



BABEŞ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY
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DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT

DOCTORAL THESIS

Summary

**USEFULNESS OF THE SOLUTION-FOCUSED
APPROACH TO TEAM DEVELOPMENT**

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Key words

Solutions Focus approach, Team Development, Team Coaching, Solution-Focused Team Development, and Team & Teamwork.

Introduction

A working definition of a team will include three aspects: (1) a group of people, (2) who interact between themselves in order to attain (3) a common goal or purpose. In an organizational setting, the team is considered to be the smallest working unit of several individuals.

How can such a team be at its best, where "best" can be changed and improved from time to time? - Is there any way to achieve it fast enough and with a lasting effect?

Recent literature emphasize the importance of developing the team members to be leaders. Every team should strive to be a team that consists of leaders as its members. That, of course, puts the team leader as a leader of leaders. In the 21st century, people want to be challenged, involved and empowered. The meaning the team members look for lies in having something that is bigger than them. Beyond just coming to work as a team and to produce results, they want to make a difference, to continue to grow and to develop. Team Development is a means of achieving it.

Corporations increasingly organize workforces into teams, a practice that gained popularity in the '90s. By 2000, roughly half of all U.S. organizations used the team approach; today, virtually all do.

This study looks into a relatively new way to develop teams: the Solution-Focused way. Though it is new as a research objective, working with teams in organizations using the Solution-Focused approach has been reported in the last decade. The research aim of this study was to explore what affect might the Solution Focus approach has on a team, through a Team Development activity.

To many authors, the term Team Development refers to an activity that aims to develop the team. This concept is parallel to Organizational Development - an activity which purpose is to help an organization to be more effective and more efficient. In some books, Team Development, Team Building and Team Coaching are all synonyms. Others might differentiate between them. Team Coaching is getting the team to focus on what they actually do together. It is about what the team wants to be.

There are many ways, many professional disciplines and many models of executing the Team Development process. The Solution-Focused approach, officially entered the organization domain around a decade ago.

The Solution-Focused approach was created by Steve de Shazer in 1988 with his colleague Insoo Kim Berg, as an approach for achieving effective results in individual and family therapy. The challenge that this approach met, was providing an answer to the question of: how to be effective in a short time, keeping the process simple and positive - working on what is possible and avoiding endless search for reasons to what does not work.

This work aims to contribute to the knowledge of working with teams, the Solution-Focused way.

Structure of the thesis

Table 1. Structure of the thesis

Part I: Introduction	<u>Chapter 1:</u> Research idea and Conceptual framework	
Part II: Literature review	<u>Chapter 2:</u> Teams and team development - Teams in organizations and managing teams	<u>Chapter 3:</u> The Solution-Focused Approach - Principles and the way it works
Part III: Methodology and analysis	<u>Chapter 4:</u> Research Methodology and Process - the qualitative case study	<u>Chapter 5:</u> Findings - From the analysis of qualitative data
Part IV: Discussion and Conclusions	<u>Chapter 6:</u> Discussion - Personal and theoretical contribution and managerial implications of the research	

The thesis contains six chapters, covering the theoretic, methodological and practical aspects of its subject.

Chapter 1, "Introduction", introduces the conceptual framework of the thesis and provides the setting for the relevant literature review and methodological direction.

Chapter 2, "Teams and Team Development: background literature", examines the literature background concerning the work of teams and their characteristics and the aspects of team development as a means of maintaining and improving the work of the teams - their effectiveness and their efficiency.

Chapter 3, "The Solution-Focused Approach: background literature", addresses the SF approach from its unique principles as an approach used for obtaining effective and simple brief therapy to its transition to the organizational setting - first by consultants and coaches, and later - by managers themselves.

This approach includes a special set of tools and techniques that support the stated principles. From individual to group settings of work, this research looks at its implication in a team setting.

Chapter 4, "Research Methodology and Process", describes the methodological careful attentions in designing the research under qualitative approach, which enables to investigate the perceptions, attitudes, norms and values of the participants, and to analyse their behaviour. The case study method was found to be the most appropriate one, as it is best fit when "how" or "why" questions are asked, when the researcher has little or no control over events and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon, within a real-life context. The case selected for this research is that of a production management team in an Israeli organization, consisted of one team leader and five team members.

Table 2 summarizes the research questions, as well as data sources, research tools and methods of analysis. Issues of trustworthiness, reliability and validity were properly addressed, as well as ethical considerations and attention to the role of the researcher.

Qualitative information was the basis of the analysis, derived from interviews, minutes written during the process of the team development workshop, and data from the researcher's diary.

Table 2. Relations between research questions and methods

Research question	Methods and data sources	Justification
<p><u>Overall research question:</u> How is the team different, using the Solution-Focused approach in Team Development?</p> <p><u>Specific research questions:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How will the team respond to the idea and principles of the SF approach? 2. How will team members behave and interact differently, during and following the SFTD activity? 3. How will the team members' language be affected by using a SF approach in the TD activity? 	<p><u>Interviews with informants:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The interview prior to the TD activity • The interview after the TD activity • The team leader and the team members as the informants <p>~~~~~</p> <p><u>Documentations:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flip chart papers recording points discussed • Notes and minutes recording the agreements and decisions taken in the team during the Team Development activity • Researcher's notes taken: prior, during and following the Team Development activity, describing process and the team behaviour <p>~~~~~</p> <p><u>Analysis of documents:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Described notes about language used and kinds of behaviour • Answers given in interviews • Research diary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews with informants that represent the team members and the team as a whole provide their thoughts, feelings and described experiences both on the way the team operates and on how teamwork issues are being presented, handled and executed • Interviews with the team leader and members provide information about the way the team operates, based on their own daily terminology • The language used, enable a better accuracy of themes and changes occurring during the process and following it <p>~~~~~</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The documentary analysis of informants' comments and elaborations in the Team Development activity as well as analysis of other sources like the notes of the reflections - taken in the process reveal implicit and unconscious behaviour
	Multiple data sources and methods of analysis	Using triangulation secures validity and reliability of the research

Findings

Chapter 5, "Findings", presents the findings of the research and shows the main themes found through the content analysis of all the data.

The first theme found was the change in language - from past tense to future tense. Team members used it as a mindset: describing what was achieved, in future tense rather than in past tense. The question: "What is different?" the team members expressed more what they will do differently in the future and how the teamwork will look from now on.

The second theme was the disappearance of the word "problem". The Solution-Focused approach emphasis the solution over the problem mindset. Team members, used any possible term but the 'problem' word: delay, obstacle, complaint - were used to address issues, but no one mentioned problems.

The third theme was the Positivity theme - both in attitude and in language. The amount of the use the word "No", decreased and almost hardly used and members in the team paid more attention to what can be done and what is possible rather than talking about what is bad or wrong. They became more aware to what was improving during the workshop process, leaving behind the need what didn't change.

The fourth theme - Proactivity. The team members shift their attention, both in speaking and in actions to become more proactive in their behavior: thinking ahead, initiating ideas and offering assistance even before being asked to, and acting to promote and advance the actions.

Chapter 6, "Discussion and conclusions", examines researcher's contribution to the research, theoretical contribution of the research, different ideas for managerial implications as well as practical implications deriving from the research.

Theoretical and practical contributions

The Solution-Focused approach can extract itself to the effectiveness and the efficiency of teams. Yet, as the findings show, the contribution is far more than mere improvement in making a team more effective and more efficient.

The positive aspect of this approach seemed to help in reducing stress, by eliminating drama situations and looking at what is there in a more realistic observation and, fast enough, coming with an answer to the question of what can be done in a given situation.

Many aspects of the Solution-Focused approach are vital to managing - decision-making and positive execution. So even if not all the principles of the SF approach are adopted, and only some of the techniques are practiced, important value is added to the way managers work. By introducing it as a culture, new ways of effective conduct are implemented in an organization. In such a way, a more positive and effective behavior becomes the leading way of interacting.

Research limitations

Any research, by the nature of its design and execution, meets its limitations. This is especially so with qualitative research, that could be considered as less objective than a positivistic quantitative one. All the same, this methodology was found to be the most appropriate for a research dealing with complex social issues, while working on providing the information that will be of use to develop a theoretical model.

Working with a single case study limits the information but at the very same, in this research, it was useful in providing an important and relevant data and information to support the theoretical model of using the Solution-Focused approach to reach useful effect on a team, through Team Development. This research provided and outlined some potential directions for further research.

Another limitation comes as a result of the team being a management team. It is possible that working team in an organization with no management accountability might be affected somehow differently. Nevertheless, management teams are in fact

the most appropriate teams to appraise new approaches in organizational setting. More than that, information from that study could be used for expanding the impact to other teams in the same organization and/or other organizations.

The absence of parallel approaches to offer supporting similar results, might open the door for critics to claim that other kind of themes might have been more appropriate in this research.

Further research can mitigate limitations of that nature and provide more information to further actualize the theoretical usefulness of the Solution-Focus approach to team development.

Practical implications for using the SF approach with teams

This research contributes and encourages professionals to address this approach to teams in all their kinds of forms: management teams, project teams, cross-functional teams, self-directed work teams (SDWT) and many more.

This approach can be used for teams who want to change their mode of operation to a more proactive mode, without even expressing it as the primary goal.

Making teams more positive and more responsible can be another practical contribution. And, if done with all the teams in an organization - it is a very practical way of achieving organizational transformation in its culture.

Managing teams positively and simply, using the Solution-Focused approach, can be another objective for getting results in a short time.

One stated implication is that SF in teams influences the attitude of the team members, both towards the tasks and objectives and towards the inter-relations with one another and other stakeholders. Therefore it might be useful, that an activity such as going through a Solution-Focused Team Development, might be used in order to make a positive change in the team's attitude, more than actually working on improving the way the team works.

Findings of this research indicate the need of further research on many of the presented concepts. All of them are in the centre of the research.

In order to explore the possible common denominators of the SFTD activity, it would be useful to have a similar research with different kinds of teams. With the same token, choosing different positioned teams in the organizational hierarchy might reveal other important and new information.

Finally, extracting the research to a whole span of groups, other than teams, such as: communities, large groups (around fifty people and above), tribes in organizational context and organizational units in organization, such as departments, divisions and the like, could open the gates for further implications.

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