

Brief Coaching: Inviting lasting change simply

by Dr. Peter Szabó

Coaches sometimes report incidents of lasting client change set in motion within a brief period of time – occasionally even within just one single session. Is it pure coincidence or are there particular success factors that make such change more likely?

At the 2007 EMCC Coaching conference in Stockholm I am planning a live coaching demonstration involving a client with a (work-) life balance goal. Can a coaching be brief and effective even with a typically intricate topic like life balance? Of course there are no guarantees about achieving lasting solutions in a single session. Nevertheless I hope to find out more about relevant factors of being brief and effective at the same time. ¹

What might some of the factors be that invite lasting change simply?

The pre-session thoughts and experiences described below might deliver helpful hints of where to look for answers.

Pre-session thoughts about life balance and briefness

Obviously I have no ways of really knowing in advance what will in fact turn out to be useful and work for a specific client. Yet these preliminary thoughts might possibly be helpful:

- Aiming the session at making a beginning. A single coaching session can by definition only be about working on a beginning with the client. There are just no follow-up sessions to support the follow through. This could turn into an advantage with life balance. Maybe it is easier to tackle the topic with a series of new and different beginnings than with a start and follow through. My best hopes for the session are, that the process of making a

beginning becomes so simple and attractive for the client, that he is tempted to repeat the process again and again on his own.

Somewhat like surfers at the ocean shore: when they have enjoyed riding one wave they paddle back out to catch the next one. ²

- Catching a strong wave

Wanting more life balance is sometimes connected to something especially important and dear to the client. Given the fact that we only have 30 minutes it might be useful to carefully look out for such a particular attractor for the client. Maybe there will be a moment when the client talks with this special glow in the eyes or this special clarity of voice. Catching such an energy and asking more about it's possible future effects might prove worthwhile for the conversation and also (re)connect the client with a powerful picture for long lasting results.

Sometimes surfers let a lot of waves pass by while waiting for the one with strong potential that is likely to take them all the way to the shore.



¹ For the last 15 years I was supposing, that merely the use of solution-focused questions as proposed by the work of STEVE DE SHAZER and INSOO KIM BERG would create the difference in briefness. Since the recent publication of the book "Appreciative Coaching" by OREM /BINKERT /CLANCY I start to realize that coaches can use the very same solution-focused questions and still apply them for a long term coaching relationship. Hence my search for additional factors that make coaching brief and effective.

² The analogies about surfers, waves and rides are due to the fact that I have just started to learn surfing this summer. Video (me on the left): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9eqwllhgD8>

- Economizing efforts

My best hope is that clients can find ways of more life balance as simply as possible (considering that daily work life necessities are challenging enough as they are). The more simple the change the bigger the chances of keeping it up in a lasting manner. Doing more of what clients already know how to do is usually more effective than putting into practice new skills. This leads to coaching questions like: “Of all the things you have been trying so far, which has been working best?” or “Of all the possible next steps that you talked about, which would be the easiest for you to start with?” If you do not want to get exhausted as a surfer while paddling to catch the wave (especially at my age of 50) you quickly learn to use as few and as effective strokes as possible.

Experiences and principles of Brief Coaching³

The two following examples may illustrate some principles of Brief Coaching in practice.

The first example, a conversation with my daughter, lasted only a few minutes – brief even by my standards (!).

The second, with an upper-level manager on his way further up, was just one single session; we agreed on two hours.

Both examples illustrate principles of “...being efficient with our coaching by helping clients get to where they want to be this week or this month, rather than just this year.”⁴

Example A: “Dad, can you coach me?”⁵

One evening our eldest daughter, Anna-Julia (13 years old at that time) asked me to coach her about a school project she had to write on Rumania. Tears were running down her face as she explained how she had just too much work going on at the same time. She was really desperate. She handed me a pile of paper. I leafed around in it and asked:

“Help me understand this Rumania project a little better. Let’s take a scale of 1 to 10. 10 means that you are holding the fully completed project in your hand and 1 means that you haven’t done anything in this matter. Where are you in the moment?”

“Maybe at a 3”, she said hesitantly.

“Already a 3? Ok so tell me: what have you already achieved, so that you are at 3 and not still at 1?”

“Well, you can see, I have all these print-outs from the internet!” She pointed at the pile in my hand, and as I looked at the pages some more, she explained: “I’ve already talked to my classmate about how we will divide the parts, but, you know, I haven’t found anything on sports.”

“Ok, there is nothing on sports yet – and what else have you done to get to 3?”

“I marked all the passages that are interesting, then I collected headings for the table of contents, but I really don’t know what exactly I could write about Rumanian music.”

“Sure, there’s still something missing!” I leafed on. “What else have you done?”

“Well, we recorded the documentary that was on television, but we still have to pick the scenes that we could show.”

“And all of this together is a 3 on your progress scale?”

“Well, actually this is more of a 4 because I did type a draft on “culture” and “geography” into the computer.”

After a short moment she gave me a big smile, poked me with her elbow and said: “Hey, Dad, I am already at a four, cool!”

With that, she was gone, a smile on her face and lightness in her steps.



³ this part of the paper has been published in “Coaching at Work” Magazine, September 2007

⁴ SIR JOHN WHITMORE in his advance acclaim for the book „Brief coaching for lasting solutions“

⁵ For more detail about this coaching conversation see: www.solutionsurfers.com → Resources → Further Material → Papers: “Brief Coaching: Dad can you coach me?”

I had almost forgotten our short conversation, when Anna-Julia came down to lunch a week later with a huge smile and proudly announced that she was at 7 on the progress scale for her quarterly project. “I told all my friends my Dad was coaching me!”

1. Staying on top of the wave of change

From a technical point of view in this short conversation above I just asked scaling questions, two very simple interventions with two distinct functions and an apparently lasting success:

- Determining the actual position (“Where are you now on a scale of 1 to 10?”).

Merely introducing a scale often helps clients to look at things from a more distant perspective. It is like moving from drowning in the rough sea of perceived problems onto a safe surfboard that helps one to stay in a position to ride the waves.

- Reinforcing what is already there (“What have you already achieved between 1 and 3?”).
Inviting clients to look at the progress already made can increase clients’ confidence that whatever they are up to can be done. The very same question can be asked repeatedly to elicit even more information about what clients have successfully done so far (“What else?”). Like a compliment it reinforces what the client is already doing that works for them, and possibilities for further change. In surfing this translates to catching up with the existing speed of an arriving wave so it picks you up to takes you further along.

2. Creating choice in client perception

By asking our coaching questions we influence how clients observe their own actions and perceive “reality”. The fastest way to change is frequently to offer clients a choice of what parts of reality they want to pay attention. When Anna-Julia asked me to coach her, she imagined that she had no choice; the only slice of reality that she could perceive was defined by what was still missing in her project.

- Creating choice: As a coach I figuratively sit next to my clients, look at what they perceive

as reality, and confirm (“Ah, yes, this is not easy” – meaning the missing things between 3 and 10 on the scale). But by giving clients a tap on the shoulder⁶, coaches can point their attention towards a different slice of reality (“... and over there, tell me what’s over there?” – meaning things existing between 1 and 3).

(This is not about negating what clients initially perceive when they are stuck. It is about making it possible for them to look at other pieces of the same reality and then to exercise the freedom to decide whether they want to keep looking at what is missing [sic] or to notice what is already there, or at both next to one another.)⁷

- Gentle nudging: In my experience clients first tend to forget about the freshly created choice and fall back on their initial limited perception (“but I have nothing on sports”). Sometimes clients need a gentle reminder of their choice while acknowledging what they say. (“yes, nothing on sports AND what else have you done to get to 3?”).



Example B: Improving on a Personality Profile

Dave, a 38 year old upper-level manager in the pharmaceutical industry had called me about coaching and we decided to meet for a first and potentially only session of two hours. I usually agree with clients to work until “things get better enough” explaining that Brief Coaching is about helping them to get a head start so they can carry on the change process drawing on their own resources as quickly as possible.

⁶INSOO KIM BERG (BERG/DE SHAZER 1994, BFTC Audio Tape: A Tap on the Shoulder: six useful questions in building solutions.)

⁷“No problem can be solved by the same kind of consciousness that created it” ALBERT EINSTEIN.

Session goal:

We started immediately right into “what needs to happen in this session so it turns out most useful to you?”

Dave explained that in a recent workshop of the entire management crew his “I” in the “DISC” Personality Profile⁸ had turned out very low. Results showed his Interaction (=I) in relationships was around “12” normally, and could go up to “50”. The “I”s of his colleagues, however, were generally more around 70. “I want to reach 70 but in my own fitting style”, he said.

In this case the “scale between 1 and 100 on a profile score” was introduced by the client himself. Scales help client and coach to get clarity and understanding of what they are talking about. It becomes easy to move between relevant positions on the scale representing different client behaviours.⁹

Positive effects of reaching the goal:

“Dave, suppose you could get to 70 somehow, how would you act differently at 70 in your own fitting style?” It turned out that the most relevant difference would be having full trust and support by his boss. This was very important to him and something he longed for. “I do not know how I can contribute to that in a way that I am comfortable with” he said, “many things that my peers do to earn trust from others and build the relationship are just not my style.”

Asking about positive effects of reaching the goal usually clarifies what is important to the client and what makes the idea of change so attractive. Clients are true experts in knowing which powerful wave to pick to take them further.

Existing resources:

When I asked about recent examples of him reaching at least somewhere close to 70 he could not recall anything relevant at first. But the more I asked questions about his existing competency to interact, the better his memory got:

- how had he managed to get up to middle management in his career so far?
- how had he contributed to the trust and sup-

port of his earlier superiors?

- when had there been even shortest moments of trust and support from his current boss?

We spent more than an hour with just the questions above until he came to realize that there had been relevant instances of him being at 60 and even 75 on his scale. I became more and more impressed and fascinated with his competencies and integrity in shaping relationships and getting results.

One useful success story was when Dave was given full management responsibility to turn around a desolate production plant early on in his career, and the other one was fairly recent when he had just taken the initiative to fly over to troubleshoot in a conflict situation in his current job. In both examples he had somehow been granted trust in advance by his superiors. We worked at developing a richly detailed picture of his behaviour that had made the difference in enabling his superiors’ to be fully trusting and confident.

A client well aware of his own resources is the best guarantee for lasting results after the coach is gone. Surfers who have once experienced using the power of a wave and their own skill in standing up and riding it to the shore are liking to get hooked in a useful way. Co-creating this awareness of the client’s resourcefulness may take a lot of gentle nudging and persistence from the coach. However, putting in this persistent and focused work in the first session is one way to be brief while still being effective in coaching.

Observable clues for further progress:

Fifteen minutes before the end of the session we got around to discussing how he would notice further progress within the next days and weeks. He easily came up with a long list of things he could do AND which would authentically fit his personality. He was obviously inspired, recalling what had already worked for him in his career.

⁸The DISC Profile generates insights about personal work behaviour. One of the four items “I” stands for “Interaction”. See: <http://www.mydiscprofile.com/>
⁹I did not know he tool at the time of our conversation. The advantage of staying at surface of scaling is that I do not need to understand the details of a given tool in order to be helpful in the forward moving process.

We discussed where these different action ideas would put him on the scale (mostly between 50 and 70) and how he would notice new reactions from his boss.

Making future progress noticable through detailed descriptions adds choice to the client's perception. Clients develop differently when they know which first signs of the desired behaviour to look out for – so that they consciously register improvements when they happen to arise.¹⁰ In this phase of the coaching it was important to define clear clues of how Dave would notice even slightly improved trust and support by his boss. Reactions by others often create lasting reinforcement of useful client behaviour.

We agreed he would contact me if he thought that more coaching would be useful.

I had not heard from Dave until I called him 4 months later to ask his permission to use the work we did together for this article. In our short conversation he mentioned that things are very rough at work plus he pointed out how he has strong trust and support from his boss. (sic)

Getting back to the initial question about factors that create lasting change in a simple manner maybe you are just as curious as I am to learn:

- How might these ideas apply to YOUR work?
- And how do YOU go about inviting simple but sustained change



¹⁰The most frequent feedback I get from clients about the effect of their brief coaching is that “the problem did not show up again”. This could be due to an effectively changed behaviour or due to a changed choice in perception. Either way the change that occurred seemed to be a lasting one regardless of the simplicity and briefness of the coaching.

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Live demonstration of Brief Coaching with Peter Szabó

Teleconferences 6pm - 7pm UK time:

- Wednesday, October 24th 2007
- Tuesday, November 20th 2007
- additional dates will be announced at www.solutionsurfers.com

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