

Positive Exceptions

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Coert Visser (coert.visser@planet.nl) is a consultant, coach and trainer using the solution-focused change approach. This approach is focused on simply helping individuals, teams and organizations to make progress in the direction of their own choice. Coert wrote many articles and a few books. More information: <http://solutionfocusedchange.blogspot.com/>

Summary - In almost any situation in which you face personal or business problems it is worthwhile to try and use the technique of positive exceptions. I have seen countless examples of how people thought about exceptions, relaxed, produced a smile and found useful ideas to influence their situation positively. My invitation to you is to start trying it out.

The management of an Italian chemical company wanted their employees to wear safety glasses. Many employees, however, often did not follow this rule. Management did not know what to do and organized a meeting to look for a solution. One manager asked the following question: "When do the employees want to wear glasses?" This question made them realize that their employees loved to wear cool, modern sunglasses with mirror glasses. Then they asked themselves: "Why don't we make cool mirror-glassed safety glasses? They did. The result was that the employees began to wear the safety glasses right away! A very small and cheap change in the design had led to a very important change in the behavior of the employees and to a higher safety¹.

When were things slightly better?
The tool of positive exceptions is so powerful that it can be one of the most valuable techniques of any manager. It is based on the following assumption:

1. NO PROBLEM HAPPENS ALL OF THE TIME ² !
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Whether you're talking about personal or business problems, no problem is constantly there. There are always moments and circumstances in which things go better. An example:

John complains to his manager Gerald about the dominant behavior of his colleague Peter. Gerald asks: "When did you ever manage to get a bit less irritated by his dominant behavior?" John thinks for a moment and gets a smile on his face: "Some time ago I thought to myself 'Sure, just go ahead and act importantly if that is what you need'. I just let him do his thing and only after that came up with my opinion. Then, I was surprised that he seemed to be seriously interested in what I had to say. Apparently this works with him because it went much smoother. And I got less annoyed. Gerald compliments him and says: "Aha, so that is how you manage to get less annoyed with him? Smart!"

Finding ideas for solutions

Gerald does not go in to questions like whether it is true or not that Peter is dominant and, if yes, why he behaves that way or why John gets so irritated or whether John might contribute to the problem

himself as well? None of that! Instead, he helps John to find and analyze a positive exception. John cools down quickly and remembers how he can deal effectively with Peter's behavior. This example shows analyzing positive exceptions can help you to find solutions for problems.

2. POSITIVE EXCEPTIONS CONTAIN THE KEYS TO SOLUTIONS TO PROBLEMS

Marc often doesn't follow the new working procedure. Due to this, he often encounters unexpected situations, which costs him extra time. He knows this but explains that he often forgets to follow the procedure. Ann, his manager, has observed that Marc now and then does follow the procedure. She asks him how, on these occasions, he manages to remember to follow the procedure. Marc says: "Usually, that is on a Wednesday". Ann responds: "O, is that so? And how do you manage to remember on Wednesdays?" He explains: "Wednesdays are often so busy that I don't want to risk losing too much time. That is why, on Tuesdays, at the end of the day I always look at the planning for Wednesday. And if it will be a busy day, I put the procedure on my desk for the following day. That way, I can't forget it." Ann compliments him: "Good idea to check the planning in advance and to put the procedure on your desk", to which Marc responds: "Indeed...I think I will start doing that more often."

Deliberate and spontaneous exceptions
The distinction between deliberate and spontaneous exceptions is important. A deliberate exception is when you can remember well what was different in the situation of the positive exception and how you behaved differently. That is great because this helps you to find ideas for solutions quickly. However, sometimes exceptions are spontaneous. This is when you do remember that things were better but you don't remember what was different in

that situation. You don't recall how you acted differently and you don't remember any specific differences in the context. When there is spontaneous exception it usually works well to instruct yourself to pay close attention to what's different in the situation and in your behavior, the next time the exception occurs.

3. IDEAS FOR SOLUTIONS CAN BE FOUND BY ASKING: "WHAT WAS DIFFERENT" AND "WHAT DID I DO DIFFERENT?"

Eric has a bad temper. Under pressure he tends to lash out verbally at those around him. He can't really understand why he is like this. He feels maybe he is too repressed, unhappy at home, worried about money – there are plenty of things that could be causing it. With the help of his coach, he puts all these causes aside and analyses when he is least likely to lose his temper. Eric works out that he feels more in control in the mornings, when he is less tired. He also realizes that he is less likely to get stressed when he is away from his own desk. He finds constant interruptions very difficult to cope with and these are more likely to happen when he is easily available. Eric begins to schedule his more important meetings for the mornings and to try to get the bulk of his important work done early in the day. He also begins to work from home one day a week and tries to save the kind of work that needs unbroken concentration for that that day. He asks people not to call him on that day unless it is absolutely vital³.

Stay close to the topic of the problem or goal

One of the most important things to keep in mind while using positive exceptions is to stay close to the topic of the problem or goal. When the relation to the problem or goal is unclear the chance will be slim that the positive exception will be useful. In the case of John and Peter it would probably not

work well if the manager had asked: “John, you complain about Peter’s dominant behavior but surely there must be things going right in your work too?” This positive exception is so detached from the problem that it will probably not work. Stay close to the problem, in this case by asking: “When did you ever manage to get a bit less irritated by his dominant behavior?”

4. STAY CLOSE TO THE TOPIC OF THE PROBLEM OR GOAL. THEN THE EXCEPTION WILL BE MOST USEFUL.

There are always exceptions. Sometimes it seems like there are not positive exceptions at all. For instance, when a problem is very serious or acute. In such cases it is sensible to search for situation in which the problem happens less, if only slightly less. When you succeed in finding that situation you will also often succeed in finding ideas for solutions. However, if you also can’t even find a situation in which the problem was just a tiny little bit less intense, than you might try the following. Ask yourself the question: When was the problem at its very worst? And then you ask: “And when was this peak (the problem at its worst) over? When you have answered this question you will have succeeded in finding a

situation in which the problem was beginning to be less intense. You can use that situation and treat it like a positive exception. So you start looking for what was different and search for ideas for solutions.

Invitation

In almost any situation in which you have to deal with personal or business problems it is worthwhile to try out the technique of positive exceptions. I have seen countless examples of how people thought about exceptions, relaxed, produced a smile and found useful ideas to influence their situation positively. My invitation to you is to start trying it out.

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References

- ¹ Source: Jackson, P. & McKergow, M. (2002). The solutions focus, the SIMPLE way to positive change. Nicholas Brealy Publishing
- ² Source: Berg, I.K. & Dolan, Y (2001). Tales of solutions. Norton
- ³ Source: Greene, J. & Grant A.M. (2003). Solution-focused Coaching London: Momentum Pr