



Developing and Sustaining a Successful Family Business:

A Solution-Focused Guide

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Chapter 2. A Solution Focused Framework

In the beginning of the eighties, Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg developed the solution focused model in the context of psychotherapy. Since then, the model has spread rapidly and it still continues to do so. The solution model not only spreads rapidly within the original field but also in many other fields of application. This is possible because the solution focused way of thinking and working is a process model. In itself, the model is without content. The content comes from the client and the situation at hand. This accounts for the remarkable applicability to all kinds of work contexts. As a result, the solution focused model found an application in many professional fields: psychology, education, coaching, management, etc. Now, the world of family@business embraces it. We are happy to share the endorsement that Steve and Insoo wrote in 2001 when my book on solution focused coaching was the first publication to discuss the use of the solution focused model in business.

The Solution Focused Essentials

1. The Land of Possibilities

In the solution focused model, problems only interest us in as much as they provide us with clues to the possible solutions. Although problems can be overwhelming, there are always moments when the problem is not there or when the problem is less severe or slightly different than at other times. In other words, there are always exceptions to the problems. These exceptions interest the solution focused worker because they indicate that there are partial solutions that can be enlarged into broader solutions.

The solution focused practitioner asks: "What still works in spite of the problems you are facing?" The working hypothesis of the solution-focused approach is that there are always things worth continuing with, that there are always things that still work and that -in spite of everything- there are always possibilities.

2. The Solution Focused Image of Man

The Image of Man behind the solution focused model assumes that:

- Every human being and every human system is fully equipped to cope with life;
- Human systems (individuals, teams, companies etc.) always have resources at their disposal that they can use to obtain their goals;
- However dire the situation may seem, there are always things that are worthwhile to keep doing;
- There are always things that still work in spite of the problem;
- Change works best on a foundation of what already is there.



3. Resource Orientation

In solution focused work, one continuously concentrates on the resources the family business members can use to move forward in their (professional) life. A resource can be anything, from your background, intelligence, work, relations, friends, family and environmental factors to convictions, experience, studies (whether or not at the 'university of life'), market situations and so on. Anything can be a resource to draw strength from as long as you make proper use of it. A half full bottle contains exactly the same reality as a half empty bottle. Yet, seeing the bottle as half full is a resource that enhances your chance of survival in the desert.

Thinking in terms of resources is so pivotal in the solution focused approach that it could've just as well been named 'resource-focused working'.

4. Future Orientation

Solutions belong to the future while problems belong to the past. The solution focused model offers a wide range of interventions that channel your attention towards constructing possible solutions. Instead of concentrating on the (why of the) problems in the past, the solution focused model concentrates on the desired outcome: "What do you want to accomplish tomorrow and next week?" "What could be the first little step towards this?"

5. Goal Orientation

The solution focused approach focuses on the goals of the clients and not on the paradigm that the experts adhere to. In solution focused work, the only goals that deserve our attention are the goals of the clients, as they need to be aligned with the goals of the family@business. Obviously the goals of the family@business need to be aligned with normal business best practices, the macro-economic contexts and the law.

Useful goals are practical, realistic, realizable, can be phrased in behavioral terms ("What will you do different if...") and they preferably go from small to large.

6. Three Mandates

A mandate is the authority required to exercise a function. If we want to regulate traffic at a crossing, we have to make sure that we have a mandate as a police officer. In the perception of the rushing drivers, we are allowed to regulate the traffic because the (hired) uniform makes us look like a police officer. This means you do not 'have' a mandate. You 'receive' a mandate by earning it from your clients' perspective. A mandate always results from interaction.



As a professional, we always hold three mandates at the same time. We have a leadership mandate that allows us to take the lead in the interventions. We, at the same time, have a management mandate through which we apply our professional knowledge and make agreements with our clients. Our third mandate is our coaching mandate wherein we create a context in which we help the others to help themselves to obtain their goals by making use of their resources.

Solution focused work means that you have to continuously switch between three mandates. The essence of your mandate as a leader is to know precisely how and when to apply your mandates as a coach or as a manager. After all, it is you who decides – from your expertise, experience and awareness of the current situation – whether you intervene as a coach or as a manager.

All three mandates are driven by the quality of our working relationship with the clients.

7. Asking questions triumphs over giving statements

Questions help to shape the answers you get and vice versa. Asking appropriate solution-building questions will uncover resources that can be used to build solutions towards the goals of the family and family@business.

When offering suggestions or even specific directives that stem from your managerial mandate, it is best to phrase those in the form of a question. That way, the client who answers your suggestive question, becomes the owner of the answer, which enhances the chance that the client will actually do it.

8. Minimax decision rules

As a solution focused professional, we are constantly aiming at obtaining maximal effects with minimal efforts for the clients. In order to reach this minimax effect, you can use the following decision rules:

- Rule 1: if something is not broken, do not fix it.
- Rule 2: if something is not working, no longer working or not properly working after trying for a while, then stop, learn from it and do something else.
- Rule 3: if something is working well, good enough or better, just keep doing it and/or do more of it.
- Rule 4: if something is working well, good enough or better, learn it from someone else and/or offer it to someone else.

You can use this list of decision rules as a checklist. Whenever you feel a certain intervention does not work, you can go through this checklist, find what you missed or what you didn't pay enough attention to and then implement it.



9. Solution Talk

Language is our main instrument. Listening and talking are the main components of 'languageing'. The cooperation between the professional and his (family@business) clients, aims at helping the clients create an alternative reality than their problem state.

Problem talk: **"What is the problem and why?"**

Solution Talk: **"What still works well in spite of the problem?" "What would you like instead of the problem?"**.

10. The Five-Step Tango

What is it that you actually do in the relationship with your family@business clients? Protocol-driven models follow a fixed script. The solution focused approach is more like a dance. Since we never know what situations might pop up nor what clients will do or say, it is a far better idea to improvise creative answers that are adapted to the continuously changing and unpredictable conversations. We improvise on a theme that comes from the situation at that moment.

It takes two to tango. In the tango, a minimal number of steps can be combined into endless possible moves between the dance partners.

Solution focused coaching is like a tango with five basic steps. Each step in the coaching tango is an activity to be performed together with your client. It starts with making contact (step 1) since the working relationship is the driver for change. After having explored the context (step 2), the client is asked for his goals (step 3), we listen for resources (step 4) and possibilities and offer relevant compliments (step 5).

The metaphor of the solution tango helps structure and guides the interaction process between yourself and your interlocutors.



The Aesthetics of Change

This Framework contains a picture of the solution focused approach as it is painted in broad-brush strokes. The upcoming chapters will detail this picture in the finest possible brush strokes so that the multilayered aesthetic gradually will become visible. In the following chapters you will encounter all these essentials in the interventions and conversations between the protagonists.

In chapter 7 (The Solution Focused Toolkit) the discussions between the family business consultants Mark and Cynthia will reveal details of the solution focused way of thinking and working. Chapter 8 (The Solution Tango) will show you what to do in the interaction with your family business clients. In chapter 9 (Conversations with the Siblings) you will see how the solution focused approach unfolds in the conversations with the family. In chapter 10 (NextGen: Eight Tools for your future) the individual conversations switch into conversations with the family. Chapter 13 (The Dance of the Stakeholders) invites the management team in the process.