Realistic Career Guidance
Adopting solution-focused views and tools

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As coaches and career counselors, we have developed a way of career counseling we have found to be more realistic, more effective, and more fun. One inspiration is the work of INSEAD professor Herminia Ibarra, whose findings on career development collide well with our own experiences and preferences. Another very important inspiration has been the Solutions Focus, an approach to consultancy we have been using for several years now. We have experienced that this approach is highly applicable in career guidance, too, which was recently confirmed by a thesis written by Barbara Steiner (2004). In this article, we would like to explain how. We hope this will provide you with some useful new views and tools. This article is built up around four statements.

1. Careers are voyages of discovery
It is more realistic to view a career development as a voyage of discovery or a journey into the unknown than as planning your route with a predestined route map. Adopting this more open and dynamic view on careers helps to treat career guidance as a process of both discovery and choice. In this process you constantly take small steps forward and find out what suits you and how to proceed. Professor Ibarra has done extensive research on how effective career change takes place. She found that it is more realistic and effective to act your way into a new career than to think yourself into one. In other words, instead of putting a strong emphasis on analysis and understanding, she argues that it is wiser to emphasize taking small steps to find out which environments, tasks, and roles suit you well. Professor Ibarra's views seem to collide extremely well with our solution-focused perspective. In her own words:

> "The central point is to act more than you reflect. Do not spend a lot of time introspecting; start acting as soon as you can. It's not that introspecting isn't helpful, but people use that as an excuse not to try things out and you can stay paralyzed for a long time. I've seen people spend a year doing self-assessment or going to coaches and not trying anything."

2. Leading the client from behind works best
In our experience, 'leading the client from behind' works best. We leave decisions on the content and the directions of the process to the client and fully respect the way he or she views his or her situation. Instead of pushing him or her to conform to a predesigned process, we stand behind the client and open up new perspectives and possibilities by asking questions. Our questions are designed to help the client focus on discovering what he or she wants to achieve and aid the client in finding the resources to get there. In order to be successful, it is best to work within the framework of the client, therefore we try to use the language of the client as much as possible and hardly ever introduce new concepts or theories. A great advantage of this leading from behind approach is that it keeps the client from becoming dependent of the coach. Of course, there is no one best way to help people. Each client and each coach has his or her specific requirements in this sense and forcing generic views or prescriptions upon clients, we have often found to be fruitless.

3. A strengths focus is more effective than a deficit focus

Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton (2001) claim that to excel in your chosen field and to find lasting satisfaction in doing so, you primarily need to know and understand your strengths. It's really common sense: people won't hire you primarily for your weaknesses – why would they?- but for your strengths. So the career guidance should aim at identifying strengths and at finding out which particular organizations and jobs specifically need these strengths. Some ideas for how to identify strengths can be found here.

Jonathan came for career advice saying his situation was rather urgent. He had been working at a large public transportation company for several years. He had started as a management trainee and, after that he held several management jobs. At a certain point, he became restless. He was approaching his fourties and thought he had to try something different in his career. He had been doing his current job for about four years then and had been rather successful. In fact, a large organizational change project he had led had been successfully implemented. Now, he had run into an executive searcher who asked him to become managing director of a small consultancy firm. It seemed a good challenge and promised to be the kind of change he had been looking for. He decided to take the challenge and had now been in his new job for about three months. When he came to see us, he had discovered he really hated the job! He hated working in such a commercial environment and was bored with the fact that his role did not require him to do much more than to take care of business. He was sure he needed to get out and find something new. And he asked of us: "Please help me find a job of which I won't, again, say after a few months, that it doesn't fit me. We helped Jonathan identify his strengths by analyzing his situations of high performance and Jonathan was able to find out some real strengths and affinities. In the meantime, he found a job as a coordinator in calamity suppression. In this management job, he can use his organizational skills, he really has a chance to manage, and he does not have to work commercially but instead his work helps to deliver an important public service.

4. Solutions Focus tools are a great supplement

We have found that the tools and attitudes of the Solutions Focus approach are a great addition to the traditional toolkit of the career counselor (like using questionnaires, teaching networking skills etc.). In fact, we now mainly rely on these tools when coaching people in their career, and we can fully integrate the solutions focus and the traditional tools. For example, we use questionnaires that are entirely solution-focused or we help the client evaluate his or her application interviews in a solution-focused manner. As main solution-focused tools we would like to mention:

- <u>Scales</u>. The coach asks the coachee to imagine a scale from 0 to 10. The 10 stands for the situation in which the coachee has fully achieved his or her goals; the 0 stands for the situation in which the problem happens at its worst. The coach asks the coachee where s/he is now on that scale and what this point at the scales means to him/her. Next, the coach asks the client what the situation would look like when he or she is on the next step of the scale. The focus is on taking small steps forward. Step-by-step progress is made. Small steps are generally less risky, require only minimal effort but their effects can be large because they often unexpectedly start off a chain of positive events. Scaling can be applied to lots of things, we mostly use them as:

1. *Scale of progress*: to visualize and keep the focus on progress toward the goal of the career guidance
2. *Scale of motivation*: to find out which context is necessary to keep up the motivation of achieving that goal
3. *Scale of confidence*: to find out what will make the client confident that he or she is able to achieve that goal.

- <u>Coping questions</u>: clients in a career guidance process sometimes are emotional about the situation they're in. For instance, when they are in an outplacement process because their job has been eliminated or when they are confused about what they want to do with their lives. A basic skill of the career counselor or coach is to help clients deal with their situation and the emotions that can be triggered by it. Here coping questions have proven very helpful. This is a "standard" example of a coping question: "Considering what you are going through, how do you manage to keep on going?" The effect of this question usually is that people start becoming more aware of reasons to go on and be strong and find resources to do so.

- <u>Miracle question</u> (and variations on this). The miracle question asks the client to describe in detail how his situation would be if a miracle had happened in the night and the problems he now faces had been solved without his noticing at night. Inviting the client to visualize what exactly his or her life would look like, once a solution has been found often helps people find out what's important to them, provides new hope to a better future, and starts a positive chain reaction.

- <u>Positive exceptions</u>: this tool uses the fact that problems are not continuously present, that there are always exceptions to the problem, situations in which the problem is not happening, or to a lesser extent than usual. Positive exceptions can be used to help the client identify strengths, but also to identify tasks, contexts, and roles that really suited him or her well.

Conclusion: 5 advantages
We have found that adopting these views and methods have drastically improved our career guidance work and made it more fun, too. As most important advantages, we would like to mention the following: First, as coaches we have become better, we produce better results for our clients. Second, we usually achieve this faster. Third, our clients become less dependent on the coach and seem more committed to the results and that makes them stick better. Fourth, we help client develop their confidence. And fifth, the quality of the working relationships with clients has improved

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