

Avoiding the opposite of what's wrong

By Dr Mark McKergow, Centre for Solutions Focus at Work

As a manager, I get to hear a lot about what's wrong - with our customers, our offices, our printer, our mailing service and even sometimes our people. And, of course, it's my job to get something done about it. As a manager/coach, I often use a coaching style to start addressing these issues. Here's an idea which could save lots of time and stress.

What's wanted is not the opposite of what's wrong

It is tempting to think that by making a shopping list of all the things that are wrong and then setting out to do something, we are making maximum progress. However, think for a moment. Imagine going out to the supermarket for the weekly shop - with a list of all the things you DON'T want. No eggs, no butter, no loo rolls... How useful would this be. Well, maybe useful up to a point - we could certainly steer clear of those items.

But, wait a moment. There could well be over 40,000 different lines in the store (many Tesco branches carry more than this, according to the company). Having rejected the small number of things you don't want, you stand in the middle of the shop, look around and... you still need to decide what you want.

In coaching, the same thing applies. Knowing what's wrong is a useful starting point - but only to move along to refining your ideas on what's wanted. As a manager/coach, this is a key step in building yourself some useful projects and progress. So, how to do it?

Build the platform for coaching

Suppose someone comes to you with a story of something that's gone wrong. As a good manager/coach, three useful things to do at this point are:

1. **LISTEN** to the story - get the details, express concern, show how important it is by giving excellent attention.
2. **AFFIRM** the bringer of the bad news - let them know how important it is they raised this issue, what you're impressed by about them, their speed of action, concern for customers, whatever it is.
3. **TURN THE CORNER** from focusing on what's wrong to focusing on what's wanted. Some good questions which can help here include:
 - So, instead of that, what you want is...?
(Let them finish the sentence)
 - What do you want to have happen next time?
 - What would be better than that, for everyone?

Your counterpart may not have thought about this, being so far focused on what's wrong, and they may fall silent for a moment. Let them think about it! Give plenty of time. As ever, a period of silence here is a good sign for the coach, there is thinking going on. Expand the answer by asking 'What else?' to get more detail, and then asking about other people's perspectives on what would be preferable.

Find a name for the project

A final tip here is to sum all the above up with a name - a snappy title that connects in some way to what's wanted. Asking your counterpart for a good name is always a good idea - it allows them even more ownership. Then you can sum up everything about the platform and what's wanted with one phrase. Having now become squarely focused on what's wanted, you can pursue it with whatever coaching strategy you favour. Try it out next time someone brings you a tale of woe, and see what happens.

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Dr Mark McKergow is director of sfwork, the Centre for Solutions Focus at Work and co-author of several books on Solution Focused practice including *The Solutions Focus* (Nicholas Brealey Publishing 2007).