

Building a Solution-focused Strategy into Career Counselling

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Abstract

This article describes, in practical terms, a three-stage, solution-focused strategy for career counselling. The strategy enables career counsellors to work effectively with the strengths and resources of clients who seek help in adjusting to or selecting a satisfying, productive career or job. It is based on constructivist principles, is future-oriented and time-efficient, and is most relevant for use with career clients.

Introduction

Recent concern that the dominant trait-factor paradigm used in career counselling is less relevant to career clients who face dilemmas associated with their lives in a complex world of work, career and family (Brown & Brooks, 1996; Herr, 1997; Savickas, 1993) can be addressed by using counselling that incorporates constructivist principles. The benefit of this to career counsellors is that these principles allow them to move beyond general career decision-making and job searching and incorporate the client's unique work and career context. Using constructivist approaches in their work also allows counsellors to work with clients in a holistic manner where personal, emotional, family, social and career concerns are interconnected.

The purpose of this article is to whet the appetite of New Zealand career counsellors and practitioners who wish to explore how one constructivist approach – solution-focused counselling – can help them work effectively with clients, many of whom they may only see for one session. In a related article (Miller, 2003) I explored constructivist counselling approaches for career counsellors, presented a three-phase solution-focused model of career counselling, and described ways in which career counsellors might integrate systems thinking into their solution-focused work. The present article is developed from a workshop offered at a recent CPANZ conference and builds on the previous article by providing new exemplars of solution-focused techniques for career counsellors who want to work within a solution-focused framework. While these exemplars offer seemingly simple techniques that may appeal to career practitioners,

the success of their use is dependent on counsellors grounding their practice in constructivist principles and an unfaltering belief in *client* resourcefulness to find their preferred solution.

What are constructivist principles?

There are two main premises underlying constructivist approaches to effective career counselling. The first premise is that individuals create their own reality based on their understanding of, and participation in, their previous experience (Brown & Brooks, 1996). The reason this concept is so important to a new way of working with career clients is the recognition that, during a counselling interview, both clients and counsellors create different realities based on their own experiences and the meanings they derive from those experiences. When using constructivist principles to guide one's work, therefore, it behoves the counsellor to stand back from his or her own ideas, and encourage the client to make sense of his or her learning, knowledge, strengths and resources. Constructivist career counselling is therefore very respectful of clients as it enables them to interpret a problem and define their own recognisable goals (Granvold, 1996; Patton & McMahon, 1999).

The second premise is that clients' whole environments, and the interactions within them, influence behaviour. The importance of this for career counselling is the recognition that the meanings a client gives to the influences of peers, family, education and employment opportunities on his or her career goals are pertinent to that client's personal reality. These contextual meanings need to be included in any counselling interview as they form the basis from which clients construct personally meaningful and socially supportable career possibilities. Constructivist career counselling therefore requires counsellors to work "with", rather than "on", clients and to encourage the client's sense of self-helpfulness.

What is effective solution-focused counselling?

Solution-focused counselling is a constructivist approach developed in the 1980s by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg (Berg, 1994; de Shazer, 1985) for use in the personal counselling field. Their model, which is future-oriented and respectful of client diversity and contextual differences, is very appropriate for working with career clients. Solution-focused counselling is a process of collaborative inquiry in which counsellors and clients selectively affirm the client's best qualities to encourage client responsibility for the direction, evolution and management of their own career goals.

In solution-focused counselling it is essential for both client and counsellor to shift the main attention away from problems (what is wrong) and towards possibilities and

hope (what is wanted) (Friedman & Fanger, 1991). Thus, solution-focused counsellors are more likely to inquire about what life might be like if the problem was solved than to spend time exploring the problem. Their work will also be influenced by the principles that change is more likely to occur when clients experience themselves as competent and successful, and that motivation for change is more likely to occur when clients experience themselves as having agency (Durrant, 1995). The goal of the solution-focused career counsellor, therefore, is to provide opportunities for clients to visualise themselves in their own idea of a positive career future.

Because solution-focused counsellors believe in the ability of clients to use their own resources for solving their problems they are freed from having to think for the client and, instead, they adopt a stance of curiosity. Similarly, career counsellors who wish to use solution-focused approaches need to replace their role as advice-giver with a role of curious inquirer. When solution-focused counsellors adopt a stance of “not knowing” they demonstrate recognition that the very act of asking questions influences the client’s reality. Thus, asking questions that anticipate client resourcefulness and competence helps clients recognise their own expertise and ability to help themselves. Examples of such questions include “How did you realise that?” or “What helped you decide that?”

While many solution-focused techniques appear to be described as questions, and specific types of questions are considered important to seed new ideas and help clients become aware of new distinctions (O’Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989), their use alone does not constitute solution-focused counselling. To be effective, career counsellors need to be confident that they can also work with clients’ responses to their questions. Embedded in these responses are examples of clients’ self-helpfulness and resourcefulness which enable them to realise their career goals.

The examples in this paper therefore focus on the development of solution-focused questions and follow-up probes that may help clients explore the meanings of their responses.

A solution-building strategy

There are a number of resources for use by counsellors who wish to explore solution-focused frameworks and techniques (Berg, 1994; de Jong & Berg, 1998; Manthei, 1997; Quick, 1996). In this paper, I propose a three-stage strategy for career counselling in a solution-focused manner. Stage one involves problem clarification and the setting of a client-identified goal. Stage two involves acknowledgement of the client’s context and resources. Important aspects of context may be related to the client’s past, present or future resources and may include a variety of things, such as money, interests, expertise and skills, as well as effort, motivation and time. In the solution-focused approach,

details of context and resources are used to help clients identify, and emphasise, aspects of their self-helpfulness and of their own progress towards their goal. Stage three involves the co-construction of an achievable homework task or activity, relevant to the client's strengths, successes and goal. This activity may involve the use of career information. The main concern is that it interacts with the client's sense of purpose and that it will encourage a successful experience.

Stage one: problem clarification and development of client-identified goals

In most career counselling, the counsellor is interested in what has brought the client to see the counsellor. In solution-focused career counselling, the client's construction of the problem and the preferred goal is listened to with care. Since counsellors are more interested in what is wanted than in what is wrong, questions at this stage include:

“What would you like to get out of this career counselling session?”

“How do you think coming here today will help you?”

“What is your goal in coming here today?”

“What thoughts do you have about your goal?”

Since the dominant paradigm of career counselling is trait-factor, many clients may respond to these questions with descriptions of their problems. They will expect that, in order for the counsellor to “help” them, the counsellor will need full details about their problem or concern. The solution-focused counsellor, however, assumes that most clients are seeking a positive change in this problem and will respectfully shift the emphasis from problem to solution talk. To incorporate the constructivist principle of collaboration in this orientation towards change, however, there are implications for practice that counsellors must consider. The first is how to build a good working alliance with the client. The second is how to be respectful of the client's need to describe his or her concern while shifting the emphasis towards solutions. Both issues can be addressed in the same manner. Solution-focused career counsellors inform their clients at the outset that the focus of their work *with* the client will be on exploring ways in which the client can move towards achieving self-identified goals.

Thus, when the client answers a problem clarification question with a brief description of the problem, the counsellor listens, acknowledges the problem and asks a goal-setting question. A useful goal-setting question is:

“Given that [this issue] is what has brought you here, how will you know that coming to see me about this was a good thing?”

This question not only changes the focus early in the interview from problems to possibilities, it also encourages the client to be reflective and self-reliant. Suppose the

client answers this question by saying she wants to be “heard”, the counsellor can address this goal by asking the client to describe (hearing) the problem in more detail. Alternatively, since this type of immediate goal is symptomatic of a larger goal, the counsellor might ask:

“What will be different when you have been ‘heard?’” or

“What would you like to be doing differently when you have been ‘heard?’”

This gives the client the opportunity to clarify expected outcomes and associated goals of this action. A response such as “I will know that I have considered all the options” will initiate exploration of solutions related to decision-making (see stage two).

Similarly, if the client indicates that his reason for coming to career counselling is that he feels confused about career plans, the counsellor can shift to a goal-setting question by asking:

“Given that you feel ‘confused’ about where you are going, how will you know when you are no longer confused?”

Notice in this example that the use of the word ‘when’ encourages hope that this is a likely outcome. In some solution-focused interviews, it is possible for the counsellor to skip the problem clarification question and start with goal-setting questions that encourage clients to view themselves as competent. Such early questions include:

“How will you know that coming to counselling was a good idea?”

“How will you know that you don’t need to come for career counselling anymore?”

Suppose the client responded to one of these questions, “I will have decided on a training course.” The counsellor would help the client describe the successful aspects of this outcome by asking questions that incorporate self-helpfulness and acknowledgment of context:

“How will you know that your training course is right for you?”

“How will your best friend know that you are satisfied with your choice of training course?”

“What will you be doing differently when you have decided on a training course?”

Notice that these questions emphasise the client’s behaviour and interactions since changes in behaviour are easier to observe than changes in feelings or emotions.

Answers to these questions such as, “I’ll know it’s right because I’ll be able to tell others about it,” provide seeds for new distinctions. In such a case the counsellor may help the client explore what it means to tell others about a training course (perhaps it means the client has sufficient information and that information-seeking is their primary

goal, or perhaps it means being more decisive and feeling more competent about a decision and this is the counselling goal). Alternatively, counsellors can then use these responses as if they are positive exceptions and ask questions to build more solution-talk (see exception questions below).

Stage two: building client self-helpfulness

While there are many techniques to help counsellors and clients construct solutions together (see Recommended Reading), in this paper I focus on two in particular. These are the use of exception questions and scales. I will also mention the place of career information in this stage of the process.

Exploring exceptions

Positive exceptions are those periods when the client's problem does not occur or is less severe. In solution-focused counselling the main premise is that the problem will not occur 100 percent of the time. It is the solution-focused counsellor's role, therefore, to help the client identify and explore the positive attributes of an exception. De Jong and Berg (2002) have developed an acronym, EARS, to guide counsellors in this technique. The process involves first Eliciting the exception, then Amplifying it by asking the client to describe in detail the difference between exception times and problem times. "R stands for reinforcing the successes and strengths represented in the exception, and ... S reminds the counsellor to start again" (ibid., p. 143) by asking, "What else is different?" When clients are encouraged to explore and amplify exceptions they are able to hear themselves describe things they have done that may help solve their current problem.

It is sometimes difficult for career clients to think of times when the concern that brought them to counselling is not present, in which case the counsellor needs to help them remember and describe what they were doing when the influence of the problem, or concern, was slightly less. The main purpose of these questions is to free clients from their "stuckness" and enable them to consider alternative ways of dealing with the issue. If, for example, a client seems "overwhelmed" by having to change jobs, a typical question that would elicit a positive exception would be:

"Have there ever been times when you were more relaxed about changing your job?"

Suppose the client said, "Yes, when I met a friend who had just changed jobs. She said it was cool." The counsellor would help the client explore details of this exception in order to identify and amplify successful strategies that the client might apply to this new situation. Follow-on questions that would assist this process might include:

"I'm curious about how it was different when you heard her say it was cool?"
(amplify);

“So, you noticed that talking with a friend was helpful?” (reinforce);
“What else was helpful?” (start again and encourage self-helpfulness).

While many positive exceptions emerge from past experiences, they may also be elicited from the details associated with the client’s goals. Suppose the client above responded to the goal development question “What would you be doing when you were relaxed about changing jobs?” with statements such as, “I would be planning things better,” “I would be satisfied with my job,” or “I would be happy.” Each of these statements can be regarded as a positive exception and the counsellor can ask questions about times when even a small part of one of these goal statements was happening. When clients focus on answering these questions they are able to experience hope that the goal is possible.

Using scales

Career counselling clients often expect their counselling session to include some form of career assessment. In solution-focused career counselling, assessment needs to be qualitative and clients are the ones who determine the meaning of any “scores”. One qualitative assessment instrument is the scaling question, or series of questions. An effective scale can provide the main focus for an entire career counselling interview. It can be used to help the client describe a problem, establish a goal, explore exceptions, check motivation and commitment, and find solutions. If the counsellor uses a large piece of paper or a whiteboard to draw the scale, she helps the client participate in the process. When the counsellor pays more attention to writing the client’s description of exceptions and goals, the client will be more inclined to think about his or her strengths and successes. If, for example, the client states his or her reason for coming to counselling is that s/he is not sure about taking a particular course of study, the counsellor can draw a simple scale for certainty. The counsellor may ask, “On a scale of one to ten, where one signifies that you are quite unsure about this course and ten means that you are certain it is right for you, where would you put yourself now?” Alternatively, the counsellor can work with the client to construct the scale. This interaction allows for strengthening of the client/counsellor alliance and allows the client’s meaning of the problem to emerge. Thus, when the counsellor asks the client to label the ends of a scale about certainty the client might respond:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Don't know									Pretty certain

Or the client might say:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Scared									Confident

The usefulness of scales is that they help clients talk about their observations, notice differences and evaluate progress. Once the scale is drawn, sensitive questioning by the counsellor can help clients clarify their problem and their goal, and explore ways to move towards their goal. The counsellor might ask, “Where would you put yourself on this scale right now?” (problem clarification); “Where would you have put yourself on this scale last week?” (problem clarification), and “Where would you rather be?” (goal clarification). Each of these points will be meaningful to the client and the solution-focused counsellor will remain curious in order to help the client explore this meaning. The counsellor may use a whiteboard to record answers to questions about what each point on the scale means to the client. Specific questions might include:

“What words help you describe that point on the scale?”

“How would you describe what you would be doing at that point?”

The following example may help clarify the scaling process. Suppose a client uses the first scale above. He may indicate that a “4” describes his situation now, a “2” describes where he was before the counselling session, and a “7” describes his preferred future. This client may use phrases such as “I don’t have any information” to extend his meaning for a “2”. Further, he may add “I need to find out what the qualifications can lead to” to this descriptor to explain the difference at a “4”, and he may use terms such as “I would have the information” and “I would know where the qualification would lead” to describe his “7”. While he is talking, the counsellor uses a whiteboard to draw the scale and write the client’s own descriptors under each point on the scale. This allows the client to observe, consider and assess all the nuances in his own scale. Such collaborative work gives the client the opportunity to notice what he is doing differently, when things are working for him, and to use this information to build achievable solutions. While the client and the counsellor both look at the emerging picture, the counsellor can ask other questions that help support these new distinctions:

“So, how have you managed to move from a ‘2’ to a ‘4’?” (to encourage self-helpfulness);

“What would be the first step you could make to move towards a ‘7’?” (to encourage positive change).

Again, the counsellor can write responses to these questions, preferably in a different colour, onto the scale diagram to help expose the client to past successes and competencies.

Each of these questions encourages clients to see themselves as agents who are able to interpret their own needs and use their own resources to move towards their goals. It is relatively easy for career counsellors to incorporate contextual aspects into the scale. Responses to questions such as: “If your partner was here, where would he put you on

this scale?” and “If I was to ask your teacher, what would she say you were doing at a ‘5?’” help the counsellor and client check contextual influences on the client’s career plans. Scales can be used to determine whether or not these influences are helpful. The use of systems-frameworks as scale diagrams is another way in which the client’s context can be incorporated in solution-focused career counselling (see Miller, 2003).

Using career information

In solution-focused counselling, the career counsellor is a facilitator who displays confidence in the client’s ability to achieve his or her goal. If the client recognises that career information will help, the career practitioner will have a great deal of information about the context and career goals of the client to guide his or her selection of relevant information. Further, if the client needs to explore the world of work, the counsellor can ask competency-type questions (“How will you know that you have explored enough?”) to encourage the client to use such exploration effectively.

Stage three: constructing a meaningful message

When Sexton et al. (1997) surveyed counselling outcome research, they concluded that clients preferred career counselling to last about three sessions, focus on specific career plans and decision-making, and provide them with a clearer sense of direction. Effective solution-focused counselling is brief, it focuses on clients’ plans, and it encourages them to leave the session with a clear sense of how to move towards achieving their goals. To assist clients achieve the latter, solution-focused counsellors finish their interviews with a formal procedure (de Shazer, 1985). When inducting the client, they signal that near the end of the interview they will take a short break to think about what the client has said and develop some feedback that they hope will be helpful. This ensures that when the counsellor suggests the short break, it is expected and clients anticipate some useful feedback. During the break, career clients may sit quietly and reflect on the interview, or they may look through some relevant career information in the waiting room. The counsellor, however, will recall the client’s goal statements, as well as details about exceptions, strengths and successes in order to construct a meaningful message for future goal-oriented work and a homework task.

It is recommended (de Jong & Berg, 2002) that there be three parts to the feedback: compliments, a bridge (or rationale) and usually a task. All help convey to the client that the counsellor has listened, acknowledged their problem, and heard what they want to be different, and agrees with steps they might take to achieve their goals. In order to compliment clients, counsellors need to recall and write down client strengths and successes. In order to formulate a task, the counsellor should look at

times during the interview when the client recognised his or her own self-helpfulness, resourcefulness and hope that success would occur. If a task is perceived as logical, reasonable and relevant, it is more likely to be considered to be achievable. The way to ensure that it has these qualities is to make it simple and link its relevance to the client's goal or exceptions. The counsellor will pay particular attention to these in order to provide a bridge, or rationale, in the feedback to the client.

The homework message

Delivering the message after the break will include the following steps. First the counsellor will congratulate the client on what they have said that is self-helpful and on things they have done to keep themselves focused on making changes toward achieving their goals. General, illustrative examples might include: making the decision to explore career options, recognising that talking to friends is helpful, and being clear about wanting a career that uses particular skills.

Second, the counsellor will restate the client's goal with a linking phrase. Useful phrases to use include: "Because you have said that you want [goal] ..." and "I agree with you that [goal]." Third, the counsellor will suggest that the client attempt a small, achievable, homework task, activity or thought that links with the client's goal statement and worldview. Thus, a client who indicated an interest in and some experience with clerical work, but is concerned that work in this area will not be stimulating, can be encouraged to explore activities that are stimulating to determine if any have career prospects.

An example of the final solution-focused message

"You have come here today because you want to find a course of study which involves maths and science and about which you feel passionate (goal statement). I can see that finding such a course seems difficult for you; however, you have already started working on finding this course (goal statement) by coming here (self-helpfulness). You have also told me that you have discovered some courses that don't interest you and that you want to look at two courses that you think may capture your interest (self-helpfulness). This is great, you already have some indicators that help you decide whether or not courses are ones about which you can feel passionate (potential solution). You have also said that you would feel more confident about choosing a course if you could sit in on some classes or talk to a tutor (exception, potential solution). So, you have made a good start on finding a course (strength). I have some information that is relevant to the courses you have considered. Since you want to be sure that you will feel passionate about a course before you decide to take it (linking phrase), I suggest you take this

information and think about how these courses will address your expectations before you come back to see me.”

Notice how this message is future-oriented and emphasises client success. The task is linked to the client’s goal and involves a thinking activity. Since it is very likely that the client will be thinking about courses, he or she will achieve the task. It is also possible that the client will do something about sitting in on classes and will experience the satisfaction of taking the initiative to be self-reliant.

Summary and conclusion

Solution-focused counselling offers career practitioners a strategy to use with clients that is collaborative, contextual, constructive and change-oriented (McMahon et al., 2002). In this article, I have described some solution-focused techniques and the ways in which counsellors might use them to encourage self-helpfulness. I have also proposed that, in order to work effectively, career counsellors adopt constructivist principles first and integrate solution-focused principles second.

Solution-focused work requires a shift in counsellor thinking and acting. Counsellors need to delay their use of trait-factor approaches and adopt a stance of not-knowing, of considering the client as an expert in their own life, and of looking for exceptions, strengths and solutions. This will not always be easy or straightforward, as many clients will come to counselling expecting to be tested, advised and given relevant information. Using a solution-focused strategy will, however, enable counsellors to work with clients so that they can quickly establish goals that are meaningful to them, from which they can examine the resources provided by a career practitioner. Clients who experience solution-focused counselling can also learn to apply solution-focused thinking to future concerns, decisions and relevant information. Such outcomes are particularly helpful when many clients only come to counselling for one session.

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Recommended reading

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