

Book Reviews

Doing something different: Solution-Focused
Brief Therapy Practices

Thorana S Nelson (editor)

Routledge New York, 2010, 341pp, ISBN: 978-0-415-87961-3,
\$US 37.95

Review by Carey Glass

This book is a complete delight! It is full of short, informative, accessible pieces of reading about SF that are just 2 or 3 pages each, some are just a paragraph. It can be so easily dipped into as all the pieces from the 43 contributors stand alone.

The editor Thorana Nelson writes that as she solicited submissions for the book, greater and greater ideas came forth. What has resulted is an uplifting compendium of interventions and practices, poems, stories and think pieces. Uplifting, because the contributors are offering their experiences, thoughts and anecdotes in a personal and generous way that shines through the book.

Section 5 entitled “Outrageous Moments in Therapy” is immediately captivating as we learn of therapists impulsively calling their clients liars and telling them where to get off. Not what the rule book says, but unexpectedly effective in particular cases.

Then there are pieces that are just useful. There are collections of SF quotes to choose from and favourite questions to try. There is a great training exercise from Joel Simon that lists 25 questions that an SF practitioner might ask and answers from people who don’t follow the script, such as saying “I really never sleep” in response to the classically

given miracle question. The exercise provides practice in using co-operation and utilisation when facing the unpredictable. Ian Johnsen has contributed a brilliantly simple chart that distinguishes therapies from each other including SF that many readers might wish to add to their collection of power-point training slides. In “The Artful Diagnostician”, Bruce Gordon describes guerrilla tactics that he uses to be SF in a “DSM-IV-speak” world. Clare Scott’s simple self-assessment of everyday mental health in seven statements is a perfect and uncomplicated measure of how life is going. It brilliantly hands power back to the individual.

While it is primarily a therapy book, it has much that can be translated to the organisational world. For example Lee Shilts writes about using scaling questions to assess couples’ readiness for therapy. He asks them to scale their own and predict their partner’s level of motivation to move the marriage forward and their optimism that they will succeed. This could be easily translated effectively for teams facing challenges in organisations. Brenda Zalter contributes a set of questions to ask following the miracle question for managers to help with their team management. Joel Simon’s exercise is as useful for coaches as it is for therapists.

Finally, some pieces just invite you to re-think. Philip Zeigler questions SF’s use of the “visitor, complainant, customer” concept because it describes people not interaction. Rather than naming the relationship, he decided to start thinking more in terms of conversations. He writes: “I began asking myself, “What kind of conversation are we engaged in at this moment in time? People are hard if not impossible to change. Relationships are almost as hard to change. Conversations, on the other hand, are relatively easy to change, especially if one is aware of the roles each participant is taking and is skilful in inviting changes in those roles.” That’s a great quote to use with managers wondering what they have to do to create change and is representative of the gems to be found throughout “Doing Something Different”.

Brief Coaching: A Solution Focused Approach

Chris Iveson, Evan George and Harvey Ratner

Routledge, 2011, 216pp, ISBN 978-0415667470, £17.99

Review by Jeff Matthews

A little like buses, you wait a while and two come at once, and so it is this year with books on SF coaching. For a number of years, *the* book on the topic was that written by Mark McKergow and Paul Z Jackson (2002), then Peter Szabó (2005, 2009) appeared. This year we have two offerings hitting the shelves, the first from the guys at BRIEF, followed swiftly by one from Bill O’Connell, due out at any moment. It’s the one called Brief Coaching from Chris Iveson, Evan George and Harvey Ratner that I am concerned with here.

Before starting, I have to declare an interest. I am currently in the middle of the Diploma in Brief Solution Focused Therapy at BRIEF, so have come to know and appreciate, first hand, the craft that Chris, Evan and Harvey work with the SFBT model in its application to the realms of therapy and coaching. And it’s fair to say that this book does an excellent job in drawing together and reflecting the core themes of their approach.

Of all the offerings currently in training and delivery of SFBT within the UK, BRIEF could rightly claim to be the heirs apparent of de Shazer’s original thinking and approach. They role-model precisely his exhortation to keep it simple and to focus on what works. To that extent, they have continued to develop the approach, over the years, with a programme of research and pragmatic observation honing the craft of the “professional conversation”, as coaching is labelled in Chapter 2 of the book. Now, there’s a phrase to conjure with and borrow – “professional conversations”. With the term “coaching” becoming highly contested and

increasingly meaningless, perhaps it's time we coined a different term for the "turn taking" we see in conversations that take place in a professional or organisational context. And so with breathtaking simplicity a whole vista of possibility for SF is opened up in the organisational realm, and not just in "coaching". And it's that simplicity of approach and clarity of thought that marks out the real value of this book. Mercifully free of theory, it offers a practical guide to using SF in the coaching domain.

All the tools of the trade are then laid out in the proposed meta coaching process that has become BRIEF's trademark. "Best hopes" as the starting point of the conversation, to establish the contract. Having co-created the "platform" of an effective outcome of the conversation, the deft move to discern the rich detail of the preferred future. Note the "miracle" question is in there, but played down in its significance as an intervention, whilst scaling gets a whole chapter. Signs of what's already working, before moving to a closing session. Lots of examples, lots of exercises, there is much for all who are using SF in a coaching context. (If you are interested in exploring further how BRIEF have built on the original model from Steve de Shazer, there's a great chapter from Guy Shennan and Chris Iveson in the recently published *Solution-Focused Brief Therapy: A Handbook of Evidence Based Practice*.)

And, of course, all good students should challenge their teachers at some point, so here are some thoughts of mine.

The majority, if not all of the case study examples in the book are taken from instances where people have entered the coaching conversation perceiving themselves in some form of deficit or distress. This makes the claim that "there's not much if any difference between SFBT and SF Coaching", which is a basic tenet of the book, entirely justified. Except that, in my experience, that's not always the case. A significant number of the people I coach arrive as part of talent management programmes, leadership development initiatives and 360 feedback. They are fully functioning, indeed, often exceptionally so – that's why they are on the particular devel-

opment programme. There is little on how to work with these individuals and they might present differently. The challenge is frequently maintaining a focus and interrupting appropriately, as the treasures of flowing ideas, talent and resources gush forward. It also gives the impression that the model is useful only in remedial coaching rather than developmental coaching. The “therapy = coaching” argument is a tricky one to sell to your hardened corporate buyer. SF has much to offer here, but there’s little in the book on this area.

A more significant issue is the distinction to be drawn between the “executive coach” – frequently external to the organisation, and disinterested in the outcome of the conversation, and the “manager as coach”, – frequently internal to the organisation and very interested and heavily invested in the outcome of the conversation. This receives attention in the book with part of a chapter, where the distinction is made and the dilemma discussed, but not much offered as to its resolution. Implicit in this is SF’s relationship to power and exhortation to place the client’s outcomes and narrative at the centre of the conversation. In an organisational context, that contract is not always clear-cut, with the objectives of the sponsoring organisation looming large in the outcomes of the coaching conversation. How is this introduced into the “best hopes”, where the organisation has clearly commissioned the coach – either explicitly in the contracting or implicitly through the role – to deliver “a change”? Whilst alluded to, there are no worked examples or thoughts on the tools for achieving this. Something for the second edition maybe?

And this book overall? Well, I would suggest a must for your bookshelf, if you are a serious SF organisational practitioner. It looks like an important contribution to the field to me.

References

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Jeff Matthews is a coach, coach supervisor and coach trainer of over 20 years' experience working with individuals and groups across a range of UK and European organisations. jeff@the-madison-group.co.uk

The Progress Principle: Using small wins to ignite joy, engagement, and creativity at work

Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer

Harvard Business Review Press, 2011, 260pp,
ISBN 978-1-4221-9857-5, £18.99

Review by Renilde Vervoort

Teresa Amabile is a psychologist at Harvard Business School. She investigates how life inside organisations can influence people and their performance. Originally focusing on individual creativity, she expanded her research to productivity, team creativity, and organisational innovation. She published *Creativity in Context*, and *Growing Up Creative*, as well as over 150 scholarly papers. Co-author Steven Kramer is also her husband. He is an independent researcher and writer.

The title – words such as ‘progress’ and ‘small wins’ – instantly made me think of SF ideas. Would there be a link? Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer analysed nearly 12,000 diary entries provided by 238 employees in seven different companies. Participants were told every day to describe one event from the day that stood out in their minds, regardless of what type of event it was. This information was analysed by the authors and provides us with valuable insights. What motivates employees? What drives them to perform at their best? The authors call it: a ‘satisfying inner work life’. When employees have a satisfying inner work life they have strong motivation, positive emotions and favourable perceptions of the organisations they work for and their colleagues. Employees will perform better, be more creative and more productive. Most interestingly, to enhance the inner work life, people must feel that they make progress in meaningful work. Progress is the single most powerful influence on inner work life. That is why the authors choose the word progress

to be part of the title of their book and talk about the progress principle. The authors remark that videogame designers understood the importance of progress better than the average manager: they all include progress bars in the games to make them more addictive. Our own scaling techniques do not seem to be far off!

The effect of setbacks on emotions is stronger than the effect of progress. Eliminating the obstacles that cause setbacks is therefore a good strategy. Barriers to progress are meaningless tasks and toxic relationships. The authors describe four ways to negate meaning, all very recognisable on a daily basis in corporate settings. Progress and inner work life feed each other, creating a virtuous circle. But the negative form can operate as a vicious cycle as well.

The authors identify two forces that enable progress: ‘catalysts’ and ‘nourishers’. Catalysts are events that directly facilitate project work: clear goals, autonomy, resources, enough (but not too much) time, help, learning from problems and successes and allowing ideas to flow. The opposite are inhibitors. Nourishers are interpersonal events that uplift workers: encouragement, demonstration of respect, emotional support and affiliation. Toxins are the opposite. The book also contains practical tips for managers, ‘Food for thought’ inserts and checklists.

This rigorous field study of inner work life results in evidence-based understanding of what works and what does not work well in teams and organisations. And here comes in my opinion also some evidence why the SF approach is so powerful. Making progress in meaningful work, taking small steps at a time, is exactly what SF provides. We set clear goals with our clients, a ‘catalyst’ factor. Other events such as respect, support, allowing ideas to flow, etc. are all part of the SF approach. The authors never refer to SF ideas however.

The authors, in spite of the enormous number of details available, didn’t drown in their rigour. The snippets of the diary entries were my favourite part. They give a fascinating insight into what is going on in the minds of the participants.

It makes the book more lively and real. The book is easy and engaging to read. It contains many useful ideas to motivate people in the workspace and points to little things that managers and leaders can do day after day to spark creativity and well-being. These little things, small wins, will lead to . . . future perfect?

Renilde Vervoort, Ph.D., is a business coach and trainer using SF and the findings of positive psychology at PositiveSolutionCoaching in South East Asia.
renildevervoort@me.com