

Solutions-focus and the five messages of the Schnäpper¹

by Peter Szabó

On the second day of their solutions-focused coach training, we find the participants standing in a circle. They are smiling and seem bit unsure about whether this is for fun or for real (or for something else or for not even that). All of them are holding a Schnäpper in their hands and are listening to the text of the solemn oath that they are about to swear:

"I ... , state your first name, ... solemnly swear that I will use the Schnäpper appropriately and for its very own purpose. When I have found a possible solution I will shut up, keep my solution to myself and let go. I will enable others to experience the satisfaction and joy of finding their own solutions."

All have agreed to swear this oath, even those who have not found a solution yet. Actually, they should be the most joyful participants since it is easier to swear this oath if you do not yet know a solution. However, it is the others, the ones that are elegantly holding the little stick between index finger and thumb to let it snap into its shaft with poise and a rich sound, whose faces are showing a sly grin.

After the oath, we celebrate the graduation from the course because, actually, there is nothing more to be said about solutions-focused coaching than what is hidden in the Schnäpper.

The first message of the Schnäpper is clear to all right after the oath:

„As a Coach control what you can control - your mouth“ as Tim Gallwey, one of the first management coaches put it. The answer is in the person who is asking the question – hints and advice are not appropriate. Self-confidence and learning only become possible when the searching person finds his or her answer for him- or herself. It is indeed surprising what profound wisdom can be found in the Schnäpper. Therefore, it is no wonder that the Schnäpper was presented as the "secret of solution-focused coaching" on the day before.

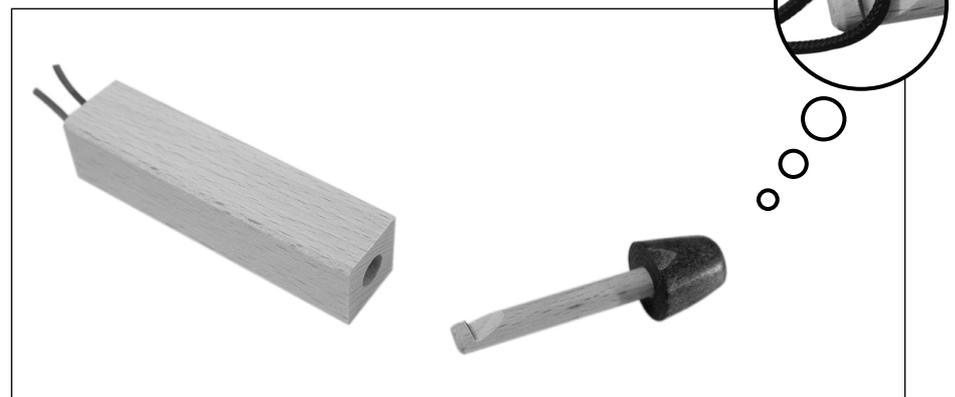
The second message, however, reveals itself only with Steve de Shazer's (the founder of solution oriented brief therapy) statement: **"There is no connection between problem and solution"** which he does not cease to explain with the innermost conviction. This is an outrageous statement when we look at it with our normal every-day perception. After all, we spend so much time thoroughly analyzing problems in order to be finally able to craft solutions from our

findings about the problem. The connection between problem and solution seems more than obvious. However, the Schnäpper impressively manifests what is probably meant by the contrary:

With the Schnäpper, it is absolutely useless to find out more about the problem or think about trying to solve it. The solution to be constructed has absolutely nothing to do with the constructed problem. By the way, every constructivist solution-oriented coach will confirm that this is not only the case with the Schnäpper but will all the daily problems that clients of coaches are dealing with.

Readers who do not yet know the Schnäpper will probably be shaking their heads by now – and of course they are right in doing so. All of this only makes sense when you have found a solution to the Schnäpper-puzzle. I would really like to explain it to you, but I fear I am bound by my oath – I cannot tell you anything about the solution. I can grant you insights into the common construction of the problem – even though this is usually not to much avail (see Figure 1):

Figure 1:
the construction of the problem:



¹ pronunciation: shnapur – stress on the a and almost no vowel in the "pur" part. Could also write it with the famous Swiss "li"-ending as "prly", but then you wouldn't know what to do with it, which would also be quite appropriate, come to think of it.

Now that you know the problem (hook the stick to the elastic) probably only Albert Einstein in person and the third message of the Schnäpper can supply the critical hint: **"No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it."** So now you know that as long as your consciousness is on the level of the construction of the problem, you will impossibly be able to find the solution.

And worse – you will not be able to use any of the following remarks as a useful hint, for you will ignore even the clearest hint toward a solution as long as your consciousness is hooked on the problem. If you like, I am more than willing to explain why (for coaches: Answers to the question WHY are not relevant for the solution, anyway): Our perception of reality works in such a way that we can only take up information of which we already have an existing inner representation. Everything else can not dock anywhere in our minds and is rejected immediately. Understanding can only be a rediscovery of what we already know. And thus you cannot rediscover what you are lacking in order to solve the Schnäpper-puzzle, even if I state it clearly in the following.

Therefore, we now turn our attention to the fourth message of the Schnäpper for the solutions-focused coach. The most meaningful instruction for coaches that the Schnäpper provides reveals itself with Thies Stahl, a therapist, who put it so nicely:

"to go beyond the delusion that everything is feasible – towards an attitude in which we don't unnecessarily stand in the way of miracles"

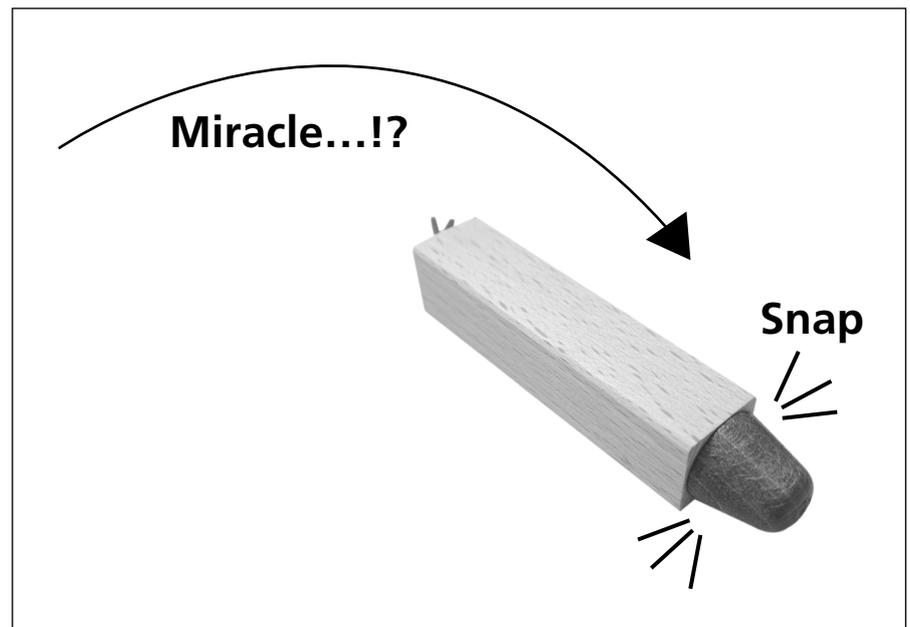
The famous miracle question! It is the perfect linguistic means to enable clients to shift into a different consciousness, namely into the awareness of the solution:

"Suppose, a miracle happened over night. The miracle is that the problem that brought you to me is solved, just like that! And because you were sleeping,

you don't know that the miracle happened and nobody tells you about it. In the morning, how are you going to start to discover that a miracle happened over night and that the issue has really been resolved?"* (see Figure 2)

stopped the teacher just in time. And in the break, the miracle happened with regard to the Schnäpper. The participant who was in the coach position and who had been playing with the Schnäpper the whole morning, suddenly shouted: "I got

Figure 2:
the construction of the solution



(Sorry, dear searchers on the Schnäpper-quest, I know, the least you need now is this stupid miracle question: what you want instead are real solutions in the hard reality of elastic, notch and case) In fact, solution-consciousness in the sense of Einstein, does not mean solving THE problem but letting go of the problem. And this is best possible the morning after the miracle.

To illustrate how this happens in real life let me tell you about what happened to two participants of the coaching course I referred to in the beginning. In one of the practice coachings, they were having a lot of trouble and were not getting anywhere.

They had been circling around the problem for over an hour so that the trainer was already seriously contemplating an intervention with well-intentioned advice and a coaching question that would lead out of the impasse. Luckily a break

it! I did it!". The second miracle happened after the break when the two participants took up the coaching again. The trainer was just about to place his supportive intervention when the coaching conversation between the two participants suddenly and unexpectedly took a turn to a new and productive level. Within a few minutes, not only the solution for the client appeared but also the next practical steps on the action level. Client and Coach were beaming with

*Marginal Note: Beware, persistent goal fetishism alone will not do- it really takes a miracle: if you are looking for a solution to the Schnäpper-puzzle and someone asks you for your goal, you will consistently say: "The goal is to catch the elastic with the notch in the little stick." The answer to the question about the goal typically is still part of the construction of the problem. And when an observer then repeats: "Exactly, the goal is to produce the snapping sound" this difference that makes a difference is ignored and you say: "There must be a trick!" – You really do need a miracle!

happiness, and the trainer was very happy not to have stood in the way of the miracle.

We have distributed the Schnäpper in the beginning of the course ever since – as an aid to the coaches and to take the load off the back of the trainer. If you have discovered the secret of the Schnäpper, it seems you can actually be more helpful as a coach.

So what does all of this have to do with Hans Fluri? After all this is a festschrift to celebrate his 60th birthday. Of course, Hans Fluri provided a significant contribution. (For me personally because he introduced me to THE Schnäpper which has now been the center of my professional learning as a coach for ten years and for which I am very grateful) However, his contribution is essential for the future of the whole trade. Hans Fluri has knighted the attitude of NOT-KNOWING. The longer I work as a coach, the more I experience that I can often be of help for the solutions of others when I have an attitude of affirmative not knowing. I don't really understand it, by the way (it seems, I am lacking a pre-existing inner representation) but I know it works.

Plus I can explain in detail HOW Hans managed to make this quality of not-knowing a desired virtue. It happened very quickly and in a truly simple way. We were standing around him and were trying to solve the Schnäpper-puzzle with increasing desperation. Hans said: "Actually, this is a test for intelligence!" (I still remember how I was instantly hurt in my pride.) "However," he continued "however, this is the only intelligence test that I know of which works the other way around: **The longer you don't know, the more intelligent you are.**" And this is the fifth message of the Schnäpper.

By the way, as a comfort to all the other intelligent people – after twenty years of intensively dealing with the Schnäpper (and after 10 years of intensively dealing with solutions-focused coaching) I still don't know how to do it – I mean REALLY (hooking the elastic with the notch and letting it snap) – but I became very successful in pretending as if ...

Peter Szabó
Unt. Batterieweg 73
CH-4059 Basel
(szabo@bluewin.ch)

Basle, September 2002