

Opportunities to Apply a Solution Focus Approach in the Objectives and Key Results Model

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1. Introduction

Many people consider goals necessary for an organisation's development, as they provide direction and clarity about its aims. Their significance is particularly pronounced in complex organisations, where clear goals can serve as guiding principles for many stakeholders. A solution-focused approach to setting and achieving goals can promote an organisation's development by emphasising empowerment, creativity, learning, and continuous improvement in the context of goal attainment.

This article is structured in a way that begins with an introduction to the **Objectives and Key Results (OKR)** model and then explores solution-focused practices within the OKR framework. I hope this approach assists readers in grasping the fundamentals before diving into practical applications.

2. About the OKR model

2.1. History and Impact

Andy Grove at Intel developed the OKR model in the 1970s. John Doerr later popularised it. It is a goal-setting framework that aligns organisational objectives with measurable outcomes to drive performance and focus.

"OKR is a goal management model that has made the implementation of strategy inspiring again. It has enabled us to improve the organisation's pace of change, strengthen a culture of continuous learning, and increase employees' ownership ¹and motivation." (Hämäläinen, Sora, 2022, p. 9).

2.2. What the OKR Model does

2.2.1. Cascades strategy to action

OKR breaks strategic objectives into actionable goals, extending them to the team level. An Objective defines what is to be achieved, and a Key Result indicates whether the objective has been met. In addition to change-related objectives set in the OKR process, the organisation also has other goals related to its operations.

¹ <https://www.scaledokrs.com/post/the-essence-of-okrs-by-andy-grove> Original video.

Example: A continuous goal in a business might be, for instance, a 70% response rate in phone customer service. If there is a desire to increase the response rate significantly, changes in operations would be required. To implement the change, an objective and key result are established:

Objective: Improve customer phone service

Key Result: Increase response rate from 70% to 90%

The same objective can be pursued in different ways, e.g. in one team, additional employees are hired; in another, work shifts are adjusted; and in a third, employee skills are strengthened.

The OKR model differs from other goal-setting techniques because it encourages setting ambitious objectives. If a goal is achieved at 70%, it is still considered a good result. If a goal is completely attained, it can be seen as an opportunity to learn that the next goal could be even more "stretching". OKR helps expand the boundaries of the current comfort zone, prioritise work, and learn from success *and* failure.

Objectives are inspiring, motivating and qualitative team goals. Limit objectives to at most five for focused tracking, increased clarity and efficient task completion.

Each objective can have 1-5 **Key Results** (KRs) tracking its achievement. KRs are concrete, measurable and appropriately challenging yet achievable. Note that KRs indicate the destination, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) measure the current state. Identify necessary metrics for tracking KR's, considering potential data creation needs.

Tasks are small, single actions that contribute to KR achievement. Objectives and KR specify successful outcomes rather than detailing specific actions.

2.2.2. Aligns the entire organisation

The OKR model ensures that all of the organisation's goals and key results align with the strategic direction. In practice, the top level sets its objectives first, based on the strategy, and then the rest of the organisation can derive their objectives from the higher-level objectives. The higher-level objectives provide the direction of where the organisation wants to go, while teams leverage their expertise to determine how and what actions will help reach the desired goals. OKR, therefore, guides towards working together rather than in isolation.

"In the OKR model, goal-setting is transparent. All levels of the organisation can see each other's objectives and align them to support the bigger picture. Open discussions during goal-setting are crucial for alignment. These discussions often lead to adjustments and fine-tuning of higher-level objectives because valuable insights are often found outside the executive boardroom. When the entire organisation participates in goal discussions, each in turn, all knowledge and expertise can be utilised" (Hämäläinen & Sora, 2022, p. 18).

2.2.3. Creates rhythm in execution

Annual objectives derive from strategy, while operational objectives and key results have a shorter execution period (usually 3-4 months), though as organisations seek agility, this can now be as little as a couple of weeks. Systematic execution ensures effectiveness, allowing teams peace to work on their advancement.

Aspects related to the rhythm of execution:

OKR Workshop: A team session to collectively set objectives and key results for the upcoming execution period.

Execution Period: A focused 3-4 month duration for advancing selected change objectives.

Weekly Check-in: A brief monitoring meeting to assess progress and confidence in achieving objectives.

Retro (Retrospective): A collective session to evaluate achievements and learning from the concluded execution period.

3. How the Solution Focus approach facilitates change implementation

Whilst OKRs can help organisations enormously, the solution-focus approach can help to improve the implementation of OKRs in several areas:

3.1.1. SF grows ownership of OKRs and gives people agency to achieve them.

In the OKR model, when teams actively define their objectives and key results, their ownership and agency grow. On a broader scale, the overall understanding and clarity of the entire organisation increases as conversations about goals (including strategic goals) and their achievement occur. Every conversation presents an opportunity to learn something new for the future.

To support this deeper understanding, Solution-focused team coaching can guide discussions in a more dialogical and qualitative direction by ensuring and creating a shared language, highlighting strengths within the team's conversation, and bringing forth aspirations. Conversations in teams and across different levels of the organisation to set objectives and key results within the OKR model can serve as excellent examples of constructive interaction.

3.1.2. SF helps people to initiate movement and recognise useful change

Both (SF and OKR) involve movement and change. A solution-focused practitioner aims to guide the individual or team to initiate something and recognise useful change. Practitioners can also help teams to identify and take small and constructive steps within a longer timeframe.

The OKR model aligns well with this movement: a short execution period sets change in motion, and regular solution-focused reflection can guide adjustments in objectives, key results, and tasks as teams seek to achieve key results.

3.1.3. SF enhances positive reinforcement

As mentioned, using a solution-focused approach with the OKR process can enhance clarity, motivation, and continuous learning. Achieving change objectives becomes more efficient and inspiring. In addition, the SF approach can enhance the incorporation of positive reinforcement within the OKR process. Teams celebrate small achievements to boost motivation and acknowledge progress, and SF practitioners can assist people in noticing their resources and progression.

3.1.4. SF encourages adaptation of the OKR model to suit the organisation

The need for frequent tracking can create a sense of pressure and stress – so the OKR process may not suit all organisational cultures. By emphasising the Solution Focus principle that every situation is different, solution-focused practitioners can encourage organisations to modify the process to fit their culture.

3.2. The flow of an SF OKR process in the art gallery model

In the following, I have outlined the various stages of the OKR (Objectives and Key Results) process using the solution-focused art gallery model (McKergow2021).

Anyone can implement these solution-focused work stages - it can be a coach, supervisor, and facilitator.

Ticket Office: Best hopes, common project

Future Gallery: Descriptions from the day after the miracle

Instances Gallery: Descriptions from the past and present connecting with the best hopes and future gallery

Gift Shop: Appreciative summaries and images of N+1 to take away

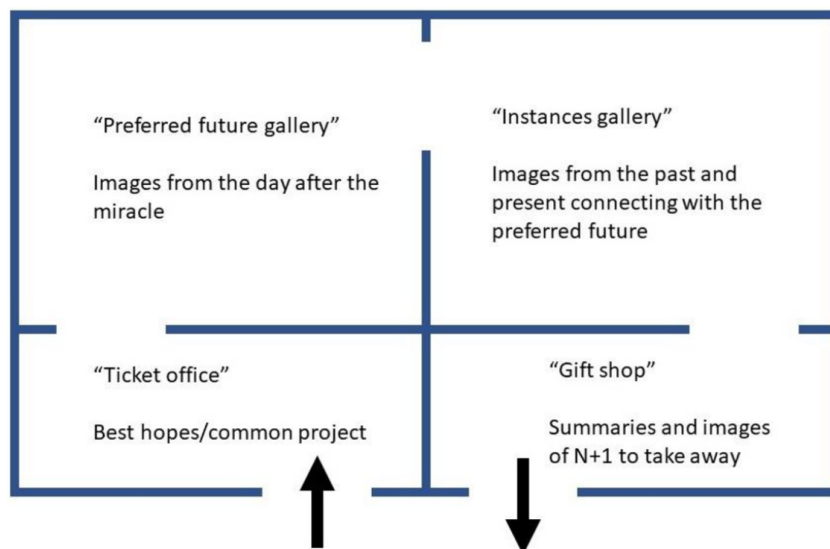


Figure 1 Art Gallery Model

3.2.1. The Flow of Solution-Focused OKR Meetings in the Art Gallery

Ticket Office

Hopes, Common Ground, Dialogue on the meaning of Objectives

The whole organisation usually visits the Ticket Office during the OKR process at the turn of the financial year, when it's time to set annual objectives and Key Results for the upcoming year. Similarly, teams go to the art gallery at the end of each implementation period, to first conduct a retrospective and then set new objectives and key results for the next implementation period.

The purpose is to create a common understanding of organisation and team objectives ("What big goal do we exist for?"). When the OKR model brings transparency to the work and the organisation's strategy in daily operations, everyone understands how their work affects others and helps others' work. This is important for motivation.

Having the conversation – ideally, a dialogue - about the significance of one's own (organisational or team) objectives is an important step that one should take. Following the principles of dialogue, creating a common language and discovering colleagues' differing thoughts and experiences related to the objective are essential. It's also good to bring out different perspectives. These should be examined without too hasty judgment to grow mutual understanding.

Dialogue about the meaning and importance of objectives in teams are important as the people create a shared understanding of what change means. In this context, a solution-focused approach can help stay with simple language. Similarly, the coach can support the team in deepening the conversation around meaning, where the participants incorporate their own experiences or feelings into a shared interpretation of the objective.

If at this stage, openness and transparency aren't sufficient for the team's understanding of the higher-level organisational objectives, or if the change is a concern for the team, a supervisor or coach can listen to these concerns and gradually begin to transform the discussion of concerns into hopes and needs ("*When you said this - what you don't want to happen – what DO you want to happen / what do you want to be different?*"). If proceeding with the change raises doubts, the situation can be structured, for example, using a solution-focused "scale" exercise: "*What are the currently known and promised benefits of the goal (=change)?*"

Future Gallery

Images of the future, what the day will look like after achieving the goal and key result - setting the goal and key result.

A team's change objective can be established through a future perfect discussion. A solution-focused approach can involve changing or simplifying the perspective in this situation. Often, in the early stages of adopting a new way of working, such as the OKR model, the focus can be solely on producing Objectives and Key Results (OKRs), potentially leading to diminished listening, conversation, and engagement.

A solution-focused approach could be to simplify the conversation about objectives during the early stages of the OKR model: *"Where do we want to be when the next four months go perfectly? What does this success look like at the end of the implementation period?"* The outcome of this shared conversation or dialogue could be the Objective (O).

Similarly, to simplify the definition of Key Results (KR), a solution-focused perspective could have the coach ask questions like *"What do customers notice as a result of the change? What do we notice? What is the change?"* In the future perfect phase, a facilitating individual can pay close attention to how we speak, focusing on solution-focused, not problem-focused language. A facilitator can actively shift the conversation from problems to solutions by asking, *"What do you want in place of the problem?"*

Instances Gallery

Descriptions of successes, increasing belief in past and current events

"What do we already have, and what more can we achieve by doing it to reach our objectives?" This is a great opportunity to use a solution-focused scaling question.

A Solution Focus practitioner can focus on what is already working and build on strengths, e.g., exploring aspects of current processes that contribute positively to achieving objectives. Particularly, pausing to reflect on positive exceptions and examining a momentary realisation of the target state can help the team notice what they are already doing regarding the objective. What is happening in the team's activities and thinking during those moments?

The role of the coach, manager, or facilitator guiding the conversation is to "notice the good": what resources are already available concerning the positive outcome? Identifying potential encouragers and support also fits well in the events space, for example, encouraging transparency and openness, peer mentoring, and receiving encouragement from leadership.

Gift Shop

Appreciative Summaries, Small Steps Forward, Takeaways

Once the objectives and key results for the implementation period have been set through dialogue within the team, in this conversation, the team can agree upon how to get started. A quick start is essential so that the team can notice the effects of the tasks they've considered for achieving the objective as soon as possible in upcoming monitoring meetings.

The facilitator of the solutions-focused conversation could further ensure this by asking, *"What could you do or try as soon as tomorrow?"* It might be a chance to create an image of success by asking, *"It's one month into achieving our O's and KR's, and we have started successfully. What did we do that enabled us to achieve that success?"*

The strength of the OKR model becomes evident through systematic and disciplined execution. Objectives and key results, no matter how inspiring and ambitious they may be, do not bring about change on their

own. The impact comes when the objectives are translated into practice and influence the company's day-to-day work. In this, the planning and monitoring aspects of the OKR model play a crucial role. In this art gallery model, regular monitoring meetings could be likened to revisiting the museum shop and looking at the Instances Gallery; we come together to assess the situation with the following questions:

- *"Where are we now? How does the key result metric look?"* The person responsible can prepare this in advance to make the situation assessment quick.
- *"What should we talk about? Which topic would benefit us the most?"* Teams typically select for discussion the key results whose numbers are not progressing and for which confidence is low. However, a solutions-focused approach inherently means that we direct the conversation towards topics we believe will benefit us the most right now.
- *"What do we do next?"* We review the commitments to move the key result numbers in the coming week.

In the weekly meeting, it's also valuable to make visible and examine what is working for achieving the objective by asking, *"What does this tell us about ourselves, and with which strengths did we accomplish the goal?"*

The structure of the scaling question could be utilised in the weekly meeting, such as paying attention to positive exceptions. During regular reflection, the facilitator prompts teams to identify exceptions and success stories. Discussing what worked well provides insights and inspires positive changes.

4. My experience using Solution Focus with the OKR process

The previous paragraphs describe how practitioners can apply solution-focused principles at various stages of the OKR model. I have had an opportunity to be a part of the OKR's journey for a unit's line managers, and I outline below how I used Solution Focus to help them develop and execute their OKRs.

4.1. My Solution Focus approach

With the managers I:

- **Used a Client-Centric Approach:** The coaching process began from the clients' perspective, ensuring the entire approach felt necessary and appropriate to them. The internal clients confirmed their output from the first sessions and were so convinced about the direction that they decided to set OKRs for the work of line managers.
- **Emphasised Positive Deviance:** I consistently paid attention to clients' strengths and positive deviances. This helped them see what was already working well and encouraged them to leverage these strengths to bring about change. I used this point of view throughout the process; when they set up their OKRs and when the line managers made progress towards their objective.
- **Supported Dreaming and Goal Setting:** I supported my internal clients in envisioning their dreams and helped them build a future perfect. This assisted them to set concrete goals that were aligned with their dreams. In practice, this happened in various phases. In the first sessions, I supported them in

setting up their “future perfect”. Later, I supported line managers in setting up the dialogue within their teams by asking the same “future perfect” question within a four-month timescale.

- **Encouraged Concrete Change in Small Steps:** I encouraged clients to think about concrete actions and steps toward their goals. Small progress was perceived as meaningful and crucial in effecting change. We used different types of scaling questions here – “What was already working?” and “What could be the exceptions from the perfect case that we should do more consciously?”
- **Helped them Identify Resources and Strengths:** Coaching sessions focused on identifying resources and strengths. I encouraged clients to recognise and use their strengths to advance the change process. In practice, we had different conversations about strengths, e.g. having one’s colleague recognise and build on our strengths.
- **Communicated with a Dialogical Approach and Participant-Centricity:** I employed an open and participant-centric communication style. Questions directed the conversation around clients' needs and goals, keeping them at the centre. This created a common understanding, e.g., what does the group understand by the words “being present” in the target?
- **Steered Conversations in a Positive Direction:** I supported discussions and thinking in a positive light. Achievements were emphasised, and clients were encouraged to see positive aspects in their work and change goals. As a result, saying “notice the good” has become a commonly used phrase within the unit.

Overall, solution-focused coaching helped clients discover their resources, set their goals, and make concrete changes in their actions. It fostered a positive atmosphere, encouraged experimentation, and helped them embrace active agency in their development.

5. Summary

“In the end, the benefits of the OKR model boil down to its essential connection to the meaningfulness of work. It's crucial for individuals to understand why work is being done. When the OKR model brings transparency to daily work and links it to the organisation's, one comprehends how their work impacts others and contributes to the work of others. This is crucial for motivation. Through the OKR model, all teams become visible, and their work's relationship to strategic objectives becomes prominent. This is highly important in today's work environment.” (Hämäläinen & Sora, 2022, p. 23)

The above quote effectively summarises the value of the OKR model. I emphasise that organisations implementing the OKR model have good opportunities to achieve their change objectives in a human-centred manner while maintaining leadership. With a solution-focused working approach, the organisation can promote the implementation of the OKR model in a way that emphasises the role of leadership in guiding objective setting, advancing dialogue, and identifying the strengths of the work community. This approach supports the central idea of the OKR model, which is based on teams' expertise and collaboration – and the notion that teams themselves are the best experts in their work.

6. References

Hämäläinen & Sora, Strategia arkeen OKR-mallilla – käytännönläheinen opas OKR-mallin käyttöönottoon, 2022 (*the book should be soon available in English too [Käännökset - Strategia arkeen OKR-mallilla \(okr-kirja.fi\)](#)*)

McKergow, The Next Generation of Solution Focused Practice, 2021

Training materials on the OKR model at Kela (the Social Insurance Institution of Finland)

7. Further information

<https://www.sfiio.org/interaction/2023-1/the-sf-art-gallery/>