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How We Reached Here

We have developed the ideas in this book from many strands of thought and practice. The main precursors include:

- ❑ The systems thinking and communication research of Gregory Bateson.
- ❑ The psychotherapeutic genius of Milton Erickson.
- ❑ The “interactional view” developed by John Weakland and co-workers.
- ❑ The shift from problem to solution focus led by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg.

This chapter sets out the story so far, positioning *The Solutions Focus* in its proper context, clarifying the links, similarities and differences to its related disciplines.

Anthropology and systems

On the East Coast of the US in 1947, the ideas eventually known as systems thinking were formed in an intellectual ferment. Following the Second World War, the first computers were developed hand in hand with mathematical and philosophical breakthroughs.

One of the leaders of this systemic revolution was English anthropologist Gregory Bateson. Before the war he was noted for his research in the South Pacific islands with his then wife Margaret Mead. They became immersed in the new concepts of cybernetics—the science of communication and control systems in living organisms and machines—and how these applied to group processes. Their daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson, recalls Norbert Wiener, now known as the “father of cybernetics,” visiting frequently, “smoking smelly cigarettes, pouring out his latest idea ... without being much interested in the response.”¹

One day Bateson was puzzling over an equation sent to him by Warren McCulloch, the neurophysiologist who first developed mathematical models of neural networks. The phone rang and the slightly nervous young man on the line introduced himself as John Weakland, a student of cultural anthropology who was interested in Bateson’s work. When he mentioned he had formerly been an engineer, Bateson interrupted him, said “Come right over,” and solicited his help in understanding McCulloch’s equation.² This began a relationship that would have a profound effect on the social sciences, and on groups, families and organizations into the twenty-first century.

Bateson proposed a research project examining how disrupted, confused and paradoxical communication might give rise to some of the patterns of behavior called mental illness. In 1952, he raised a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation and, over a celebratory dinner at Peter’s Back Yard restaurant in Greenwich Village, offered Weakland a job on the project.³

Paradoxes in communication

Weakland moved to the West Coast with Bateson and they set up shop in the Veteran’s Hospital at Menlo Park, California. Bateson had also recruited Jay Haley and William Fry, and together they examined paradoxes of abstraction in human communication. It was varied work: They introduced the novel practice of taping interviews with schizophrenics at the hospital and studied their conversational patterns. They were all

interested in film criticism and compared notes on Chinese, German and American movies. They went to the zoo and observed animals communicating. Their first important publication was “Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia.”⁴

Enter Milton Erickson

Bateson also introduced his team to doctor and psychotherapist Milton Erickson, who already had a reputation for achieving startling results with his clients through his use of language. Weakland and Haley visited Erickson regularly for 17 years. Haley recalled⁵ that Erickson helped to keep them in the real world, in contrast to Bateson’s thoughts and abstractions; a prime case of Occam’s Razor, perhaps.

Haley says: “I remember talking to Erickson about a case I had of a patient, one of those in our project [at the hospital] who had the idea that his stomach was full of cement and that was very painful for him. And he kept objecting to this cement. I was trying to get him over this idea by making interpretations about mother’s milk, that sort of thing, and I went to Erickson, and I said, ‘What would you do with this patient who got this idea he’s got cement in his stomach?’ And Erickson said, ‘I would go to the hospital dining room and see how the food is.’”

The Mental Research Institute

In 1959 Bateson’s team founded the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, California, to continue their study of communication in groups and to extend their work with families. Under Don Jackson, the group developed the revolutionary conjoint family therapy approach, observing and interacting with whole family groups rather than just the “patient.” The nearby Stanford University had a Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences and this provided a source of interesting ideas and new recruits.

Early research associates included Paul Watzlawick, an Austrian and a professor at Stanford, Richard Fisch and Virginia Satir, later to make her

own name in family therapy. Scottish psychiatrist RD Laing was also a visitor.

The MRI approach of exploring how communication—in the broadest sense—between people could create and maintain problem behavior grew in influence. The first training program began in 1962, and co-directors Weakland and Fisch founded the Brief Therapy Center in 1967, maintaining their links with Bateson and Erickson.

When Don Jackson died in 1968, aged just 48, Weakland said, “The most basic contribution Jackson made was to be among the first to see things in terms of what people are doing between each other in the present, rather than get stuck on the idea that behavior just depends on something that comes from the inside and has no relationship to the world people live in.”⁶

The MRI’s basic philosophy of change⁷ can be stated thus: People have difficulties all the time. They routinely resolve these difficulties as part of everyday life. Occasionally, a difficulty is mishandled; the attempts to resolve it fail. If this happens repeatedly and the people concerned have no better alternative solutions, then a problem is created and they seek help. As the problem is the result of continued misapplication of the wrong attempted solution, our job is to have them stop doing that and do something else. Once they have found what works, they simply need to do more of it. In short:

- 1 If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.
- 2 Stop doing what doesn’t work and do something different.
- 3 Once you know what works, do more of it.

When Mark visited the MRI in 1994, he was delighted to find the operation still in full swing. In the modest building in Palo Alto sit the results of thousands of hours of observation by the team, now expanded and augmented. John Weakland was weak from illness and sadly died in 1995. Dick Fisch still directs the Brief Therapy Center, while Paul Watzlawick, who is 85 as we write, remains active as a teacher and faculty member. Thinking about all the different approaches and people who had passed through this place

was tremendously exciting, and to find the originators ready and willing to talk about their work over a pizza was a valuable and welcome discovery.

The roads from Palo Alto

In the early 1970s, the original MRI approach was taken up and adapted around the world. Jay Haley wrote his book on Erickson, *Uncommon Therapy*, in 1973 and founded the strategic therapy school. In Italy, Mara Selvini Palazzoli and co-workers founded the Milan school of systemic family therapy.

Meanwhile, Bateson took an interest in the work of a neighbor, Richard Bandler, and his colleague John Grinder, then a young linguistics professor at Stanford. The two were interested in therapy and change work and Bandler was running a Gestalt group. Bateson introduced them to Erickson, setting in train the events that led to neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). Bandler and Grinder also observed Virginia Satir and (on tape due to his demise) Gestalt therapist Fritz Perls. Their conclusions about the linguistic patterns utilized by these master therapists were published⁸ before they coined the NLP name.

Since the 1970s NLP—usually defined as the study of the structure of subjective experience—has developed into an increasingly complicated collection of models, theories and schools. It is now widely known as an approach to therapy and personal development. Sue Knight's book *NLP at Work*⁹ is one of the more practical offerings aimed at people in an organizational context.

From problem to solution

In the mid-1970s two fresh faces arrived at MRI: Steve de Shazer, a keen saxophonist and home brewer interested in language and philosophy, and pharmacologist-turned-therapist Insoo Kim Berg from Korea. Together, they founded the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee in 1978, using their house as collateral. Wally Gingerich, Eve Lipchik and Alex Molnar were key members of the team.

As de Shazer and Berg refined their practice, they “serendipitously”¹⁰ realized that the MRI approach could be made even simpler. They figured that no people “problem” happened consistently all the time. There were moments when it was not happening or happened less—when times were better. The easiest key to progress was to discover when and how this occurred and encourage more of it. This reversed two of MRI’s principles of change, giving us:

- 1 If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.
- 2 Once you know what works, do more of it.
- 3 Stop doing what doesn’t work and do something different.

This seems a modest adjustment. However, the kind of conversation you have when searching for times when matters are better is very different from an apparently similar conversation searching for previous failed solutions.

De Shazer and Berg’s solution-focused brief therapy clients also produced other useful ways of defining and discovering progress. The “day after the miracle” and scales are examples of ideas that clients proffered, Berg picked up and used, and de Shazer noticed and captured.¹¹

De Shazer spotted connections with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s linguistic philosophy, a fascinating parallel that often helps people to understand some distinctive aspects of solutions-focused work.

Philosophically minded readers may know that Wittgenstein’s work is generally seen as falling into two phases. His early work, published as the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, broadly sought to put “problems” of language, and hence philosophy, on a firm, logical basis. The second phase, from the 1930s to his death in 1951, recognized the futility of the first endeavor and took a more pragmatic stance, investigating how we use language in terms of games with rules created as we go along.

Although these two efforts are different, they have a core of common ideas, and this book includes quotations from both phases of Wittgenstein’s work.

Solutions spread

The Milwaukee ideas spread around the world. De Shazer and Berg continue to publish books on their approach.¹² Other authors, including Bill O'Hanlon, Brian Cade and Michelle Weiner-Davis, were reaching similar conclusions based on their own experiences with Erickson and the MRI. With the deaths of both Bateson and Erickson in 1980, the torch passed to the next generation.

The solutions-focused approach is now spreading rapidly, not only through the "people professions" but in many situations where progress is wanted. We know of applications and conferences relating to education, conflict resolution and mediation, prison, self-help, parenting and occupational therapy, for example.

While writing the first edition of this book, we made contact with other organizational consultants and coaches who were finding their own ways to use solutions-focused ideas in their work. Eager to discover even more connections and ideas, we and our Bristol Solutions Group colleagues decided to host a conference. We invited anyone in the world using these ideas in organizations to join us for a three-day event in Bristol, to be known as SOL 2002. We expected about 30 people to attend. In the event, more than 80 practitioners from nine countries found their way to the UK's West Country to participate.

SOL (Solutions in Organisations Linkup) has now become an annual conference, and has recently spawned a summer university residential program. SOL 2003, also in Bristol, led to the production of a series of articles published as *Positive Approaches to Change*.¹³ SOL 2006 in Vienna attracted participants from 20 countries. Workshops addressed all manner of organizational contexts, from coaching to conflicts and learning to leadership, with many international authors and presenters adding their knowledge to the mix. For information about SOL events, visit www.sol-world.org.

We have also been introducing these ideas within companies around the world, and have been struck by how much support and how little disagreement we have found. From workers at the sharp end to leaders in

the boardroom, we meet people wanting to grasp these ideas and start to use them. We know of organizations helping themselves to better performance via leadership development, coaching, teamworking, appraisal, meetings, questionnaires, strategic planning, competence management, training, creativity, feedback, outplacement and even health and safety—all using a solutions-focused twist to help them on their way.

Research findings

A growing canon of research is proving the effectiveness of solutions-focused approaches in a wide variety of settings, including mental health, school behavior problems, anger management, family and marital therapy, occupational health and rehabilitation, problem drinking and prison.¹⁴ There are more than 40 studies, including controlled randomized studies, which assess the effectiveness of the Solutions Focus methodology. Clients reported improvement in 60–80 percent of cases, figures as good as or better than comparative treatments, and mostly achieved in between one and five sessions. Interestingly, in many of the studies the work was implemented by relatively inexperienced workers, often just recently trained. For an annually updated summary of research, visit the website of EBTA president Dr Alasdair Macdonald at www.psychsft.freeseve.co.uk.

Mark McKergow

Mark's first inkling of solutions-focused work came during an MBA degree course with the Open University. As a reformed physicist turned manager in the electricity industry, he was keen to find helpful new ways of thinking and acting. He spent time learning to apply neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) to his work, as a scientist being interested in the ideas and philosophy behind it, and discovered the work of Gregory Bateson and Milton Erickson.

A chance encounter with philosopher James Wilk introduced Mark to solutions. Mark liked the clarity and simplicity of this line: sharper, less theory burdened, easier to learn, pragmatic and focused on results for an individual.

For the next year or so between consulting assignments, he trained with key figures such as Steve de Shazer and Bill O'Hanlon. He was struck by the way in which the ideas of the Solution Focus were being applied in a huge range of circumstances, from difficult psychotherapy cases to social work, family and child protection, and workplace counseling. And these were experienced, feet-on-the-ground professionals dealing with their most challenging situations.

At around this time Mark chanced on a copy of M Mitchell Waldrop's *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos*. Waldrop described the development of complexity science—a descendant of chaos theory—in which economists, biologists, mathematicians and others were grappling with systems that, although simple in essence, produced complex, beautiful and unexpected results. Even if all the properties of the system were known, there was no way, short of having a go, to calculate how the overall interactions would turn out. The reflexive and systemic nature of such systems has strong resonance with the development of cybernetics some 40 years earlier.

The striking aspect of all of this was a link backward and a link forward. During his PhD research, Mark had carried out computer simulations of hydrogen in metals. At low temperatures, hydrogen atoms can form themselves into ordered structures in the gaps between the metal atoms. These were, had the term been coined then, complex systems. A full calculation of the ways in which model hydrogen atoms interacted was impossible, and Mark had spent months performing Monte Carlo computer simulations, starting from a random arrangement and seeing how things resolved each time.

The link forward was to solutions. Here again were the same ideas: simple interactions leading to complex and unpredictable phenomena, the primacy of “what happens” over theory, the focus on describing events in as simple a way as possible without ignoring the vital factors. Since then the application of complexity ideas to management has become a hot topic, but often in hotly debated terms of applying a general “theory” to a general “organization.” Mark liked the way that the Solutions Focus was different each time it was applied, so the fact that dif-

ferent things happened in different places was not only unsurprising, it was normal.

Mark quickly realized that these ideas would take their place in his own fields of consulting, facilitating and training in organizations. In particular, he appreciated how solutions were rooted in interactions between people, rather than starting in the unknowable and indescribable world of guessing about what goes on inside people's heads. Seeking a way forward, he and fellow Bristol-based solutions enthusiast and counselor Harry Norman founded the Bristol Solutions Group, the world's first cross-disciplinary solutions-focused network and support group.

Paul Z Jackson

A year or so later, Mark introduced Paul to the Solutions Focus. Paul had graduated to consultancy and training from the diverse careers of newspaper journalism and making radio comedy programs for the BBC. He had spent a parallel ten years training three groups of performers—in Cardiff, Manchester and the southwest of England—to deliver hundreds of improvised comedy shows on stage.

These were intensely practical efforts, with instant measurements of success—either members of the audience laughed or they didn't. And if they did, the question was whether you could make them laugh more.

Paul distilled the mechanisms of laughter through improvisation and began teaching spontaneity, adaptability and creativity to members of the public and to teams within organizations. The emphasis was always on what worked, with new ideas added to the stockpile if and only if they proved their usefulness.

He was immediately impressed by the simplicity and power of the solutions approach, and devoured a bookshelf of solutions-focused literature, attended courses and conferences, and began applying the Solutions Focus in his consultancy work.

One great attraction was the derivation of solutions from the participants' own resources, their skills and successes rather than failures and deficits. Working with comedians, actors and writers in radio, television,

and theater, he had always been struck by how much better they responded to praise, encouragement and a view to the future than to criticism and retrospective analysis.

Almost all of Paul's creative work involves collaboration, which fits well with the co-construction—inbetween—aspects of solution building. These elements of joint creative effort are as important and effective with leaders and managers, office and factory workers, as they are with more obviously artistic talents.

He also liked the pragmatism, having benefited from many quirky examples of what worked as keys for getting results in pressurized situations—such as improvising comedy in front of a live audience. While one performer might need an intensive group warm-up, another would do better with a quiet drink alone in a bar, then both would deliver the goods. It was possible to find some commonalities, but the main lessons were about diversity and how it was impossible to predict what would suit the next candidate.

Each solution is unique and fresh, yet here was a method offering a robust, logical set of principles, which could enable skilled yet skeptical individuals or groups of players to reach amazingly high levels of performance. The methods, themselves flexible, deliver us to the point from which an on-the-day “what works” can be applied, enjoyed and relied on.

The Solutions Focus, as you may have discovered in this book, chimes with many aspects of improvisation. In impro, one of the key techniques is to respond to suggestions with the words “yes” and “and.” The “yes” directly parallels the solutions requirement of accepting what the customer for change tells you. Then we are ready together for the “and,” which is about proposing the next step forward.

In any drama, convincing an audience depends on performers staying “here and now,” in a state of responsive alertness. In the Solutions Focus, instead of arriving with a theory, a consultant or facilitator arrives with an interest in what's happening here and now. We work with these people, in their present circumstances, aiming to help them achieve their objectives.

We also know that they have a problem or are stuck in some way, and that it will be a rewarding process to help them get out of it.

We need to remain alert primarily because “everything is a useful gift”—a key tenet of improvisation and a direct inheritance from the Solutions Focus’s therapeutic great-grandfather, Milton Erickson, who called it utilization. The idea is to welcome the new, unusual, peculiar or even problematic aspect and use it, to the full. That is often what creates the magic in an impro scene: the mistake, the audience suggestion, the novelty. And it is often the key to the solution in an organization.