is to search for improvement solutions and figuring out helpful interactions for your client.
- ✓ **Make use of what’s there:** Try to note the evidence of what’s there. Learn to find counters that measure the client’s performance.
- ✓ **Possibilities—past, present and future:** As a coach, a main aim is to generate a sense of possibility. You have to act as if progress is inevitable.
- ✓ **Language:** Keep the language simple. Refrain from using words like “self-actualization,” “disempowerment” and “cross-functional mindsets,” please. Also avoid negative words like “failure” and “hopeless,” and use the client’s own words when describing his or her performance.
- ✓ **Every case is different:** Your every assignment should be fresh and new. It should be looked upon as a new challenge. Your only expertise should be in understanding how each case is special and how that hinders or helps them reach their solution.
- ✓ **Optimism and pessimism:** The Solutions-Focused coach has to be positive. Positive people take credit for their success and blame their failure on circumstances beyond their control; pessimists do the opposite, blaming all of their success on flukes and taking their failures personally. During sessions, you should stress what’s impressed you about the performer’s performance, and offer views on how the performer’s efforts to improve have been successful.