# PART TWO

# Coaching Approaches

# 6

# Facilitating Inspired Change Through Strengths-Based Coaching Conversations

Denise Wright

*This chapter offers the view that sustainable change is dependent on successful dialogue. It puts forward the idea that relationships, organisations, and society are largely their conversations and hence we can change any of these by changing our conversations. Through reference to change literature and the author's Asia based experiential observations and learning, this chapter illustrates the role that strengths-based coaching conversations can play in supporting individuals, groups, and organisations move more quickly and simply toward a preferred future and new levels of impact. It concludes that profound change can be created when colleagues work collaboratively to affirm and amplify what works towards what is wanted.*

---

## Transforming Conversations, Transforming How We Work Together

Organisations and relationships are largely their conversations, or to be more specific, the sum of their responses to their conversations and of all their interactions. If we think about the work we do as leaders, much of it is conversation based. Hence, promoting and amplifying helpful interaction is critical.

Arie de Geus, strategic planning expert, in his book *The Living Company*, puts forward the idea of thinking about a company as a living being instead of as a machine for making money.

> Conversations are the way workers discover what they know, share it with their colleagues, and in the process create new knowledge for the organisation. In the new economy, conversations are the most important form of work.
> - Webber

If organisations are living entities made up of human communities, we can set about developing useful patterns of interacting with one another and can cascade helpful conversations out through wider and wider circles within and beyond the organisation. In this way, over time, we can release positive energy and transform our relationships, organisations, communities, industries, and society.

## Changing Leadership Landscape

This is especially important in today's increasingly complex environment and changing leadership landscape. James Canton, CEO and Chairman for Institute for Global Futures, lists five factors that will define the extreme future environment: speed, complexity, risk, change, and surprise (4). Canton describes a new world taking shape in which uncertainty will reign supreme and ongoing anticipation, adaptation, innovation, and evolution will be necessary for successful navigation of the future.

> If organisations are living entities made up of human communities, we can set about developing useful patterns of interacting with one another... over time, we can release positive energy and transform our relationships, organisations, communities, industries, and society.

One way in which we have seen the need to anticipate, adapt, innovate, and evolve within organisational life these past few decades is in terms of how managers and leaders work with the people around them. As the nature of work has changed to being largely knowledge-based, leadership focus is increasingly moving beyond the focus on tasks to focus more on people, engaging in issues, and getting results through people.

As business structures have flattened, there has been a growing challenge and opportunity for leaders to learn not only how to lead but also how to be led and how to follow. A more at-ease, collaborative style of leadership has evolved where leaders are keen learners initiating and steering conversations to draw out and harvest knowledge and ideas from a diverse group of others. For some, this is quite a departure from the "all-knowing guru" leadership style of the past.

Modeling and promoting helpful conversation is key to creating a high-touch positive environment.

In order to lead successfully today, leaders and managers have had to adapt the way they interact with others. Merely managing people is not enough. Nowadays, evidence suggests that many upcoming managers and leaders want to be stretched, supported, and nurtured in their development toward their next role. Organisations are responding. Many have built interaction-based behaviour focuses into their leadership frameworks, including building effective relationships, influencing across and outside of the business, a focus on strengths, seeking and giving feedback, coaching and mentoring, and sharing knowledge and expertise.

Today's leaders are benefitting from interacting openly and authentically and making time for the people they work with. How are they doing this? They are doing this largely through their conversations – the number and nature of the conversations they have. Modeling and promoting helpful conversation is key to creating a high-touch positive environment.

> The organisation is… more than a machine, more than economic, defined by results in the marketplace. The organisation is above all social. It is people. Its purpose must therefore be to make the strengths of people effective and the weaknesses irrelevant.
> - Peter Drucker

I seek to show, through the case examples provided, that strengths-based coaching

conversations can play a key role in facilitating such transformation.

## Key Principles of a Solutions-Focus Approach to Change

There are various strengths-based approaches to change (including Appreciative Inquiry[1]), I have used Solutions-Focus coaching examples in this chapter.

The Solutions-Focus approach to change, which is facilitated largely through coaching conversations (one-to-one and group), focuses on identifying what change is wanted and on progress toward this. The customer (be it an individual, group or organisation) gets more for less as they affirm useful change that is already in place and do more of it.

I will not attempt to provide a detailed description of the Solutions-Focused (SF) coaching approach. There are several excellent existing resources that do this, some of which are listed in the bibliography section for this chapter.

However, I would like to highlight three simple and radical ideas that are at the centre of any SF change (Jackson and Mckergow 1):

- Be as clear as possible about what is wanted – the "solution" on which we focus.
- Harness what is already in place and use these positive forces to influence the emerging future in the direction of the solution.
- Take a direct route to what works by overlooking pitfalls and excursions, such as delving into problems and what's not working.

Jackson and McKergow's description of a SF approach to change is one that particularly resonates with me; "change is happening all the time, our job is to identify and amplify useful change" (54).

With a Solutions-Focus Approach:

| The focus is on... | Instead of... |
|---|---|
| Solutions | Problems |
| Illuminating strengths and resources | Weaknesses |
| Competencies | Inadequacies, gaps |
| What is going well | What is wrong |
| What is working | What is failing |
| Actions towards a preferred future | Understanding and fixing causes of a problem |

**Table 6-1: Focus of Solution-Focus Approach (Adapted from slides from the Academy of Solution-Focused Training)**

## Solutions-Focus Steps

I have listed below three SF "steps" or tools. However, these steps are not sequential or mandatory. One might take any step first depending on what is already in place and stop at any step. Every case is different.

A SF approach to change starts with having someone who wants something to be different and is prepared, in principle, to do something about it. In SF language, this is called a "customer for change" (Jackson and Mckergow 28). Thorough contracting around the coachee's goal is critical to get a clear idea of what is wanted.

### *Step A: Describing the Preferred Future*

The "preferred future" is brought to life in rich detail through a coaching conversation using a hypothetical question such as the miracle question[2] to kick off.

The picture of the preferred future includes what the individual, group or organisation wants to be different and how they will know when it is (evidences

of the desired changes in place).

It is important to draw out specific behaviours when building this preferred future picture. What are you doing? What are you saying? Who is there? What is the nature of the activity? The resulting description resembles a film script that can be clearly visualised. The behaviours, dialogue, and physical descriptions in this film act as progress clues moving forward-signs we can look for to see where the desired change is happening already.

> Positive images of the future are a powerful and magnetic force… They draw us on and energise us, give us courage and will to take important initiatives. Negative images of the future also have a magnetism. They pull the spirit downward on the path of despair and impotence.
> - William James

In addition, building a picture of the preferred future also draws out how the change will be noticed by others and the impact that achieving the preferred future will have on various stakeholder groups. In this way we can explore the likely impact of such change on all key significant groups – both within and external to the organisation. This gently nudges the client to look beyond the impact on the self and the organisation to the bigger picture and broader potential of achieving the desired changes.

SF practitioners are interested in the perceptions of the various different participants in any given situation because change comes from an observer's point of view. Bjorn Johansson and Eva Persson (160) state that "SF qualities like leadership are not intrinsic to individuals but emerge as part of the interaction between individuals".

### *Step B: Affirming What is in Place Already / Illuminating Strengths*

Once this rich preferred future picture is in place, a possible next step is to check

where the organisation or team currently rates itself to be. This can be marked as N on a 1-10 scale where 10 represents the preferred future and 1 is the opposite (Figure 6-1).

Where are you now?

**Figure 6-1: Scale for affirming coaching journey**

Identifying the N point allows client and coach to identify and affirm that they are already on their journey (even if N=2) and that they have many strengths already in place that have supported them in getting to N.

Existing "know-how" (Jackson and Mckergow 139) and resources are drawn out by helping the client explore how they got from 1 to N. A detailed list of things already in place is generated and affirmed.

Step B is very different from the more commonly seen approach of exploring what is in the gap between N and 10, that is, what is not in place.

### *Step C: Identifying Next Small Steps*

Finally, we might explore what the customer will do next – the small steps they can take to get to N+1. SF breaks down the "so what will you do" stage into small, observable, and doable immediate next steps, having affirmed existing relevant "know-how" and strengths which will keep you moving step by step in your preferred direction. This works to build confidence, further "know-how" and to amplify useful change.

At no point in an SF approach is the client asked to zoom in to the problem or look at a gap between where they want to be and where they are now. Neither does SF involve the drawing up of a grand master plan that takes you all the way from where you are now to the preferred future, as this can be overwhelming and

potentially paralysing for some. It is also questionable how useful this is, given that change is happening all the time and we can only see the possibilities that are visible to us today.

## Solutions-Focus Group Coaching Asia Case Examples

There are many great case studies on how strengths-based and SF principles and tools have been used to affirm and amplify change within organisations.

Below are three snapshots of how I have used strengths-based principles and SF coaching within organisations in Asia to amplify inspired positive change.

### *Case 1: Illuminating Resources in the Moment*

This first real case describes how a conversation, focused on affirming existing strengths, helped managers working in extremely challenging conditions acknowledge what is already working well and in doing so encouraged them to set about doing more of this.

Managers from all over Asia participating in a multi-module leadership programme for an electronics giant were asked to describe (by creating a picture postcard) the terrain they had been travelling since the last time we met, three months earlier. A huge change was taking place within the organisation at this time. Within small groups, each leader shared the challenges they faced and the group listened to and affirmed one another authentically.

Each participant shared their personal story and experiences (the writing side of the postcard). Through a facilitated SF group coaching approach, the group worked together to uncover what is better, what is moving in the preferred direction (which had been established earlier), and what strengths and resources are driving current progress in this super challenging environment. The group did this by asking questions such as "How did you do that?" and "How did you know to try this?" The conversation was highly affirming. There was a visible shift in "can do more of this as it really works" energy amongst this group as a result of this strengths-building conversation.

We had a chance, shortly after, to link these illuminated strengths, to the list of desired leadership qualities these participants had identified in an earlier plenary session. There were clear similarities between the qualities these leaders claimed they were looking forward to demonstrating and the list of their existing strengths that we drew out and acknowledged during the "picture postcard" exercise. This really helped the leaders affirm that they were already living out many of their desired leadership virtues and, as a result, many felt they were much further along in their leadership journey than they had previously acknowledged.

The focus on strengths in this conversation worked to build confidence, a heightened resourcefulness, and willingness to keep moving as it highlighted all that was already in place that could be further leveraged.

The helpful strengths-based questions and dialogue led to trust, a feeling of support, and positive group energy which helped to propel forward movement.

### *Case 2: "Leadership Challenge" Peer Circle Support*

I have successfully used this peer coaching circle approach a number of times to amplify change. It involves a leader introducing a current leadership challenge (or new initiative) by sharing their preferred future for this challenge, progress to date towards achieving this, and possible next steps with his or her peers or key stakeholder group. The leader then requests from the group the specific type of feedback and support that will be most useful to him or her. As facilitator-coach, I gently steer the group to peer coach the leader, using the three SF steps outlined earlier as a guide. Key coaching and feedback skills are discussed upfront to guide participants to create and honour helpful operating agreements.

Peer mentoring, via "know-how" stories, is also offered towards the end of each session. The session typically ends with feedback from the group to the leader on what most impressed them about him or her as leader of this complex challenge (again affirming strengths) and with the leader thanking and acknowledging his or her peers for their input.

**Building Clarity of Vision, Readiness to Act and Collaborative Group Spirit**

In one particular case, the Korean Operations Director of a multi-national oil company, YK, had a leadership challenge goal to achieve "zero-errors operations". He provided detailed background information, objectives, and timelines for this goal. As the vision of what a "zero-errors operations" would look like was not yet clear, a solutions-focused "preferred future" conversation was initiated by one of the peers in the circle to support YK to get clearer on what will be different when "zero-errors operations" becomes a reality and to help him spot progress clues moving forward.

Developing team alignment for this goal, through such a shared-visioning exercise, was identified as a key next step for YK. Many useful "know-how" stories, organisation specific, were shared by the circle peers to create and communicate a compelling vision. By the end of the session, YK felt much more confident, was clear and ready to proceed with this project plus supported and validated by his peers' inputs. He expressed that he was able to gracefully receive and fully appreciate the direct feedback and rich support offered by his peers because the group had created a safe space for an authentic style of conversation, in line with the group agreements set at the outset. The group had demonstrated acceptance and acknowledgement of YK, and empathy for his challenging situation. YK's circle peers shared that they felt valued for their contribution and were energised both by the process and progress made. These shifts in resourcefulness, readiness to act on YK's part, group energy, and collaborative spirit are key benefits of this SF peer coaching approach

**Identifying Desired Future Impact, Amplifying Existing Resources, and Building Relationships**

Another example is the Singaporean Business Processes Director for a pharmaceutical giant, Jenny, who was leading a huge transfer of operations from the U.S.A. to Asia – highly confidential as many of those to be involved were not yet aware. The SF peer coaching circle process helped her to share this major challenge with key cross-functional peers and to receive their support and stretch input, in real time, and in a context where confidentiality was preserved. The peer

coaching discussion helped her to get greater clarity around who might notice the change once in place, what in particular they would notice, and how they might be impacted, which generated a clearer picture of the preferred future for this project and the possible impact of achieving it. This led to early trust building within this peer circle, which was very powerful. This peer coaching session a led to amazing sharing and excitement-building around this change project, plus offers of support from those peers present (who represented all key functions likely to be impacted). Jenny became much clearer on what resources she already had access to (many of which she had not recognised previously), plus on her immediate next steps. This SF peer coaching conversation took two and a half hours in total. It brought awareness to this project and to the progress made to date so that key strategic collaborator groups could support this challenge leader in her thinking, in real time, and feed in their inputs. The shifts in relationships were clearly visible in the room.

## Change is in the Interaction

In the SF approach to change, organisational problems are considered in interactional terms – change happening in the in-between. Change is in the interaction as all changes come from an observer's point of view. If change is not visible in the world, then there is no change. The SF approach also takes the view that there are no hindering mechanisms – neither internal (e.g. beliefs, personality traits, attitudes, motivations, etc.) nor external (systems, power structures, cultural norms) – that we need to correct in order for other changes or progress to occur (Mckergow and Korman 34-49).

Personally, I really respond to this idea. For me this means that we do not need to find or create X (e.g. a new belief or a higher purpose) or change Y (e.g. the system) in order to move towards Z (a preferred future). Of course, if X or Y are partly in place, we can use what is there and amplify it. Working with what is there is a key SF principle. At the same time, not having to build, fix or find X or Y first, allows us to go for change anywhere at any time. For organisational change, it means we don't need to take a top down approach or a bottom or middle up one. We can start wherever we have a customer (group) for change, that is people

who want something to be different and are willing, at least in principle, to do something about it. Progress clues will ripple out from this group leading to a momentum which attracts others to join in, to go for "some of what the other group has going on". Indeed, we have seen this many times over in organisational life. One division introduces an effective new way of working which inspires other divisions or regions to follow, building on what is working.

On reflecting on this idea of change happening in the "in-between", it occurred to me that when I reflect on the many powerful coaching moments I have been privileged to be part of, for pretty much all such experiences, it is what happened in the conversation, in the relationship that created a shift toward what is wanted rather than anything external or internal to any one party. Observable change was in the interaction. This, for me, is what makes coaching transformational. In transformational coaching the shift begins in the coaching room, in the coaching conversation, in the interaction.

### *Case 3: Observable Change is in the Interaction*

A group of Asia based managers for a major IT multi-national had generated a picture of their preferred future in which "an environment where people feel connected to each other and are engaged and passionate about their work" was a key part. The company had been experiencing waves of extremely challenging change for a period of eight months and Wong, the China-based head of Finance, amongst others, shared that he was struggling to see how to pull this (preferred future) off, when "there is no good or stable news to offer the team right now".

Through the use of a facilitated SF group coaching approach, these managers identified recent moments of "connected, engaged, and passionate working" within their teams, and within the company generally. The group coached one another to identify key progress clues (signs of the preferred future happening already) coming through that they could affirm and do more of, even in the present extreme conditions.

As his peers coached him, Wong realised that his own moments of greatest

engagement at work had resulted from positive interactions he had had with a few very supportive colleagues. His coaching group probed to a rich level, asking questions such as: How did you contribute to building these engaging moments; what specifically did you do; how did you listen to your colleagues; how did they respond to you; what response did this generate; how did the team create this atmosphere? And so on.

> When you listen to somebody else, whether you like it or not, what they say becomes a part of you… The common pool is created, where people begin suspending their own opinions and listening to other peoples'… At some point people recognise that the common pool is more important than their separate pools.
> - David Bohm

The key shifts that materialised for Wong were: the realisation that he could work harder, right away, to build supportive relationships with his colleagues, and most importantly, he had many ideas on how he might do this; and at the same time, he now felt a readiness to act, in fact more than this, he felt excited to start making these inspired changes. Wong identified that he could initiate and facilitate helpful interactions with those around him including his peers, team members, and manager, and that he could make time to listen authentically to them. He could engage others in more non task-focused conversations, perhaps a check-in chat by the coffee machine or lunch from time to time, and he could seize opportunities to enjoy a joke or story with them. He fully connected to the potential impact this could make through reflecting on the impact it has had in the past, for him and for those he has already interacted with in this way. He shared that he was feeling relieved, encouraged, and energised that there were clear steps forward that he could take right away. He wanted his colleagues to know he cares. He did care.

Prior to the exercise, Wong had reported feeling stuck and powerless to act. He had been following what he understood to be John Kotter's advice in *Leading*

*Change.* He had been careful not to declare any victories or celebrate small wins too soon and somehow he had concluded that he had nothing to offer his team communication-wise. As a result, he had literally been hiding away in his office avoiding everyone around him.

**Affirming Existing Know-how**

How did this shift in how Wong saw his situation happen – from powerless to act to ready and excited to support and be there for his colleagues? What created this shift? The shift was in the interaction. His peers had helpfully supported and stretched him throughout their coaching conversation to reflect on the know-how he already had in place and could do more of (amplify) to move forward. This resulted in increased confidence and readiness in Wong to take action right away to change the way he interacts with his team members.

**Modeling Helpful Interaction Qualities**

Through real, robust conversation and open, authentic listening and sharing, trust was built and this stimulated Wong to dare to show his vulnerability and his colleagues to dare to be truly supportive. Wong's peers in this coaching conversation were not asking him to hypothesise what might be helpful for his situation or role play a simulated tough situation exercise. Together, the group had modeled the helpful interaction qualities that Wong had identified were most needed for his own team, just as I had modeled this for the whole group initially in my role as group coach-facilitator. Together we had lived out Wong's solution.

> Whenever two or more people join in shared purpose an organisation is formed. Healthy organisations contribute to healthy individuals, communities, economies and to a healthy biosphere.
> - Christine Whitney Sanchez

Wong responded to this peer group coaching with generous, rich, and open sharing around his shift in perspective, intention, and energy in regard to his challenge, and in doing so, he enabled many other people in the room to relate to the learning in his story for themselves and those they work closely with.

This was a high-impact transformational moment. The movement and shifts happened in the room.

## Conclusion

Promoting helpful interactions, be they one-on-one conversations, within teams and groups or between one organisation or country and another, can produce wide-ranging changes quickly and sustain-ably. Ultimately, we are our conversations and interactions. If we (organisations, leaders, managers, colleagues) can support one another through helpful interactions, building on existing strengths, we are better placed to anticipate, adapt, innovate, evolve, and successfully navigate our future.

Strengths-based conversations are accessible for all and doable right here and now. We don't need to fix X or Y first and hence they are easily scalable. There are various strengths-based approaches to change and I have used SF coaching examples in this chapter.

SF coaching approaches can be powerful resources in today's challenging environment because they work to propel forward movement and facilitate inspired positive change. It is often the case in our work and personal lives that we spend time looking at what is in the gap between where we are and where we want to be. The SF coaching approach instead invests time to recognise all that is currently in place toward what is wanted, leading to a rich affirmation of progress underway and signs of the ideal future happening already. As a result, confidence, belief, inspiration, and momentum towards further movement build. Change is inspired, not forced or pushed. This is the power of doing more of what is already working.

The SF coaching… invests time to recognise all that is currently in place toward what is wanted … confidence, belief, inspiration, and momentum towards further movement build. Change is inspired, not forced or pushed. This is the power of doing more of what is already working.

When applied within a group context around questions that matter, strengths-based coaching approaches generate active engagement, rich collective dialogue, and constructive possibilities for action. They also harness the unity and diversity within the group. The application of group coaching skills and tools helps intimacy and trust to build and fosters deep listening, authentic, open sharing, genuine curiosity and helpful questioning. Profound change can be created when colleagues work collaboratively in this way, coaching one another to affirm and amplify what works towards what is wanted. For even greater connection, inspired creativity, collective inquiry, commitment and action, I have successfully blended a variety of other group strategic collaboration methods (including World Café[3] and Open Space Technology[4]) into a SF coaching framework.

We are seeing a solutions-focused shift coming through in many fields from counselling and therapy, to coaching, education, and business. Personally, I believe strengths-based approaches to creating change and strategic collaboration in organisations have huge potential and generate amazing, clearly visible pay-offs. I look forward to seeing the use and impact of rich conversation strengths-based methods grow significantly over the next few decades and beyond. It is a good time I believe, in today's extreme environment, to consider wider application of these powerful methods. There is much potential for Asia, with it's rich diversity and huge growth markets, to play a key part in driving greater strategic collaboration and effective strengths-based dialogue in every day organisational life.

* * * * *

*"A life affirming leader is one who knows how to rely on and use the intelligence that exists everywhere in the community, the company, the school, or the organisation. A leader these days needs to be a host – one who convenes people, who convenes diversity, who convenes all viewpoints in creative processes where our intelligence can come forth."*

**Margaret Wheatley, Berkana Institute**

* * * * *

**Endnote**

1 "Appreciative Inquiry" is about the coevolutionary search for the best in people, their organisations, and the relevant world around them. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives "life" to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms." <www.appreciativeinquiry.case.edu>.

2 Ibid. The miracle question: Suppose… tonight while you sleep a miracle happens… the miracle being that all the things you brought to this conversation are solved… just like that… but you do not know about the miracle since you were asleep. How will you go about discovering the next morning that this miracle must have occurred? How will you react differently?

3 The World Café is a conversational process based on a set of integrated design principles. See www.theworldcafe.com for further information.

4 Open Space Technology (OST) is a simple way to run productive meetings for five to 2000+ people, and a powerful way to build strategic collaboration and lead any kind of organisation. See www.openspaceworld.org for more information.

## Reflection Questions

1. What are the signs of helpful interactions already underway within your team, organisation or daily life? How might this be amplified?

2. What is the change that you most want to see for the coming year? How will you know that this has been achieved? What progress clues might you notice over the next 48 hours – tiny signs of this "preferred future" happening already?

3. What group methods have you used successfully to evolve levels of strategic collaboration? What was it that made these approaches impactful?