

Getting a team working together.

Establishing more effective ways of working for a senior team.

Co-authors: Daniel Meier and Peter Szabó
Comments by Jenny Clark and Mark McKergow, SFWORK, UK

In this case study about team coaching, we see how two coaches provided the initial support for a new team of managers keen to find rules and procedures that everyone would follow. By focusing on the Future Perfect, they found a higher level desire to work well together, allowing them to overlook the more contentious issue of rules and procedures.

The management team of EB Zurich, a large institute for further education in Switzerland had just been through two extremely intensive years. They had had to deal with a merger between two different state schools, and the management team had grown from five to seven and then finally nine people.

In order to implement this change successfully, the management team hired the coaches Peter Szabó and Daniel Meier to work with them. In the initial conversation with Peter and Daniel, the managing director and his closest co-worker reported communication difficulties in the management team:

- Agreed procedures are not implemented
- Agenda items at the management team meeting are not well enough prepared
- Endless discussions ensued
- It is difficult to make decisions.

In short, they wanted to establish clear rules for working with each other – and they wanted these rules to be followed!

In this first conversation, the coaches listened very carefully and asked questions about the desired future:

“If this team coaching measure turns out to be successful, what will be different afterwards?”
“Who will be the first to notice a change – and what will they notice?”

Peter and Daniel let us eavesdrop on them talking about the situation:

Peter: What the two managers just described sounds very difficult and there does not seem to be much hope. I don't really know where we could start here.

Daniel: Yeah, you are right. But I am also amazed at the fact that they are asking for help so early. This does indicate a broad perspective and real interest in the issue. In many other teams, the external coach is only called in when things are so bad that the team can't work together any more.

Peter: OK. Do you think one initial day plus a half day follow up will be long enough for the coaching?

Daniel: I hope so. I am more concerned about how we are going to deal with the goal that they mentioned: “Establishing clear rules for working together.” It bothers me a bit because I don't think that these rules and regulations are very helpful in general. But I don't see any alternatives at this point.

Peter: I was thinking along the same lines. It would be really nice if we could work on increasing choices rather than on strict rules. So, we would open up choices that support their common goal of working together better.

Daniel: Yes, definitely. That would also be more fun. First look at what has been working already and then open up new possibilities.

What difference will the goals make?

This is an interesting conversation which suggests that the coaches didn't much like the clients' goals! However, as we see later, Peter and Daniel have a neat way of responding to stated goals by asking something like “and what difference will that make?” This can lead to higher level goals – for example “working together better”.

The first day of the workshop

On the first day of the workshop, the team and both coaches met just outside Zürich, at the edge of the forest with a view of the city.

At the beginning the coaches asked the members of the teams to introduce themselves briefly. They were asked to say which characteristics of their colleagues they valued in their work together. This already set a nice platform for mutual appreciation within the team and surfaced first hints on what behaviour was considered useful. The next step was to clarify the expectations and goals for the workshop.

After that, the coaches took a long strip of masking tape and taped it onto the floor across the whole room. They asked the members of the management team to position themselves on the tape:

“One end means that all your problems and questions concerning the way you work together are solved satisfactorily. If you put yourself at 10, your work would be so outstanding that it could be video-taped and distributed widely as an example of ‘best practice’. And on the opposite end of the scale, at the other end of the masking tape, we have number 1: the absolute opposite of that, so that you could hardly bear to work with your colleagues for two more days. Where on this scale are you now?”

After the individual managers had positioned themselves on the scale (between 3 and 6), they were asked to work in small groups. The task was to have a close look and identify what was already going well in the way they worked together, allowing to say they were higher than 1 on the scale. The participants were invited to look for small things, events, or experiences that were already pointing into the desired direction.

In small groups, the participants were then asked to develop common rules for working together in future on the basis of these findings. During this exercise, the groups discovered valuable clues pointing to what was already working well. For example, they noticed that they collaborated effectively and without tension when they were in small groups. They also found

concrete hints for an efficient and appreciative facilitation of the management team meeting and realised what the structure of the agenda for their meetings could look like.

It was only when the three groups presented their “rules of management” that they had developed that first intensive discussions broke out. Some suggestions were diametrically opposed to others, and it seemed that these three sets of ideas could never ever be collated or integrated. One suggestion was based on consensus, another aimed at delegating to committees which would then decide with a single majority, and the third group wanted to install individual small cells which divide the work. The realisation of these differences took out a lot of the enthusiasm and the team went to lunch.

Let’s listen to the coaches talking among themselves at lunchtime:

Peter: How can we possibly be helpful so that they can find a solution together?

Daniel: I don’t see a way at the moment either. Maybe they simply need more time?

Peter: How do you manage to stay so calm and relaxed when they start debating so intensively? It is all about problems, there are no perspectives. We lost control of the conversation and I was afraid that we would lose the control completely.

Daniel: I simply assume that there will be something useful in it for them. And honestly, I’m waiting for them to get tired of the discussion. This would be the right moment to start asking question again. And additionally – if we believe in the ability of the team to organise themselves just a bit, then we know that these nine people must have the capacity to fight and then draw something constructive out of it.

Peter: You think that we sometimes just need more time until a whole team recognises a wave that is worth surfing on? You are probably right, but it is often so difficult to wait and to keep trusting the competencies of the people involved.

Daniel: Yes, that is not easy for me either. And they didn’t seem to be getting tired. I think what also helped me to stay calm was that I did not

understand much of what they were discussing. I could concentrate very well on understanding nothing and then asking a few targeted questions.

Peter: It was useful that you asked them “what do you want instead” every once in a while. “What would it have to be like so that you could work well in this management team.”

Daniel: How about dropping the issue of the rules and regulation for the moment and continuing with the Future Perfect? First develop a practical, action-oriented vision of the future and then later have the rules and regulations reflect that vision?

Peter: Sounds reasonable, although I am afraid that the Future Perfect will again produce infinite various ideas. Actually, they wanted to take back the rules and regulations into their usual management team meetings.

Pick a route that looks fruitful.

If one route seems to be a blind alley, approach things from a different direction. Here, Peter and Daniel decide to look at the Future Perfect and then – perhaps – work out what rules and regulations might help get there. We sometimes call this back casting – building and expanding on the Future Perfect to look at what else must be happening to sustain it.

Visiting the Future Perfect

The team agreed to drop the issue of rules for the time being and to work on a vision for the future together. First, they developed the “future perfect” individually and then went out for a walk with a partner. After an hour or so, the whole group reconvened.

Christa was the first to speak up. “Felix and I realised that our visions are very similar. When it is really going well in the “future perfect”, we are looking forward to the meeting. The paper work is short and concise, summarised to capture the essentials. We also have the opportunity to add other topics to the agenda ourselves.”

The coaches then asked the following questions:

- Imagine you are really looking forward to the session, what would be the other consequences?

- Are there any other ideas about what the future should look like?
- If we dropped by in a couple of months, how would we as coaches know that your trust in each other has increased and you are comfortable giving positive and negative feedback?
- If you knew each other better, what would be different then?

(This last question was suggested by the group. They felt like victims being thrown together by fate, with little in common and no desire to get to know each other better.)

This generated a very constructive sequence with a lot of energy. The participants then reflected in pairs about what they could do themselves to take small steps into the direction of the future perfect. “What can each and every one do in our daily life to support the process constructively?” At the end of this sequence, there was a choice of 20 different concrete alternatives for action nicely written out on postcards and put on the floor. There were cards like “discuss informally before bringing into the meeting” or “prepare alternative options when asking for a team decision”. The participants proudly presented their ideas on what they might do different individually in the future.

Back to the coaches talking among themselves:

Peter: Hey, now this was a classic example of opening choices. Did you notice how the individual participants suddenly showed energy and were amazed at how improved working together can consist of many small building-blocks?

Daniel: Yes, I am also very impressed with the careful way the team dealt with this process. However, we have not finished this rules and regulations thing. We are running out of time.

Peter: And we haven’t introduced the practical communication tools that we promised. What do you think, what do we want to give them to take home, scaling maybe?

Daniel: Exactly. They could spend the last five minutes at the end of each meeting scaling their communication and thus keep the process going. A short phase of focusing their awareness

on where they are now and what has worked already?

Peter: We could demonstrate this at the end, right here. And then we could ask them to take away the flipcharts with the rules and regulations and continue working on them.

Daniel: What do you think about just asking them what should happen with the flipcharts. If we don't know what to do with them, maybe they do?

Peter: That's a great idea - taking seriously the client as expert. Yes indeed!

Sparklers

The question of what to do with the rules and regulations flipchart caused another heated half-hour discussion. The team finally agreed to postpone the discussion to the next workshop. Just before the end, Peter had a suggestion. He said: "I brought a tool with me for you. It is called 'sparkler'! As if by magic, he produced a pack of sparklers from his bag. "I will hand out one sparkler to each of you. We'll conduct a small, secret experiment with them. Every time you notice that a colleague acted a little bit like you would like him her or to do you secretly place a sparkler (or a picture of a sparkler!) on his or her desk. Take care that nobody sees you and don't talk about it to the person. Who 'sparkled' whom and for what will stay a secret until our next meeting. If you get a sparkler yourself, of course, you can continue to 'sparkle'".

Two weeks later, a team member wrote an e-mail saying: "Thanks again for this team workshop. The situation is more relaxed now. The sparklers have definitely contributed to this."

Create conversations about positive change. The purpose of the sparklers here is as a mechanism to create conversations about positive change. Such conversations can be difficult with some kind of 'excuse' or prop to help them. Perhaps birthday cards serve a similar purpose in everyday life?

Coaches talking among themselves:

Daniel: What in the world made you think of the sparklers?

Peter: You asked me to bring some Christmas material when we called last night so I just saw some leftover sparklers and brought them along. And then while they were presenting their ideas I suddenly had the idea of how to use them. I thought it might help them to continue to focus on small successes and support them in their everyday life. Small changes in behaviour disappear quickly if they are not noticed and appreciated.

Daniel: On the one hand everyone is showing a certain awareness of the things that they perceive as changes – whether the other person has really changed something or not. On the other hand, everybody who receives a sparkler on their desk will ask him or herself what exactly they got it for. What he or she did that already points in the Future Perfect direction. And thus the focus of awareness remains on the desired changes.

The second team workshop

The management team met the two coaches for half-day follow-up four weeks later. The team (in groups of three) was given the task of noting what had changed for the better in the last few weeks. What happened next in the plenary can really be called a "sparkling moment". By persistently and consistently asking what was better and what else, Peter and Daniel created a space that the nine members of the management team used to find out exactly which developments had taken place, however inconspicuous. They discovered more and more important details. At the end of the round, the participants were even comparing themselves to successful sport teams.

It was then time to revisit the three forms of rules and regulations suggested in the previous workshop. The individual groups were very well prepared for the presentation of their work and the advantages of each one were discussed.

The full group recognised the similarities and differences in the ideas. Occasionally, very different views and positions flared up – expressed more clearly than before. The discussion, however, stayed factual. The nine managers selected a few of their members to form a group to be responsible for the rules and regulations and work on a compromise. One participant said:

“But something tells me that something has been set in motion. We have not come to an agreement yet, but we don’t have to agree at this point. We have started to fight constructively and this is an essential difference to what used to happen before.”

Final round

Daniel started the final round by asking “On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the future perfect and 1 being the absolute opposite of that, where are you now at this point?” Everybody now was two or four points higher on the scale. Than they had been at the beginning of the first workshop.

The last quarter of an hour was used to answer the following: “What can you all do (together or individually) to maintain this improved number on the scale?”

Build confidence about sustaining change. We like this question – asking about sustaining change, not just more progress. Of course, these actions may well lead to further positive change too.

Marlise Leinauer leads the department responsible for training the trainers, and is part of the management team. She says:

“The workshop helped us to find out that we could work better in small groups and reinforced that way of working together. We became aware of this as a result of the workshop and could build on it – we became more efficient in the way we worked. This was an important step for us in working to bring together the different managers from the two schools.”

Peter and Daniel’s reflections

“Once again, we were amazed by the way that re-focusing people’s attention on what works changes their reality. We were really concerned towards the end of the first day, when they started arguing about the “rules of management” again – we thought we’d lost it. But the sparklers idea, which came to us from nowhere, intrigued people and restored the sense of appreciation and enthusiasm. And it led to the astonishing improvements we saw in the second session.”

We are fond of quoting William James who said “The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook.” In this case, Peter and Daniel demonstrate their wisdom in overlooking the contentious issue of rules and regulations by seeing them as just a means to an end – the end being better collaboration. By creating a better climate, the team are able to deal with their differences more constructively, knowing that their aspirations are similar.

Appendix to chapter: The eight elements of the “SolutionCircle”

The “SolutionCircle” tool was developed by Daniel Meier from the work of Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg. It consists of the following eight steps. They help tackle complex conflict situations in teams and enable them to use their energy for the sustainable development. Although presented in order here, the eight steps can be adapted to the situation.

1) Preparing the Ground

The first step serves to build trust in the coach and to agree on what is needed so that every one can participate fully. The coach creates the structure and the framework for the workshop, co-ordinates the procedure and roles and poses questions. The participants are responsible for the content and for developing solutions.

2) Expectations and Goals

The aim of this step is to define the criteria for success for the session. Which goals need to be met and which expectations fulfilled so that a participation in the workshop seems worthwhile? Here are some helpful questions that the coach might ask:

- What should happen in this workshop so that it is worthwhile for the participants to be there?
- What should be different after the workshop than before?
- How will you notice that you have reached your goal?

3) Hot Topics

In this step, we determine the “hot topics”, the things which need to be improved.

4) Highlights

The participants look for situations in which the problem or conflict occurred less or did not occur at all. They find out which competencies and skills enabled them to do this. The following questions might be used:

- What happened in the last weeks that seemed like a highlight as far as the problem is concerned?
- What exactly was different?
- What helped you to react in this way?
- What did you contribute to the fact that your colleague was able to react this way?

5) Future Perfect – developing an image of the solution

In the future perfect, the team develops a very precise picture of a future in which the problems are solved. Questions the coach might ask include:

- If the team developed exactly how we want it to – where would it stand in two years?
- What exactly would you be doing differently?
- What would others say about the team then?

6) Scaling Dance – what is already working well?

The individual members of the team assess the current situation in order to find out what has already worked in the past. Questions include:

- Imagine a scale of 1 to 10. Where are you now regarding the topic if 10 means the ideal state and 1 the absolute opposite?

- How did you manage to get to this point? What is the difference between 1 and this point?
- If you think about your highlights from step 5, where were they on the same scale? What is the difference here?
- What did you contribute personally so that you are on X on the scale?

7) Steps

In this step, the team decides on concrete measures that they can implement in the near future – preferably the following day.

8) Personal Mission

The coach gives an observation or action task to focus the awareness on certain aspects of the implementation. It is important to stay aware of what is starting to change for the better.

For more details and many practical tips on using SF ideas with teams, see Daniel’s book *Team Coaching with the SolutionCircle* (SolutionsBooks, 2005).

SolutionSurfers

Daniel and Peter founded the international Brief-Coach Training institute SolutionSurfers[®], based in Switzerland.

Daniel is the Director of the German speaking part of this association (www.weiterbildungsforum.ch), Peter leads the international Brief Coach Training Programme.

Contact:

peter.szabo@solutionsurfers.com
daniel.meier@solutionsurfers.com
www.solutionsurfers.com

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