

# rutenso - the art of thriving in times of constant change

## Introduction

The first three months of 2025 have brought much in the way of global change and realignment. It's disconcerting to find long-time allies seeming to turn away and aggressive dictators being lauded on the world stage. So much of the assumed consensus for a law-based and inclusive world order seems to be being undermined.

As individuals, it's hard for us to do much to turn this particular ship around. However, one of the basic tenets of Solution Focus work is that 'change is happening all the time', and our role is to notice *useful* change and amplify it. (Indeed, I introduced this phrase, though made the mistake of attributing it to Gregory Bateson; it's a summary of his position, not a quote.)

If everything is moving, then how are we to find a foothold to stand on in the maelstrom? Following visits to work in Japan and being impressed with how much Japanese society accepts change as part of nature (I wrote [here](#) about their celebration of the fleeting days of Sakura, or cherry blossom), I devised a new Japanese word for this concept. I think this is a good time to reexamine this word and concept.

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Everyone knows that working in a Solutions Focus way involves focusing on solutions – i.e. what's wanted, right? That's the part that everyone gets. Focus on the solution, not on the problem. Well, that's right, of course. And... there is so much more to SF than this. I have been thinking about how to convey all the other wonderful elements of what makes SF so different, and so effective in situations where other approaches don't seem to gain traction. So, here is my thinking on this – *rutenso*.

*rutenso* comes from the Japanese word *ruten*, which means 'constant and ceaseless change'. It seems that the Japanese have many different words for different kinds of change, (the same is said of the Inuit and snow). Perhaps it's connected with an Eastern way of looking at things.

So, *ruten* means constant change. When the suffix '-so' is added, this means 'phases of' or more poetically 'working with'. So *ruten-so* is about working with constant change. Those who have heard me speak about SF will know that I always start my talks with the one-line definition of SF: 'Change is happening all the time; therefore, the simple way is to notice USEFUL change and amplify it'.

*rutenso* can be written as three kanji characters, as in the picture overleaf. The same character set is used for Chinese, too. In Chinese, these three characters mean 'flow-turn-image'. It also has overtones of good fortune through change.

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*ru-ten-so - the art of working with constant change*

## **Koteiso and Rutenso**

To contrast with 'conventional' thinking, I also invented another Japanese word, *koteiso*. *Koteiso* is the art of working in a stable world, and it will come as no surprise that much conventional management and medical thinking stems from an initial assumption of stability. If things are not moving around, we can get some benefit from analysing them and developing action plans. (The difficulty of doing this in real life I see as giving support to the 'change happening all the time' position.)

I then drew up a set of seven principles that work very differently if you take a *koteiso* or *rutenso* stance.

<b>Koteiso – stable world</b>	<b>Rutenso – working with constant change</b>
Change is hard and un-natural	Change is happening all the time
Goals and targets are vital	Direction and momentum are vital
Deal with problems by finding the root cause	All the pieces matter – look widely
Huge plans give huge results	Small actions start things quickly
Eliminate difference and uncertainty	Difference is USEFUL – use and learn from it
When it's hard, speed up and act	When it's hard, slow down and observe
Leaders drive and exert	Leaders host and enable

*Comparing koteiso and rutenso*

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Just to be clear, I am not suggesting that the current resident at the White House is using the left column. *Koteiso* is the classic 'waterfall' method for big projects, as taught in many business schools, and there may be some benefits to it for very stable and well-understood situations. On the contrary, Trump appears to be using a wilfully confusing and personal stance, at once dogmatic and unstable. I want to examine how we might use the ideas of *rutenso* in response to this confusion.

Let's take three of the *rutenso* principles which seem relevant at this time.

## 1. All the pieces matter – look widely

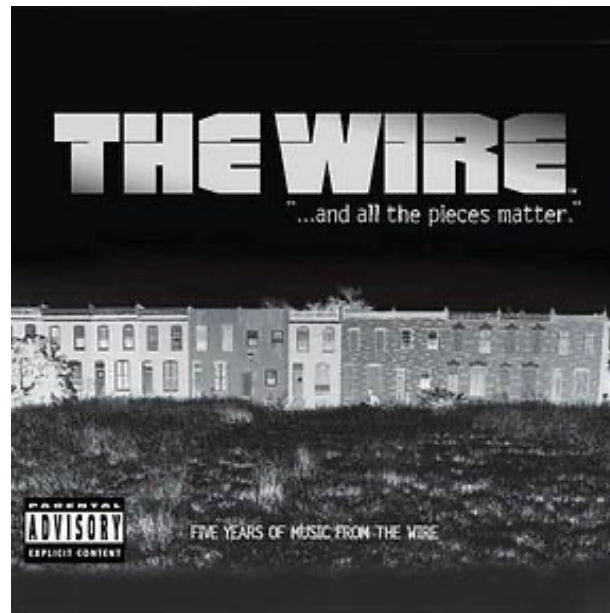
Trump is well-known for his lack of enthusiasm for multilateral organisations like the United Nations, World Health Organisation and so on. He thinks (correctly) that these bodies constrain his freedom for unilateral action. (We heard the same arguments from the Brexiters about the European Union (EU).) Rather, he prefers to strike bilateral deals which can be seen as win and lose.

Leaving aside the many ways in which cooperating with a multinational group can strengthen, not weaken, the ability of a country to pursue its interests, let's look at how the recent responses to Trump reflect different positions. It is very tempting to be openly outraged by the Trump administration's overturning of international norms. Many commentators in the UK are insisting the Prime Minister Keir Starmer should 'pick a side' and get behind the EU at this point.

Starmer has doggedly rejected this 'choice' so far. He is keeping as close as possible to the White House, making every effort to stay onside with Trump. While this apparent fawning to a would-be dictator sticks in the craw, it is balanced by the great efforts that Starmer is making to build alliances across Europe, the Commonwealth and the world to build positions where the worst of US policy can be ameliorated, and other options pursued should the need arise.

It seems to me that Starmer is following the principle that 'All the pieces matter'. As some of you may remember this phrase appeared in connection with the TV show [The Wire](#) (2002-2008), one of the first productions with ambiguity and complexity about who were the 'goodies' and 'baddies'. In rejecting a simplistic analysis of the players, Starmer is opening the maximum range of future options in this time of uncertainty.

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*...and all the pieces matter, Five Years of Music from The Wire (Source: Spotify)*

I am also reminded of a line from TV's *Yes Minister*, a comedy about the relationships between ministers and civil servants from the 1980s which was widely seen as well-rooted in fact. The minister asks Bernard, his private secretary and supposed civil service ally, about whose side he is on, when the chips are down. “

Minister”, he replies, “my job is to see that the chips stay up.”



*Yes Minister: Civil service mandarin Sir Humphrey Applebee, hapless minister Jim Hacker and private secretary Bernard Woolley (Source: BBC)*

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## 2. When it's hard, slow down and observe

This is, I admit, not the easiest thing in the world to do when things seem to be disintegrating. This principle is not an invitation to paralysis, it's an injunction not to rush into things unnecessarily. I have been watching re-runs of the BBC chess series [The Master Game](#) from the late 1970s/early 1980s. It was a very effective way to televise chess matches between top players; they played the match and then recorded their thought processes a couple of days later in a sound studio as if the match was in progress. It's surprisingly gripping even for a non-chess player like me.



Screen from "The Master Game" (Source: BBC)

I was struck by how many times a disastrous move was presaged by the player saying "I don't have a choice here..." before making the move. They did have a choice, but they had given up looking for it. (To be fair, sometimes they were under time pressure to move quickly.) When something looks clear and obvious (and the situation is shifting rapidly) then it pays to give these things a second thought.

I was struck by events a few weeks ago, following the disgraceful humiliation of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the Oval Office. Various pro-Ukraine groups announced that they would be holding protests outside US embassies and consulates, presumably in noisy (and well-justified) condemnation. This was rapidly followed by [pleas from Ukrainian officials NOT to hold such protests](#). While at one level the protestors would be entitled to show their displeasure, someone in Kyiv had figured that such actions at that particular moment would likely make things worse, not better. And the option of protesting at some future point remains open.

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It's interesting to note that immediately after the Oval Office debacle Jonathan Powell, Britain's current national security advisor and broker of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in Northern Ireland, went to Kyiv to support and coach Zelenskyy about his response. I've written here before about Powell's ['bicycle theory'](#) of conflict resolution; never let the bike fall over. It's better to keep things moving (even if they are currently not moving in the right direction) than to let the bike stop, fall off and have to get moving again. I have the highest regard for Powell; if anyone can find a way through, he can.

## 3. Leaders host and enable

President Trump and his team are in full-on 'issue orders' mode at this time. This may be effective in some ways and gets things happening – but there is a great cost in terms of producing strategies which will work and also gain support from those implementing them. The US court system is (rather slowly) taking its role in challenging some of these decisions, and US government lawyers are saying that they are [complying with court orders](#) (at least in public). The main product of taking such one-sided action is resentment and fear by those affected. And as legal commentator David Allan Green notes, [asking 'what if?' is likely to generate more heat than light](#) in such unprecedented times.

It seems to me that Keir Starmer has taken to acting as a host rather well, at least in international terms. He was quick off the mark to organise meetings of the putative 'coalition of the willing' to help enforce a peace deal in Ukraine, (more in here). As I write this, he is hosting a 40+ nation [summit on illegal migration in London](#); responding to this very wicked multi-layered problem by getting as many of those involved around the table. This includes far-flung places like Vietnam and Iraq as well as the US and France, as well as Meta and TikTok.

A [recent editorial in the Guardian](#) by the estimable Jonathan Freedland pointed out that, thanks to the shenanigans in America, there is currently a vacancy for the post of 'leader of the free world'. Britain, Europe and Canada are currently in pole position to take up the reins, preferably together. Watch this space.

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## Conclusions

These times are more than usually ridden with uncertainty and confusion. The principles of *rutenso* are about working effectively in times of constant change. It's encouraging to see some of them in use. And, of course, they are very well aligned indeed with Solution Focused (SF) practice. Working a step at a time, building relationships even with people you don't like, looking widely, going slowly and taking small steps while seeking the emergence of more useful futures – these are all thoroughly SF ways to think and act.

This is an edited version of this article. [You can find the original here.](#)

