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Problem or Solution Focussed?



Asset Managers are Solution-Focussed! Are we really?

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“An Inspector Calls”

Short case study illustrating application of the Solutions Focus Approach



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The Solutions Focus—in brief

A concise overview of the Solutions Focus for use in your organisation



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Skills Shortage

Suggestions from Leo Gohier on making better use of the professionals that we do have—and will be able to get.

Two things happened this week that made me think about how we tackle the problems we are currently facing.

One was a chance remark at a conference (see page 138); the other a book I have found very useful.

So this report is by way of an extended book review. (pp 139-142)

Both articles focus on problem solving involving people—but then don't they all?

On the skills shortage issue that we have discussed in recent reports, Leo Gohier, Canada, provides six extremely useful suggestions to add to the pot!

What ideas do you have? Let's share them!

Consider and Enjoy!

Penny Burns

Researched and written by Dr Penny Burns, AMQ International,. unless otherwise specified, Published fortnightly. Subscription, Comment, or Inquiries to

AMQ International
PO Box 75 Salisbury South Australia
Tel 618 8281 5795
Email: sam@amqi.com Website: www.amqi.com

“ASSET MANAGERS ARE SOLUTION-FOCUSSED”

Are we really?

“There is no upside to risk in Asset Management!”

Presenter at Conference

This comment was made almost belligerently, as if daring anybody in the room to say otherwise – and nobody did. But I found this statement exceedingly strange – especially for this audience of about 70 engineers looking at ways to extend the lives of their ageing assets. Just about every one of them would have been the beneficiary of upside risk many times over.

Every time you take a punt on an asset not failing, despite omitting to do the maintenance you considered necessary but couldn't fund, *and the asset does not fail*, you are the beneficiary of upside risk. The ‘economic life’ of the asset is 25 years? Some will fail earlier. But many will not, and will continue to provide good, efficient, service for 30 years or even more.

Look to what you are doing right!

Instead of focussing all of the time in what we are doing wrong for those assets that fail before 25 years, maybe we could look at what we are doing RIGHT for those that go longer? Why, for example, have Australia's fleet of F111s far exceeded the lifetime of other country's F111s? Instead of being ashamed of the age of this fleet, we should be proud that we have managed so well.

“Find where things are working – and then do more of it” is one of the prescriptions in an interesting book by Paul Z Jackson and Mark McKergow called “The Solution Focus: the SIMPLE way to positive change” published by Nicholas Brealy Publishing, London, 2002.

Focus on Desired Outcomes *not* the Problem

The idea is to focus on the *outcome* you want, rather than the *problem* you face. In this issue I present a short excerpt from this book that I think captures the essence of this approach. It can be

applied to both people (as the authors do) AND to asset management, as we need to do. Read “An Inspector Calls” on the following few pages.

‘Future Perfect’—Can you say what it is you are seeking to achieve?

(Often this proves to be very difficult, which may account for our relative lack of success in these areas.)

An important aspect of the outcomes approach is to be able to define what the world would look like if you successfully addressed the issue at hand. “If you were to wake up tomorrow and find that your problem had disappeared overnight, what is the first thing you would see that would let you know this had happened?” This is a useful question is to ask yourself which helps avoid getting stuck in the problem (and what caused it) and helps you focus on the solution (and what you can do to bring it about).

The Solutions Focus—in brief

The Solutions Focus approach is briefly summarised on pp. 141-142 in “The Solutions Focus in brief” but you may find that it is worth getting and reading the whole book: it is short and practical. The examples given are people related rather than asset related. But, as our emphasis on Skills Shortages and their solutions over the last few issues has shown, a lot of our problems now are, in fact, people related – how to get them, how to train them, how to keep them. *But it is also how to use them!*

Solutions to the Skills Shortages Crisis

Leo Gohier, Toronto, Canada, took up my challenge for more Solutions to the Skills Shortages and all of these issues are raised in the six very practical suggestions that he puts forward. See “More Suggestions for Managing Skills Shortages” on pp.143-144

And a footnote: Last week I was told that Energy Australia has taken on 150 new apprentices each year for the last two years. “That is a lot”, I said. “Others are struggling, so what are you doing that allows you to be so successful?” “Simple. We pay better than others – **and we treat them really well!**”

“ AN INSPECTOR CALLS”

The Solutions Focus in Action



(from “The Solutions Focus” by Paul Z Jackson and Mark McKergow, pp5-6)

The situation

“The chemical site had a problem that was looming larger, with a threat of closure from a new safety inspector. The plant had seen plenty of change over the years, with old machinery decommissioned and new processes brought on stream. Safety, which had always been a key issue, was now managed by a plant safety team in conjunction with the safety regulator’s site inspector.

The inspector had a great deal of power: he could go wherever he wanted on site, enforce improvement notices (potentially at great expense), and ultimately stop operations and close down the plant. In the past, working relations with successive inspectors had been reasonable. Now, however, the new inspector was proving uncooperative when presented with the plant team’s latest plans to improve the site’s safety culture.

The team members had been expecting support from the regulator and were surprised by his officious attitude. He wanted to see every piece of paper and was reluctant to engage in the customary informal exchanges with managers.”

What had been tried

“The team tried all their regular good tactics for getting along, but to no avail. As stories spread – “You can’t get a straight answer out of him...” “He’s not interested in anything but the paperwork...” “He’s out of his depth, you know...” “He won’t stop until he’s found something wrong” – a sense of despondency gripped the site.

The safety team knew the essence of the problem: the inspector was stopping them from making progress with their safety culture plans and a worsening impasse would threaten the very future of the site, with appalling knock-on effects for their parent company.”

KEY IDEAS

- Situation involved communication difficulties
- Standard approaches had been tried to no avail
- ‘Solutions Focus’ adopted
- What is the desired outcome?
- When does it happen now, if only briefly?
- What did you do to bring about the improvement?
- Remedial actions: cheap, simple, small and immediate
- Improved morale from focussing on actions that can be taken rather than problems that exist

“ AN INSPECTOR CALLS”

The Solutions Focus in Action

Traditional Approaches

“Traditional problem-focused ways of approaching the situation might include:

- An examination of why the inspector wouldn't see sense.
- A “barrier analysis” of what was impeding matters.
- A psychological profile of the inspector to establish the cause of his behaviour.
- Attacking the inspector by official complaints to his seniors.
- A workshop with the inspector to firm up the nature of his concerns.
- Writing off the time and money invested in the safety culture project and starting again.”

The ‘Solutions Focus’ Approach

“The safety team brought us in to help, perhaps suspecting that we would begin by setting up mediation between them and the inspector.

Instead, we took a solutions focus, asking the team members to rate their encounters with the inspector on a scale of 0 to 10. One manager quickly snorted. “Zero!” We paused and waited, and he continued, “apart from once, when it was a three for 20 seconds.”

Suddenly there was a glimmer of hope. The crux of the solution, we figured would be in those few seconds – not in any of the traditional approaches, and not even requiring conscious action from the inspector. The solution was not going to center on him as an individual, with all his flaws, failings and difficulties, but on the interactions between him and the safety team. We needed to know more.”

What IS working?

“When we asked the manager what he had done to bring about this dramatic, if brief, improvement, he said “I suppose I stopped pushing him for a moment and gave him time to think.”

The mood of the meeting palpably changed. The team outlined the parts they had individually played in their own best exchanges with the inspector and from these strands drew out a list of 14 actions that they could do quickly, simply and cheaply to move just one point up the scale.”

Actions—cheap, simple, small

“These included bringing fewer people to meet the inspector, wearing name badges at meetings and giving him more notice of impending questions and issues. The individual who had most contact with the inspector was given the task of noticing what was working best.

Instead of gloom at their lack of options, the managers said they now felt refreshed to be analysing what was going well instead of what was going badly.

When we followed up some weeks later, matters were much improved. The threat of an improvement notice had been lifted, and the project was back on track. One manager said that she knew they were making real progress when the “impersonal” inspector had enquired about her recent holiday.”

“THE SOLUTIONS FOCUS—in brief!”



KEY IDEAS

- Difference between a problem and a solution focus
- Engineering have tended to a problem focus
- In Knowledge Arena, a solution focus might be more useful
- Find what works and do more of it
- **Solutions not problems**
- **Inbetween – the action is in the interaction**
- **Make use of what is there**
- **Possibilities – past, present and future**
- **Language – simply said**
- **Every case is different**

“The Solutions Focus” by Paul Z Jackson and Mark McKergow, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London, 2000

The most important differences between a problem focus and a solution focus

Problem Focus

The past
What’s wrong
Blame
Control
The expert knows best
Deficits
Complications
Definitions

Solution Focus

The future
What’s working
Progress
Influence
Collaboration
Resources
Simplicity
Actions

In Engineering, we look to the causes of failure – so we use past history, look at what’s wrong, and identify the cause. This can be a quite complicated task, requiring expert analysis with complex data and definitions.

As we move increasingly into a “Knowledge Arena” where we are dealing more with people, and especially the interactions between people, it may help to adopt a more ‘people approach’ rather than the ‘task approach’ that has served well in the past.

The Solutions Focus may help us make this transition.

The benefits are that discovering what works and doing more of it, is generally a positive, enjoyable and empowering activity for all concerned. By cultivating what is already happening as the seeds of change, you nurture growth through small initiating events. Changing as little as possible has benefits in time, cost and effort. This form of change takes the path of least resistance.

“THE SOLUTIONS FOCUS –in brief!”

“Asking “When does success happen already?” generates a different kind of conversation from “When do you go wrong?” Energy, enthusiasm and cooperation are frequent and welcome side effects.

SIMPLE

Solutions not problems

In between – the action is in the interaction

Make use of what is there

Possibilities – past, present and future

Language – simply said

Every case is different”

Solutions Not Problems

“In the chemical factory in the previous chapter, the problem talk was all about the difficulty – or even the impossibility – of dealing with the safety inspector. By focussing instead on how the inspector worked (or might work) constructively, all sorts of possibilities appeared.”

In between

“Many aspects of a solution are most helpfully thought of as being in between the people involved, rather than isolated or belonging only to one party. Empowerment, for example, is not something you give me or I give you; we co-construct it between us by the actions each of us takes. This interactional view is a link into systems thinking; the system has properties that exist outside any of the individual components.”
As asset managers, we can readily see the applications of system thinking to the issues we deal with.

Making Use of What’s there

“The seeds of the solution are almost always present in the form of various Counters, parts of the solution that have been happening occasionally before, or in part, or in embryo.” *We need to search them out.*

Possibilities

“Any useful story of the past, explanations (of what is happening in the present) or vision (of the future) will contain possibilities” – *ideas of things that may be done to make a difference*

Language

“Big words can make matters more complicated. To stay simple, it is best to keep the language simple.” *Talk the language of the person that you are hoping may come up with an idea!*

Every case is different

“The Solutions Focus is an approach to change, not a set of prefigured methods to fit every case. It offers a pragmatic route to find out what works in this instance.” *It doesn’t even matter if you don’t know why it works!*

The Solutions Focus is about small, incremental change: steps you can take immediately.

You don’t need a consultant. It is the antithesis of something like “systems re-engineering” and other such movements that have created such havoc.

Worth a go?

MORE SUGGESTIONS FOR ADDRESSING SKILLS SHORTAGES



In the last issue “Skills Shortages—Creating Solutions” I put out an open challenge to anyone to provide their own non-traditional solutions. **Leo Gohier, Toronto, Canada**, took up the challenge and produced the following SIX solutions.

All of them are sensible and practical and are worth considering at individual, organisational and association levels. Don't think that you need to 'go it alone' - why not seek the support of your professional association? (You may need to be persuasive to convince the old-timers, but it will pay off in the end.)

KEY IDEAS

1. Increase the level of tolerance for risk
2. Reduce process I
3. Reduce process II
4. Change the manner in which we manage professionals
5. Change the way we pay people
6. “Regionalize” systems

1. Increase the level of tolerance for risk

Increase the level of tolerance for risk at the public, political and legal levels - I am of course not suggesting that we take risks in terms of the safety of drinking water, but we need to be more realistic about things in general. The old way of “making sure that this never happens again” is simply too onerous. We end up needing staff to follow-up on things that have virtually no chance of happening, but that “may” happen nonetheless. We need a better balance and a more realistic approach. We need to have professionals that are less defensive and more pro-active if we are to deal with the challenges that we will be facing in the future. This would obviously also have to involve a reduction of exposure to legal issues, i.e. have fewer lawyers, different laws, etc.???

2. Reduce process I

It is scary how much staff time is spent on feeding the internal bureaucracy as opposed to actually serving the public or customers. This is not only true in government, but also in the private sector. Again, the demands from legal, human resources, finance, etc. can be overwhelming. It's the old battle between the “internal focus” and the “external” focus. This all translates in having many professional resources being used for things other than what they were trained to do.

Ed: For councils, you may wish to add elected members to your list of internal bureaucracy. I know of a number of councils where a good third or more of the senior asset manager's time is spent answering questions from the public or from elected members that, with good planning, could be addressed by others.

MORE SUGGESTIONS FOR ADDRESSING SKILLS SHORTAGES

3. Reduce process II

Another example of process is the Environmental Assessment process: good and essential process, bad application – projects take forever to be evaluated, they

can be derailed by a single individual, a self-interest or a one-issue group, it is expensive, time-consuming, confrontational and not necessarily productive.

4. Change the manner in which we manage professionals

Traditionally, engineers supervise engineers and so on. Quite often, professionals actually make the worst managers since they can't decide if they are still professionals (ex. engineers) or if they are managers. Why not develop professional managers, and let the professionals do the job that they are trained to do?

5. Change the way we pay people

This is a corollary to item #4. Because most organizational structures are pyramids, you get paid more money as you go up the pyramid. Unfortunately, you lose a lot of good professionals to the management ranks simply because people want to get ahead and improve their lot. We need to pay people based on their skill sets and their contributions, so good professionals could and should be paid as well as their managers.

6. “Regionalize” systems

In Canada, and even more so in the US, there are so literally thousands and thousands of small towns that are one beside each other. As a result, they all have their own water departments, roads departments, etc., each with their own engineer, senior engineer, engineering manager, etc. The pool of professionals is simply too small to accommodate this structure. As you can imagine, there are a few political issues surrounding this one!

SKILLS SHORTAGES are one of those things that are going to get worse before (if ever) they get better.

I would be pleased to hear from anyone about ideas that work—or even ideas that *could* work.

Sharing your ideas is not simply altruistic. We all benefit from reducing the load on existing skills, increasing the range, quality and quantity of skills, and utilising them more efficiently.

amqi@amqi.com