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The Appreciation Virus

How does the solution focused development of organisations work? If the development is influenced by solution focused methods, how is it different and what benefits it brings? Based on an example carried out in a company in the mechanical industry, we will attempt to answer these questions.

What is solution focused organisational development?

The reader may well expect us to define what we mean by organisational development at the outset. But in a solution focused process, the definition is provided by the client and not the advisor. This is one of the main differences between solution focused and any other organisational development methods: the solution focused method operates in the client's world and uses their language. The client comes to the advisor with his own notion of what is development for his company. It is this notion that forms the basis of what happens during a solution focused process. It is a characteristic of the solution focused method that it works on the premise that the staff of a company are experts in their own field: thus they know best what works - and how - in their organisation, and how and what might be improved. The job of the SF advisor is then to harness this knowledge in the development of the organisation.

How to develop a company in a solution focused way

The advisor poses solution focused questions, the aim of which is to get the client to define and realise his goal, to describe and to make the journey there by taking many little, sequential - but reasonable - steps on the way. The questions fall into four categories outlined below, with examples. The purpose of these questions is to profile:

- ◆ 1. the general desired future
- ◆ 2. the concrete desired future of certain groups or individuals
- ◆ 3. the desired process which might lead there, and
- ◆ 4. the next steps which are the action and behaviour necessary to reach the goal forthwith.

How is this in practice?

The four key questions

- ◆ 1. Suppose your company has reached the state which you aimed for – what things will be different from now on, and what will stay the same?
- ◆ 2. Suppose things are as you described - what things would you yourself do differently, and what would you continue to do the same?
- ◆ 3. Suppose everything is as you want it to be, and you are as you have just explained - how did all this happen, and how did you personally contribute to it?
- ◆ 4. Suppose all this has worked the way you described - what was the first small step you personally took, that started this process off?

What are the benefits of solution focused organisational development?

“It works on the premise that the staff of a company are experts in their own field: thus they know best what works - and how - in their organisation, and how and what might be improved.”

Above all, it engenders optimism. It concentrates exclusively on building the desired future of the company, and those parts of it which already exist. The analysis of deficiencies, weaknesses and operative disorders - in other words, all those things that help understand how the problem came about - are ignored. Solution focused development concentrates solely on desires which concern changes for the better, and works only on how to systematically realise them. It

is constructivist insofar as it systematically and radically concentrates on solution construction, instead of focusing on problem construction.

Furthermore, it creates positive relationships and contacts both inside the organisation and between the organisation and its environment. It works on the assumption that social systems work best in constructive relationships. These positive relationships can be within the specific group or beyond - such as with the whole organisation, its suppliers, customers or investors. It also touches the connections between groups and their departments, as well as contacts with other relevant units inside and outside the organisation. Finally this constructive relationship applies to values, goals, strategies, programmes and processes and their individual steps, functions, as well as the material resources of production in the same way as the other abstract and concrete elements of the organisation. Solution focused organisational development in this sense works systemically.

The function of the first key question: the general vision of the goal

1. Suppose your company has reached the state you aimed for - what things will be different from now on, and what will stay the same?

The individual forms a nuanced image of the desired changes. This image usually has three characteristics: the person a) creates a concrete picture of the future, which b) enthuses him and can do the same for other members of the company, and c) awakens the irresistible desire to effectuate the image. So at the beginning of the solution focus process “general visions” are born which provide an orientation point throughout the procedure.

The solution focused approach generates and uses the energy necessary to create change and increases the loyalty of fellow-workers to the organisation or company. The desired future is constructed by the people affected by it hence they feel it as their own. The result and the road to it adapt to their aims - consequently they fit well together. The potency of self-organising unfolds and is utilisable. The result is that staff identify with what they do and what they want. Solution focused development in this way is based less on the usual meaning of direction, more on self-organising and the setting out of frameworks.

How is this in practice?

Solution focused organisational development starts, where possible, with the top management's commissioning of an advisor. In our case this began with a meeting between the advisors using the SF approach and the company leadership. The latter described the organisation as having greater know-how than the industry average, and with a long and honourable tradition. The company had just been bought by an international concern which was prepared to invest in it. Orders had significantly increased, and in order to keep up, productivity had to be increased too. They had begun several projects to improve the 'hard factors' (such as introducing new technologies, new machinery) which their own staff had to implement with help from outside experts.

Examples: answers to the first key question – the general desired goal

Answers to the question:

1. Suppose your company has reached the state which you aimed for – what things will be different from now on, and what will stay the same?

The CEO: "The most noticeable would be if the mood changed: that would be extraordinarily good, especially if it were throughout the company. People would be friendly and positive, regardless of the pressure on them. Even great pressure wouldn't affect this. People wouldn't feel it as "pressure" but as a greater dynamic or simply a bigger challenge, and they'd be glad of it, as they'd be proud that they could deal smoothly and easily even with these tasks. Anyway, what these people could do would be very effective and impressive. Sometimes you would even hear ringing laughter, and people would definitely feel better."

Production manager: "There would be good communication between departments - direct and uncomplicated. Information would pass quickly and would be available exactly where it was needed. Workers would spontaneously support each other. Knowledge and know-how would be gladly and proudly passed on between workers. They would talk about solutions and not waste time finding out who is at fault: that would simply not interest anyone. Naturally the quality would be very good. Al-

though occasionally there would still be discrepancies, but rarely, and those would be thought of as opportunities for improvement. Equally there would still sometimes be some delays and disturbances, but significantly fewer, and they would be quickly and intelligently handled. We would hardly have to pay penalties for missing deadlines, instead there would be premiums for early delivery. Clients, suppliers, investors, colleagues and their families would speak with pride about the company. The staff – at every level – would be more attractive on the job market too.”

Group leader: “We would be doing what we are supposed to. We would be clear that we know our trade very well, and others would think so too. We would see the big picture and understand the sense of our part in it. If we had a problem, we could talk openly and calmly about it, concentrating on the solution. Within the group there would be a more relaxed atmosphere, often positively cheerful. People might even laugh if someone did something amusing. Everyone would know that we are the best, that we are peak performers, that we really know what we are doing. If something needed fixing, no-one would keep stumm but simply make a suggestion, say what he thinks, then see how the issue turns out. Naturally we would be very flexible, and would take on extra tasks at once, as we would feel that our undertaking is valued. We would work better – fewer mistakes, less waste, less delay. We would be aware that at the highest level they know that we here on the shop-floor are significantly adding value to the company’s results. Occasionally we would see someone from the management and they’d talk to us, they’d really have an interest in finding out what they can do for us, so we can do our jobs better and more easily.”

What was expected of the advisors?

The management wanted improvement in the ‘soft factors’. They hoped for increased productivity, and more dynamism and speed from the present workforce. This meant improved leadership culture, better communication and cooperation, as well as an improved sense of identification with the firm, the new owners and their aims, and in general a better working atmosphere throughout the company.

The advisors wanted from the management an exact answer to the following question: “Suppose the project has successfully been completed. What did the advisors do that was useful and effective?” The answer was: “They helped to form our ideas of the desired future and to effectuate them. With their support, our theories became reality.” The advisors were committed to the solution focus method and they demonstrated how they worked as they were keen to know whether what they normally did would suit the company’s needs. They explained what they meant by the solution focus method, and what it would mean in their work with the company. The managers were very interested in the central idea of the method – and at the same time somewhat sceptical - namely that the time-consuming processing of problems and their causes can be abandoned, especially the unpleasant and unnecessary search for guilty parties, and as soon as possible all attention and energy should be focused on developing the solution. They grasped Wittgenstein’s theorem that a problem is known to be solved when the problem disappears. At the same time they realized that being solution-focused changes the focus of attention: it turns away from mistakes and deficiencies, and towards resources and those parts which already work well. And most importantly, this brings a change in mood.

The notion was born within the managers that in their desired future a solution focused attitude should spread throughout the company, and become the basis of the entire development process. They were swept away by the thought that instead of complaints and accusations, the talk would be of solutions, which would prove inspirational and stimulating

First step: Questioning the workers about their desired future

The management wanted a nuanced picture of their staff’s image of their own future. This was realised in a solution focused questionnaire with some key questions set by the leaders.

The function of the second key question: the individual’s desired future

2. Suppose things are as you described – what things would you yourself do differently, and what would you continue to do the same?

The individual forms a progressively more varied picture in his imagination, of how much he would do differently (and how much the same) than previously. The consideration of this behaviour refers him to concrete situations in his everyday work, even such difficult ones as the handling of conflict. Together with the description of changed behaviour in the general vision of the future, he will adopt the behaviour of his concrete future, which enthuses and stimulates him to achieve it. In this way the individual configures his own behavioural target vision, becoming an orientation point to changing his present behaviour and attitudes, which coheres with the development of the company and helps that aim forward.

About 60% of the staff filled in the rigorous questionnaire. On average they spent about an hour each on it. Some worked in pairs or in groups. The results made a deep impact on the management and executives, especially the straightforward, lively descriptions of the desired future. It was striking that most people received and offered more appreciation in every field of their activity in the imagined future than in reality. In their texts there was more cooperation and appreciation within groups and throughout departments, with less obstruction and lack of motivation. The leadership style was clearer and more appreciative, and less imperious and belittling. Their attitude to mistakes and inaccuracies was more open and motivating, and less accusing and reproving. The company vision was more understandable and enthusing, not general and meaningless. The processes were more practicable and considered. Some workers wrote of changes in their own attitudes (e.g. motivated, helpful, loyal, accommodating) and their behaviour (e.g. greeting colleagues, asking questions, listening carefully, desire for improvement, expressing appreciation, passing on information without being asked, making suggestions, being open to extra tasks).

Examples to the second key question: the individual's desired future

2. Suppose things are as you described – what things would you yourself do differently, and what would you continue to do the same?

An executive: “Executive meetings would be more effective. We would be a real team and would trust each other. I could reveal my aims and assessments, as well as my doubts and insecurities, and the others would do the same. I would unequivocally state that I valued the competence and the opinions of the others. My decisions would be clearer and more easily understood. I would attain a state of total permanent motivation by the whole management. Everyone would feel their responsibility and would concentrate hard at all discussions. I would deal with matters quickly, and so would the others. I would really be interested in other people’s points of view and opinions: I would ask for them. I would feel more free, and would approach people anywhere in the company more easily. As often as possible I would go round the offices and shop-floor unannounced. I would keep my eyes open... I would talk to people and would make every effort to show real appreciation, and they would show me what they are doing, what they’re proud of. I would do everything to ensure they felt free to tell me openly and directly what they need, what they lack, what they’re unhappy with, what they’d like to change. I would take up positively intentioned ideas, and would make sure we did something with them. I would be happier, and I would show it. People would realise that it really is important to me that things go well for them. I would delegate more, make fewer specific proposals, and would have more time for the really important issues that only I can deal with. I would be more relaxed, have more ideas and be able to do more about them. I’d make every effort to see every project through to a successful end.”

Chief engineer: “I would deal with the important parts of my job, and would trust that my men do the same. I would have a close relationship with them, would know them well enough to see at once if they can’t sort out a problem on their own and need my help. I would take what they said seriously, and would ensure that their conditions were constantly optimised, so they could do their work well. I would constantly watch that they all solve their problems themselves and not shuffle them off on to someone else; naturally they would help one another. I would observe carefully who is good at what, so I could network know-how and expertise. I would be open about what I like to see, and equally what I don’t, and make clear what I’d rather have in its place. No-one would hear any more reproaches. I’d have a good relationship with other departments,

and would regularly meet with them. I would learn what they are doing, and how I can support them. In management meetings I would speak up if I had something to add, even if it wasn't directly my area. I would work out positive initiatives, and ask for others' opinions. I would become the stimulator of innovation, and in this regard would cultivate my acquaintances in other companies, and with colleagues working in research. I would be genuinely proud of the company, knowing I have a part in its formation. I would be more relaxed and witty with the workers.

Works manager: "I'd be glad to get up for work in the morning. I'd be relaxed, attentive and alert. I'd be more interested in how things are going, and glad about the things that went well. Again and again I'd be conscious of the quality and calibre of my men, and I would say over and over how I appreciate them, and what I value in my work with them. I'd do that mostly when there was a problem or conflict. Then I'd talk about how to fix the problem as quickly as possible so we could go back to working as calmly and pleasantly as before. We would also talk about how to prevent these things happening again in the future, or at least lessening the likelihood that it would recur. I would be keen on any ideas for improvement, and would be delighted to talk about such things with my bosses. I would volunteer for improvement projects, and would take on more responsibility. I would go on further education courses. The future of the company would be important for me. My children would be proud that their father worked here."

The management recognised a coherent picture of a desired future, agreed with it, and found it attractive.

The function of the third key question: the vision of the process

Suppose everything is as you want it to be, and you are as you have just explained - how did all this happen, and how did you personally contribute to it?

The individual answers this from the point of view of the desired organisation, as if the changes had already been carried out. Thus the imagined

development process already carries the marks of the renewed company. We call this the congruence of the road and the destination. Each person outlines their ideas of the efficacious processes of change and their intervening steps. Sometimes they don't mention some steps or processes, as if they'd forgotten them. Here it is useful if the interviewer, based on their knowledge of organisational development, has some ideas of what is going on in the imaginary world of the interviewee. For example, they could ask, "Did some of you take on some special tasks perhaps, and carry out a kind of project organisation?" In this way during the conversation the "process vision" gradually takes form, and it conforms to the concrete situation in the worker's mind, while also adapting to the desired general and personal visions.

Second step: shop floor meeting, presenting the results of the opinion survey, and feedback

The results of the opinion research were introduced at a shop floor meeting, and opened for discussion. The workers' reactions were robust, and ranged from doubtful ('rose-coloured glasses') to interested ('let's see what comes of it') to enthusiastic ('we must do something with this'). Overall the majority opinion was that something lasting should be done about the realisation of the aims described. The CEO announced that, in light of the results, one development project would be carried out with the participation of the workers.

Third step: Getting top management involved

Through a series of solution focused negotiations, the advisors and the management formed the outline of a development process: this was to be realised both in a top-down (the leadership), and in a bottom-up (change agents) mode.

Based on this a workshop was held for the top leaders where the results of the opinion research were presented, and the solution focused method and the proposed process were explained. The participants formed their own views of the desired future, and in a simulation using SF they made it very detailed, close to live. From the ideas of the management, the

results of the workers' opinion survey and the previously defined image of the desired future, evolved a systematically coherent and in itself consistent picture of where they wanted to go. The top management took a decision to participate in the development process. They created a team whose job, together with the advisors, was to prepare and carry out the next steps.

Examples: answers to the third key question: the vision of the process.

Answers to the question: Suppose everything is as you want it to be, and you are as you have just explained - how did all this happen, and how did you personally contribute to it?

“The development process was to be realised both in a top-down (the leadership), and in a bottom-up (change agents) mode.”

An executive: “I introduced my thoughts on the desired changes firstly to the management. At the beginning just in outline, more like tentative suggestions. At the same time I made enquiries about how others started to make their productive changes. I asked for advice and got to know different methods. I presented these too to the management. They were fairly critical of my ideas, but received them throughout with interest, for they recognised that I was serious. Some of them joined me in a small group that continued the discussion on the issue. We invited advisors and described our ideas to them. Then we began to outline a vision within the management. We continued this until it affected everyone, and they all wanted to realise this vision. The small initiatives group then formed itself into a team which took responsibility for the direction of the process. Its members came up with concrete ideas about the process, made suggestions. Then we agreed the timetable and began to work as we had intended in our vision. We wanted to be the model and example of the future. We collected the opinions of our colleagues too, so we knew how they imagined the future which they wanted for themselves. Step by step, we progressed towards the vision, the management and the workers.”

Chief engineer: “Management thought up the idea of developing. The initiative came from the CEO or from one of the managers. We were interested in the idea, and explored it to form some picture of it, but expressed opinions only from a certain distance. Thereafter we soon began to take concrete initiatives and formed a project of them. It was important to involve the workers suitably in it. The aims of the project were not just decided by the leadership anyway; the workers’ aims were just as important. There was a wide consensus throughout the company regarding the aims. There was a very committed group which acted as a stimulant, but there were others, in every department and at every level. There were some people, mainly in the top management, and primarily the CEO, who showed a good example. Gradually a kind of enthusiasm took over the whole company and it went smoothly and cheerfully. The workers liked what was happening.”

Works manager: “We were able to take the thing into our own hands. We know best what we can change or improve around us. And we did it. In areas where we depended on others, we tried to convince them of the advantages of change, and to win them over to our goals. I assume that there was support from the top level, for when things changed for the better with us; it was like an example to others. We got results quickly, because we were doing what we all wanted. Naturally what we wanted had to be clear fairly quickly, but that was no big thing as we all know each other well.”

Fourth step: setting out the concept “Spreading the Virus of Appreciation”

To facilitate further progress, the process was worked into an easy-to-understand and credible model. It was premised on the spread of epidemics or fashions and used epidemiological and marketing hypotheses. As appreciation was the main feature of the desired future in the eyes of the majority of participants and at all levels of the company hierarchy, the chose the title “Spreading the virus of appreciation” and defined the process as a culture development project. As with a lasting epidemic or fashion, so with “the solution focus company culture of appreciation”: the process had to spread from the top management downwards

through their ‘leadership style which radiated appreciation,’ and from below through the activities of ‘the ambassadors of appreciation.’

Fifth step: the kick-off and formation of the ambassadors group

The entire top leadership was invited to the kick-off event for the “Spreading the virus of appreciation” project, as well as 45 people who responded to a general invitation, and they were from every department and from every level of the hierarchy. A group made up of top leaders and managers demonstratively introduced their ideas of the desired future, and demonstrated and tested their impression of the process and of the solution focus method. And finally 24 workers came forward and volunteered to be ambassadors of appreciation.

Sixth step: development workshop for the top leaders and for the ambassadors on solution focus, and on communication that radiates appreciation.

In the following months a series of workshops were organised for the top leaders and for the ambassadors, during which they worked on the “leadership style that is solution focused and radiates appreciation”, and established the “ambassador of appreciation” role. The participants, being role models, began to experiment with demonstrating their newly learned roles in their everyday work.

The top leaders took part in a solution focused coaching, in which they worked out their own role in the new solution focused, appreciation-radiating company culture.

The function of the fourth key question: concrete action

Suppose all this worked the way you described – what was the first small step which you personally made, which started this process off?

The individual here describes a particular personal action, which he is able to carry out right away and on his own, and which triggers or un-

derpins the development process. The point of this action is that it can be done immediately.

Seventh step: the spread of the appreciation-radiating, SF culture

The managers gradually changed their leadership and communication styles, and passed this on to the leaders and colleagues below them. Meetings and discussions were more solution focused, and more appreciation was shown, partly due to the integration of the ambassadors. In time, communication between departments and groups also changed, as it did with suppliers, client relationships and negotiations. The staff thought the way people spoke to each other was more friendly and more open, and described their communication as more focused on solutions. The atmosphere in the company they felt in general to be better.

Examples: answers to the fourth key question: concrete action.

Suppose all this worked the way you described – what was the first small step which you personally made, which started this process off?

The CEO: “I spoke to my closest confidantes, and then prepared something for the company leadership which was like the germ of a desirable development.”

Chief engineer: “I spoke to the CEO and put to him my idea, and waited to see what happens. I really felt he was distinctly interested.”

Works manager: “I organised a meeting of all my men, and we discussed what it was that we particularly wanted to change, and how we might achieve it so that it really does change.”

Eighth step: Evaluation – the second opinion research

A year and a half after the first questionnaire, a second similar one was conducted. This time it wasn't written and wasn't given to everyone, but was a structured interview with a random group of people from throughout the organisation carried out by the ambassadors.

The result of the survey showed a marked change in the whole company, which involved increased appreciation and a more pronounced solution focused style both in the leadership, and in the cooperation between the departments and within the groups. There was a definite improvement in the clarity of the processes, and in the handling of problems and inaccuracies, although the respondents thought further improvement desirable in these fields.

The position of the ambassadors had consolidated, and they also ensured their own replacements. Every two months they have a half-day ambassadors' conference, and people count on their contribution to the solution focused nature of meetings and events. The company organises culture days involving the ambassadors in order to ensure that the new culture of appreciation is embedded in all development projects from the very start. The epidemic of appreciation really has spread, and even if to different degrees and depths, many of the staff have been infected with the virus of appreciation and the focusing on solutions.

Snapshot two and half years later

Two and a half years following the start of the process it was widely heard that clients and suppliers really felt that their dealings with the company had become clearly more focused on finding solutions, and were easier overall. An associate at another part of the concern, who regularly worked with the company staff, described the change thus: "Previously they showed their professionalism with grim pompousness and belittling comments; today they show it with friendly openness reinforced with intelligent witticisms." Previous leaders who had been included in heading projects, reported that the leadership style lost its commanding-instructing stamp, and became collegiate and cooperative. More and more skilled people applied to work at the company, having heard of the changes, and who wanted to find jobs there because of the good atmosphere. The old pride in the company was reborn, in a new garb. In general it was obvious that a definite improvement in mood could be felt throughout the company.

The last link in a chain of remarkable events was the Christmas event when the choir of ambassadors, together with other colleagues, per-

formed Beatles numbers, and members of the management played guitars and told personal anecdotes with every song.

My grateful thanks to Jean-Claude Riesterer and Rudi Roesch, managing directors, to whom the development of this culture was very important. Horst Speckter, head of quality, the cultural development project's leader, for his perseverance and optimism; the Ambassadors of Appreciation for their commitment, courage, and will to act, and the members of the wider leadership, because we could depend on them. Last but not least, I want to say thanks to my fellow advisors, to Franziska von Blarer theater-creator, for her easy-going reliability, to Dominik Ruppen for his creativity and determination: they both gave of their best in this project. Finally my thanks to Peter Mandler for recommending me to his clients.

Summary

In this model of solution focused organisational development, the members of the organisation describe how they imagine the development and what its results would be. This is the decisive point in solution focused organisational development: it is radical in that it depends on the ideas of those people who are part of the structure and uses their imagination in working through the process. It is a mark of solution-focused organisational development that at every step it works with the ideas of relevant people, ideas which they have created themselves in individual and group conversations.

It is advantageous if the projects start from the top leadership or its members' ideas of a desired future. If these are sufficiently practical and clear, then the course of development can advance from their ideas downward through the company. At certain steps, ideas harmonise vertically and horizontally (by a solution focus method), and any discrepancies between aims are clarified and find their own place in the process. Usually the top leadership's vision also includes steps proposed from below. Through these people becoming involved, they bring their own, original ideas of the desired future from all levels of the company. Step by step every person involved is engaged in a discussion about the development, with the aim that both the result and the process are synchronised with all the members of the organisation. This is the quickest way to ensure that everyone is singing from the same hymn-sheet.

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