

Focusing on Solutions

Another kind of possibility thinking is to focus on solutions by looking for exceptions to a stated problem and encouraging more of what's worked in the past:

1. **Get a brief problem description.** Translate generalities to specifics (as mentioned earlier, generalizations sustain patterns). The term “brief” doesn't refer to a specific amount of time, only to the principle of getting sufficient information to frame a solution without focusing overmuch on the problem. For example, a Four says he has “a terrible problem with anger” and doesn't know how to stifle it. You ask for examples and reframe the problem in the past, using his own words. Remember to keep the employee's Enneagram style in mind. Some may need more time to vent than would otherwise be absolutely necessary; some may try to move on before you have enough details.
2. **Ask how a solution will look.** Get a concrete vision of a solution: “When this is no longer a problem what will be happening? If I'm there with a video camera, what will I capture?” If they can't imagine a solution, ask: “What if a miracle occurs...” Get them to use “videospeak” – what will they and/or others be doing and saying? The Four who needs coaching on his anger might answer, “If a miracle occurs, people will be influenced by my ideas instead of insisting the way we've always done it is better.”
3. **Find exceptions to the problem.** Once the two of you are clear on the components of the solution, you can begin to explore how parts of the solution are already happening. The first step is to get an example: “Tell me a time in the past when people were influenced by your ideas.” Perhaps the person recalls a time when he felt angry in a cross-departmental meeting but didn't act on it, and persuaded others to agree to his idea.
4. **Ask how they made that happen.** The second step of scanning for exceptions is to help them accept responsibility: “How did you make that happen?” Some might respond, “I don't know, I just did it,” or give credit to someone or something outside their perceived range of control. Stay with this until they take ownership. They can always find something they did that was an exception to the stated problem. Then you can encourage them to do more of what works. Let's say the Four recalls jokes others made about how difficult it would be to carry out his idea, so he backed down from pushing it and invited their opinions about what some of the difficulties might be.
5. **If they report no exceptions to the problem, suggest closer observation.** There are almost always exceptions. No one is something *all* the time. If you stick with this process, you're likely to find at least one instance where the problem did not occur. In the case of the Four, if he says he's never stifled his anger, ask him to observe during the next week even a small example of

1. Rapport
2. Self-observation
3. Possibility language
4. **Solution focus**
5. Both/and thinking
6. Breakthrough practices

Get a brief problem description.

Ask how a solution will look.

Find exceptions to the problem.

Ask how they made that happen.

Do more of what works.

Suggest practice to look further for exceptions to the problem.

not acting on his anger, and to pay attention to how he does that. Notice you're using a presupposition – expecting he will find exceptions, however small. Most likely he will.

6. **Do one part of the solution that's likely to succeed.** If, even after looking for small exceptions, they still draw a blank, together you can create an action that will fulfill the solution to some degree and is likely to succeed. In the case of the Four, part of his solution is to have more influence. You might explore influence strategies with him and pick one action he likes that's different from his usual past response. That becomes his practice for the next week.

If they report no exceptions to the problem, co-create achievable steps.

Then you reflect back what he's said, helping him remember what he already knows how to do.

Once you have examples of exceptions to the problem, you can use possibility language. Your Four employee came in with a problem that couldn't be solved, the general and fatalistic statement, "I have a terrible problem with anger." You've already put the problem in the past. Now you can add, "So when you notice others focusing on the barriers (present tense), you'll invite discussion about their concerns and increase the likelihood they'll welcome your ideas." (Future tense.)

Now you can use possibility language.

Practice

1. Try this yourself when you feel stuck: instead of getting mired down in a problem, think of a time when you were able to solve the same or a similar problem.
2. Ask, "How did I get unstuck that time? How could I do more of what has worked before?"
3. Now coach someone else using this technique. Don't worry about getting it perfect. If you forget some of the steps, just remember the principle: focus on solutions, not problems.

