

One Small Step Forward

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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/>

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Summary - The thought that serious problems in organizations require drastic interventions is popular. Drastic change program's, restructurings, and reorganizations are all around. But whether these are really effective remains questionable. This article argues for an alternative, the approach of taking one small step forward. This approach of change has a low threshold and a low risk and can be very effective.

The approach of one small step forward is part of the solution-focused approach to change. The article *The POWERS of the Solution Focus*, which was published on this site, gives an overview of this approach. Several other articles elaborate on other parts of this approach, like setting achievable goals, using scales and identifying positive exceptions.

“Life is just one damn thing after another”

American writer Elbert Hubbard once said: “Life is just one damn thing after another”. Wow, is life really so problematic? Well, that depends on your definition of the word ‘problem’. A problem can be seen either as the presence of something negative or as the absence of something positive. If you use this broad definition of ‘problem’ it seems fair to say that everyone is nearly constantly confronted with problems. Of course, this can be very hard. But problems also have a useful function. They are aversive and evoke negative emotions that you normally want to get rid of. That is how problems set you in motion. Put differently, problems can be so hard, nasty, and painful that they urge you to adapt and improve your circumstances.

Experiencing and acknowledging problems can help you to get motivated for change. But how do you accomplish change?

Some Objections against the Big Steps Approach

When confronted with serious problems people understandably tend to start up drastic changes. That seems only logical: if there is a big problem then there is a big gap between the current situation and the desired state. The distance to bridge is great so big steps have to be taken. But however logical that sounds, there are some objections against the big steps approach. Firstly, the approach requires much insight and knowledge about the effectiveness of the step. A big step requires a lot of energy and often a lot of money. When it fails there may be considerable material and immaterial harm and a great loss of time. So a lot depends on whether it is the right big step and whether it is executed well. But in the complexity of organizations and markets there is often a great unpredictability of events. Case in point is a great Dutch supermarket chain (Laurus) that tried to radically change its proposition and failed, partly due to rapidly changing market circumstances. When that happened, it could

barely survive and it accomplished this only with outside help. Secondly, taking big steps requires a lot of energy, motivation, determination, discipline and trust of people involved. The threshold is high. Often big step change programs are not kept up or even not even seriously started up. Furthermore, they often raise resistance with people within the organization. This may be partly due to the fact that this 'everything must change' strategy seems to imply that there is a lot wrong with the status quo. This way, it almost feels like an accusation.

The big steps approach has some serious disadvantages but is there an alternative?

The Alternative: One Small Step Forward
Consultants using the principles of solution-focused change argue for a one small step forward approach. The more literal this is taken the better. Notice that we don't intend an approach in which a large series of small steps should be taken. Instead we mean that only one step is taken. The central idea is to not change more than strictly necessary.

What are the advantages of this?

1. Low threshold: when the step forward is as small as possible, the requirement of energy, motivation, and trust is minimal. The threshold is so low that the willingness to take the step will be maximal. The low threshold stimulates a high probability of change.
2. Low risk: little precise knowledge and certainty is needed about the effectiveness of the step. The step can be seen as an experiment. If does not work not much will be lost. Damage done will be minimal as will wasted energy be. In the unpredictability that characterizes many work situations this is a great advantage. The one small step approach makes it easy to respond flexibly to developments.
3. Positive message: aiming for a small step implies something positive, namely

that there is already a lot functioning well as it is. Changing no more than strictly necessary is really like saying: "There is already a lot going well and we do not want to risk of losing that by changing too much. It will not be necessary to drastically change our course. A subtle change will do." A positive message like that reflects trust and works motivating.

4. Chance of positive snowball effects: the one small step approach has a surprising side advantage: it may lead to a snowball effect. Edwin Olson and Glenda Eoyang, authors of 'Facilitating Organizational Change: Lessons from Complexity Science' (2001) describe such a process as follows: "A small change in one part ripples through the organization and can have tremendous unintended consequences far from the site of the intervention". Why is that so? The reason is that in a complex system, like most organizations, everything is linked to everything. Maybe you know the so-called butterfly effect from chaos theory? Scientist Edward Lorenz reasoned that a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil might cause a tornado in Texas. Likewise, taking one step forward as an individual can eventually lead to system wide progress. The behavior of one person will affect the behavior of another person, which will affect yet another person, and so on. In this way, small-scale actions may lead to large-scale change.

After the step forward is taken attention is paid to how the step has helped. Next, a following small step is taken.

How Do You Know Which Step To Take?

A small step is often enough. But which small step do you have to take? How do you find an idea about which step to take? The technique of positive exceptions is an excellent way to identify a good small step forward. Briefly put, it works like this. You think back about situations more or less

related to your current situation in which you were relatively successful in dealing and analyze what caused the success. Based on this you choose your next step. Do not worry about whether it is the right step. Remember, the step can be viewed as low risk experiment. If it does not work, try something else.

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