

# Solution-Focused Coaching

## An Approach for Resolving Employee Complaints

*When employees share issues with their managers, it's sometimes better to recommend adaptive strategies for dealing with the situations rather than trying to identify root causes and solve the problem in a more traditional manner.*

Michael Cardus

When working in a managerial coaching capacity, people will come to you with a variety of problems, complaints, and concerns. It is important to remember that your role as a manager is to serve as a resource, not a therapist. If the complaints and problems presented to you come from outside the workplace and extend beyond the appropriate manager/employee relationship, then you should recommend that the employee obtain proper professional assistance such as that provided by an employee assistance program.

On the other hand, employees may have work-related issues that vary greatly. As Steve de Shazer wrote, "... complaints are usually rather complex constructions involving many elements, any one of which they may emphasize more than the others."<sup>1</sup> Solution-focused coaching tools can provide an especially powerful method of helping managers work with employees to resolve this type of problem. The process for using solution-focused coaching in the workplace has been adapted from de Shazer's approaches, which originally were developed for use in traditional therapy but now have proven useful for managerial interventions.

Solution-focused coaching relies on a simple philosophy and language that provides a positive and pragmatic way to coach individuals. Its process is designed to discover what works in a given situation, and its goals are quite different from more common coaching methods, emphasizing the following three areas:

- What's wanted rather than what's wrong

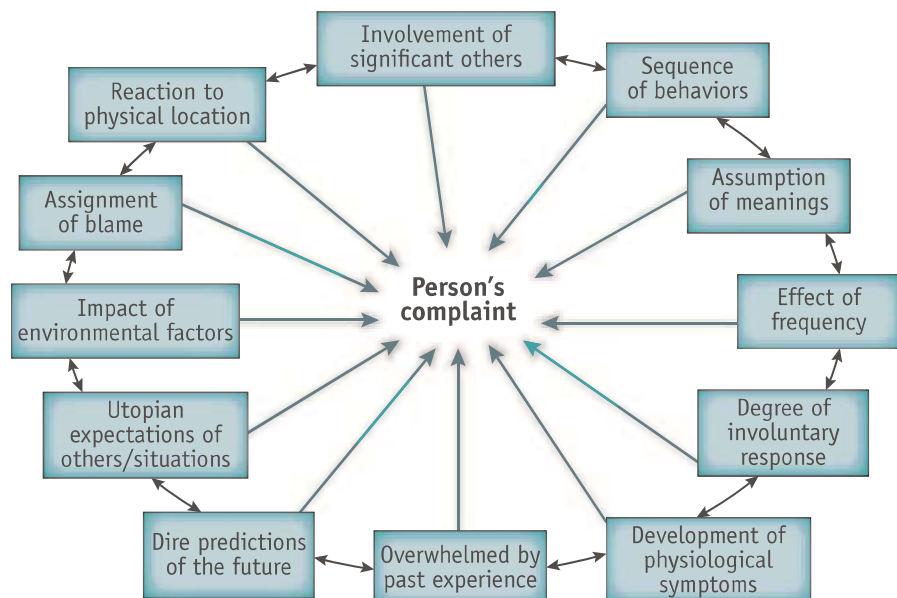
- What's going well rather than what's gone badly
- Practical progress rather than explanatory theory<sup>2</sup>

This article presents a high-level overview of the solution-focused coaching process and its key components. It includes examples that are intended to clarify situations where this method can be applied successfully.

### Fundamentals of Solution-Focused Coaching

Figure 1 shows 12 classifications of complaints that are used as the basis for solution-focused consulting. Table 1 provides some examples of what an employee might say in regard to each of them. Listening to and understanding the complaints that are shared offers the foundation for framing the coaching process. Each complaint can be considered a door that leads to a solution, and the manager coach needs to find the most appropriate skeleton key—the key may not fit perfectly, but it will be close enough to open the lock and discover

**Figure 1: Complaint Classifications**



Adapted from Steve de Shazer<sup>1</sup>

**Table 1: Examples of Employee Complaint Classifications**

Complaint Classification	Examples of What the Employee Might Say
Sequence of behaviors	"I never feel caught up with all these emails and work. It seems that whenever I catch up, there is something more for me to do. This locks me into a place where I feel as if I am doing 12 things poorly."
Assumption of meanings	"The members of the sales team are out to get me. They know that I need their receipts by the 12 <sup>th</sup> of every month, so I can turn in the budget and expense reports on time to the CFO. It is not my job to chase them to get their receipts. They see me as a weak person who they can ignore. The sales team is ruining me!"
Effect of frequency	"Almost eight times a week I find myself avoiding contact with Akio. I need his forms to be completed for my work to get done, and he has always been helpful. I need to be able to call Akio and hang up with all the information I need."
Reaction to physical location	"The minute I walk through that door I am ready for battle. I know that we are on their turf and walking into their workstations. It is funny how they immediately reject our great ideas. I think we want the same thing, but they are protective of their work spaces."
Degree of involuntary response	"When I walk into that office and sit down, Fran and I are ready to fight. It happens every time. She brings out the worst in me; I cannot control or change it. It is just how we are."
Involvement of significant others	"My wife nags me to spend more time with the kids. I cannot get my work done as it is, so how can I spend more time at home?"
Assignment of blame	"This vendor sends the wrong items consistently. My manager told me to straighten out this situation. This call is nerve wracking because the vendor has been really helpful in the past, working with me when I desperately needed supplies."
Impact of environmental factors	"We are never going to get the customer to purchase these products at these increased prices. Sure the value we offer has increased, but people are just not choosing to buy outside their past comfort zones."
Development of physiological symptoms	"When speaking to the members of the executive management team, I feel as if I don't belong, cannot find the right words to say, and don't even know the words to speak. My stomach tightens and my head pounds. After the meetings I am mad at myself for not talking. I need to speak clearly and share my opinions. This will happen when I sit up straight in my chair and use a strong, firm, tone."
Overwhelmed by past experiences	"I learned my lesson three years ago, and I will never be able to change how things get done. At the safety meeting, I suggested that we involve the people that work with the customers on a daily basis with the development of the prevention plan. I was told, 'That is the stupidest idea possible. How could they understand the complexity of our operation?' I know that new ideas are not welcomed."
Dire predictions of the future	"This new process is never going to work! If I try it, and it fails, my future is ruined; they will fire me. If I get fired, my life is over, and my family will starve. I am going to continue doing what I've always done, keeping my future safe."
Utopian expectations of others/situations	"I believe that the staff should be able to read my mind and know what I want without me having to tell them. They know their work, and they should know mine. Why do I have to tell them what I expect? They should just know it."

a solution when the door is opened.

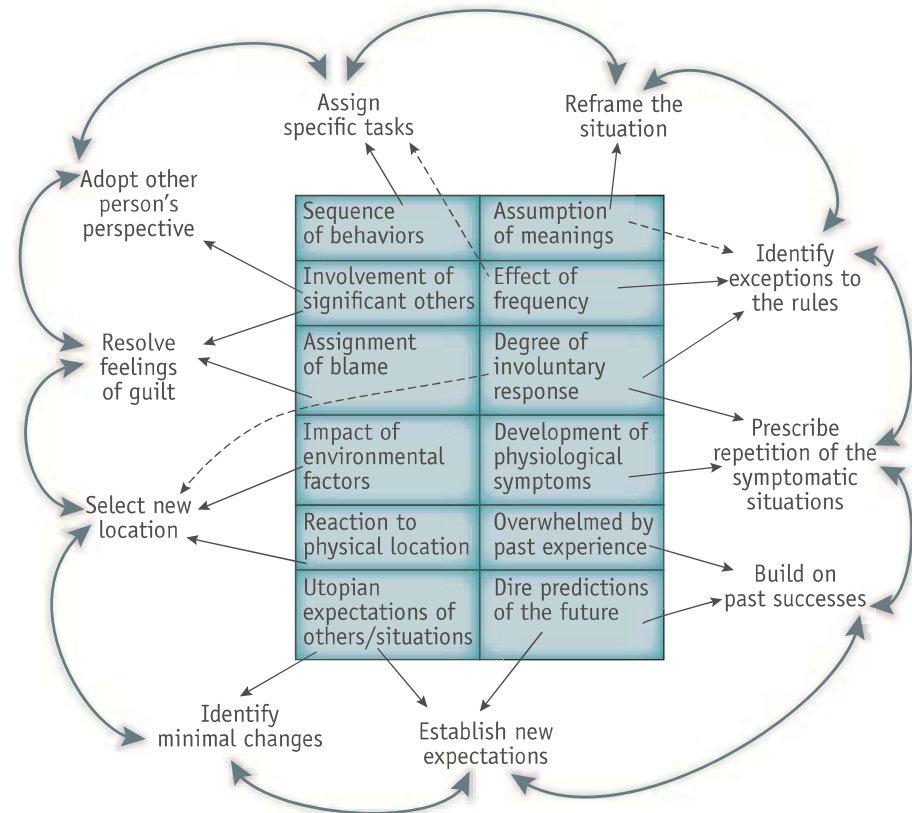
The manager coach, working with the employee, will clarify the task assignment and create workable goals and solutions by using his/her existing knowledge, resources, and skills, which will build the employee's confidence in the coach and the process. The application of each skeleton key depends on how the employee frames the complaint. Interestingly, solution-focused coaching presumes that the actual problem is not as important as identifying an effective solution as the intervention process. Figure 2 displays the connections between the 10 skeleton keys and the 12 complaint classifications. A description of each skeleton key and how the manager might coach the employee using that key is provided in Table 2, along with examples of the coach's comments to the employee.

Skeleton keys, the solution-focused interventions, are intended to generate cooperation and progress. When the first skeleton key selected does not work, the manager coach tries a different approach. The process continues until the employee has learned a new way of dealing with the problem. The relationship between the manager and the employee is strengthened because they work together to determine the most effective interventions, monitor progress, and make adjustments when appropriate.

## Conclusion

This article describes how an understanding of typical employee complaint classifications and finding a skeleton key that can create positive change provides a pragmatic tool for managers. Even when the skeleton key does not fit exactly or a specific solution cannot be found, progress is possible, and the employee can learn new strategies that improve performance by changing perceptions.

**Figure 2: Linkage Among Complaint Classifications and Skeleton Keys**



When managers are able to work with employees to improve problematic situations and offer support, they help to increase employees' contributions to the organization, generating higher performance.

## References

1. Steve de Shazer, *Keys to Solutions in Brief Therapy*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1985, pp. 22, 27-30.
2. SOLWorld, "Sharing and Building Solution Focused Practice in Organisations," <http://www.solworld.org>.



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**Table 2: Skeleton Keys**

Skeleton Key	Potential Coaching Approach	Examples of What the Coach Might Say
Assign specific tasks	Recommend that the employee thoughtfully complete a specific task, preparing to describe in detail what proved to be useful and what change occurred.	See “sequence of behaviors” example. “Just flip a coin. Before you turn on your computer and look at your emails, flip a coin. Block out 20 minutes of time, list your top three priorities for that day, look only at open emails, and respond only to those emails that align with your priorities if you get heads. Take note of how your day proceeds and how much more work you accomplish. For tails, work as usual.”
Reframe the situation	Work with the employee to shift his/her perception of the situation or behavior. Encourage the employee to refocus and view the circumstances differently.	See “assumption of meanings” example. “Choose three of the sales staff members at random. What strengths do you project when working with them? When speaking with these three sales people, how do you leverage your strengths to accomplish your work? What happens when you use this strength? The next time you interact with these sales staff members, begin the conversation by stating your strengths and listen to their responses.”
Identify exceptions to the rules	Suggest that the employee be more observant of the times when the complaint is not happening and exceptions to the perceived rule are not being noticed. Remind the employee that the complaint situation does not consistently occur to the same degree at all times.	See “effect of frequency” example. “Focus on what happens when you work effectively with Akio. The results you two achieved have been impressive. Think about a time when things went better. What were you doing, and what was Akio doing?”  See “degree of involuntary response” example. “You can’t force Fran to change. What happens when you act as if this complaint has been solved? In other words, what happens when you act as if you are oblivious to this problem? How does Fran act when you act differently? Write down all the differences in both of your behaviors that you notice when you act differently.”
Prescribe repetition of the symptomatic situation	Ask the employee to engage in the problematic activity more purposefully. Advise the employee to pay particular attention to behavioral changes that prove to be especially useful for breaking the pattern.	See “development of the physiological symptoms” example. “It’s impressive how you have managed to interact with the member of the executive management team despite this reaction. The next time you leave a meeting with this group, work to make yourself angry to the point of exhaustion instead of trying to calm yourself. Take notes on what happened and what benefit you received from this action. Compare your notes from the exhausted period to the way you feel and act during the meetings. What have you learned to do differently?”



**Table 2: Skeleton Keys (continued)**

Skeleton Key	Potential Coaching Approach	Examples of What the Coach Might Say
Build on past successes	Ask the employee to consider past successes that may relate to work or personal situations. Recommend that the employee clearly identify the steps that took place and what happened. Encourage that those approaches be applied to present circumstances and that the employee focus on prior successes.	See “ <i>overwhelmed by past experiences</i> ” example. “Thank you for sharing your concerns about the work of the safety committee. From our discussion and my knowledge of your work, it seems that you have made positive changes in the company, your team, and your work. Share an example of something you accomplished that made you proud. Provide as much detail as possible to describe what created that success. What challenges did you encounter? How did you deal with them? What are you doing now that you were not doing then? How can you apply your lessons from previous successes to the current situation?”
Establish new expectations	Point out to the employee that his/her current view of a solution may be laden with resistance. Work with the employee to create a slightly different expectation of what would work and might break the existing beliefs.	See “ <i>dire predictions of the future</i> ” example. “Can you see another angle to this situation? What you shared is useful, and you have a good understanding of the work. Suppose you were viewing a ball from one angle. Think of this as your current perspective. Then turn the ball 45 degrees and describe how differently it looks. What was amplified, minimized, louder, quieter, etc.? Now think about the new process. What approaches seem more likely to be workable if you view this change from a new angle? How does that shift in perspective help you see the situation differently than you did originally?”
Identify minimal changes	Collaborate with the employee to identify and assist in making a slight change in his/her actions and perceptions. Once minimal change happens, nurture the adoption of additional changes in incremental steps.	See “ <i>utopian expectations of others/situations</i> ” example. “Try doing one thing differently. Suppose that you chose to share one of your expectations very definitively with the staff members at some point during your next meeting. Encourage their questions and pay attention to their reactions. What different results occurred? How did this slight change in your actions generate a better response from the staff?”
Select new locations	Share some research findings on the connection between locations and specific behaviors and roles. Explain that human brains oversimplify these relationships, which can be helpful at times but also can create barriers. Suggest that a new location be selected in order to change behaviors and outcomes.	See “ <i>impact of environmental factors</i> ” example. “Do you think it might be a good idea to meet with the customers in a more relaxing location? Would taking them out to lunch create an environment where they would be more open to discussing the rationale behind the pricing changes? Ask if the customers would like to have regular off-site sessions to keep aware of new developments? Watch how the change in location affects the customers’ behaviors.”  See “ <i>reaction to physical location</i> ” example. “Pay attention to where the team members are most open to discussing their work and ideas for improvement. Conduct a simple experiment to learn what goes better when the meetings are held in different locations.”

**Table 2: Skeleton Keys (continued)**

Skeleton Key	Potential Coaching Approach	Examples of What the Coach Might Say
Resolve feelings of guilt	Suggest that the employee set aside concerns regarding what happened in the past that may block progress toward finding a solution. Work with the employee to adopt a different focus where new solutions become evident.	See “assignment of blame” example. “When you are with this vendor, try doing things a bit differently. For instance, treat the vendor representative as if he/she were your greatest supporter and you were working together on the same team. Instead of focusing on the problem emanating from the vendor, why don’t you ask what you can do to help solve it?”
Adopt other person’s perspective	Propose that the employee envision the problem from the other person’s perspective. Try to understand how different solutions will affect him/her.	See “involvement of significant others” example. “I’m impressed by your understanding of your wife’s views on this situation. What phrases have you heard her use during your discussions? What clues have they given you regarding her preferences? Imagine a scale from 0 to 10 that indicates situations where she is highly satisfied (a rating of 10) versus the current situation where she is highly dissatisfied (a rating of 0). What changes do you think will move her perceptions up the scale? What clues can you expect to observe to validate that you are making progress?”