

# Focusing on the “solution” rather than the “problem”: Empowering client change in adventure experiences

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Father Sanchez: This way of consciously relating, in which everyone attempts to bring out the best in others rather than to have power over them, is a posture the entire human race will eventually adopt. Think of how everyone’s energy level... will increase at that point! (Redfield, 1993, p. 219).

A critical element of adventure programming is a facilitator’s ability to help clients process their experiences.<sup>1</sup> Processing can be defined as “those techniques that are used to augment the qualities of the adventure experience based on an accurate assessment of the client’s needs” (Gass, 1993, p. 219) and has been called the cornerstone of effective adventure-based learning experiences (Nadler & Luckner, 1992, p. 1). Processing can be verbal or non-verbal, and may include a variety of approaches such as debriefing, direct or indirect frontloading, and framing (e.g., Priest & Gass, 1994). Its purposes are to enhance the quality of the experience, assist clients in finding directions and sources for functional change, and create changes that are lasting (i.e., transferable).

The key to achieving success with processing techniques often depends on the facilitator’s approach (e.g., Doherty, 1995). An example of this can be seen in Figure 1, where two differing presentations are offered as part of the introduction to an adapted Mine Field

activity<sup>2</sup> (Rohnke, 1994; see illustration). These presentations are made to parents and adolescents participating in a family weekend experience during the adolescents’ stay at a residential treatment center. While both introductory frameworks begin and end in the same manner, notice the subtle variations in the middle of their separate presentations. One group is presented with a “problem-solving” approach to address the issue of substance abuse, while the other is offered a “solution-focused” approach.

How might these two different introductions affect the clients’ experiences? With the “problem-solving” introduction, the following is an actual example of a debriefing that occurred following the experience:

Facilitator (F): What kinds of comments and feelings do you have about our “drug field” here and the activity? Was there anything in general that came out?

One Dad (D) responded: I think that one of the simpler things that it points out is there are no real good books that I know of that tell a parent how to be a parent. This is a good example of how too much guidance can cause just as many problems as not enough guidance. Finding that very narrow margin that is the exact amount that gets you through life is a very difficult position to find. So, I noticed I can talk my son right into troubles as well as talk him out of troubles.

*Focusing on solutions for producing change for clients is not so much of a series of techniques, but more of a philosophical shift in approaching client issues.*

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**Facilitator:** As parents, you've learned that your adolescent's world is filled with drugs like marijuana, cocaine, and alcohol. And unfortunately, the reality is your daughter or son is going to be faced with negotiating the world of alcohol and drugs again. They've faced it in the past, and they most certainly will face it again in their future.

As you can see on the floor of this room stretched out in all directions, we've done our best to try and recreate exactly the problems they will be encountering once they leave treatment. It may be quite obvious to you what the white sugar in the bags represents. It also may be easy to see what these bottles, cans, and white joints represent.<sup>3</sup>

**Problem-solving  
facilitation approach**

And while some of these problems may be obvious to us, one thing we have learned is for one reason or another, many teenagers like you become blind to the problems out there in the world of drugs and alcohol. You may have noticed that you start to think and believe you can handle these problems, and in believing this, you become blind to seeing how these problems can keep you from reaching the goals you want to reach in your lives. For one reason or another, it also may become easier to hear all of the problems around you than other things that may help. And as parents of adolescents who are addicted, you too may actually have seen this happen with your son or daughter. Isn't that the case?

To represent this problem, we want each adolescent to place a blindfold on to signify being blind to what's out there. The goal is to stay within the boundaries of the activity and to get as far along in life as you can before you run into a problem or step on some issue out there.

Another thing we've learned, as you may have also, about adolescents being involved with drugs is that once they begin to have problems, they run into more problems until they are confronted by the law. Running into problems with the law is the reason why all of the adolescents here ended up in our program. We know as family members, you have tried to offer some guidance to your daughter or son. What we would like for you to do is to continue to do that by talking to your daughter or son and help guide them through this whole big world which is full of drugs and alcohol, seeing how far they can get with your assistance.

In offering this assistance in this activity, your guidance can only be verbal - you can't (1) touch your adolescent, (2) step into the boundaries, or (3) physically guide them; but you can talk to them. In this process, we're going to ask all (7-9 adolescents) to go at the same time.

**Solution-focused  
facilitation approach**

And while it's probably quite easy, maybe even extremely tempting, to focus on all the problems out there associated with drugs and alcohol, we'd like to invite parents and adolescents to notice, if you can, the tools of treatment you may be able to see in front of you. You may see the telephone amidst the bottles of beer and liquor, even an AA Big Book among the joints and bags of white powder. You may be able to recognize, as adolescents who are recovering, that you possess the opportunity to seek solutions to your addiction just as you can avoid the problems that led you there. Basically what it ends up coming down to is that it's your choice on what you're going to direct your attention to and pick up once you leave here.

To represent the times when your problems blind you, we want each adolescent to place a blindfold on to signify these times. The goal is to stay within the boundaries of the activity and to get as far along in life as you can before you run into a problem or step on some issue that won't provide any solutions.

We also know as family members of adolescents who are recovering you may have tried to offer some guidance to your daughter or son in the past. What we would like for you to do in this activity is to offer guidance by talking to your adolescent and help guide them. We recognize you have the choice of guiding them away from problems, toward solutions, or both. We're really not sure how you will choose to guide your daughter or son. Perhaps in the same way you always have, one that has worked for you; or perhaps in a different way that may work better. However, we're very curious if you will notice the difference between how you normally offer guidance to your daughter or son and what you're doing now...noticing what works...noticing when they listen the best...noticing when and how they respond positively. Let's see how far they are able to get with your guidance.

**Figure 1:** In this figure, two different introductions to the adapted Mine Field activity are presented. The clients of this experience are parents and adolescents participating in a family weekend experience during the adolescents' stay at a residential treatment center. While the two introductions begin and end in the same manner, notice the variations in the middle of their presentations. The facilitator on the left column uses a "problem-solving" approach to address the issue of substance abuse, while the facilitator on the right column utilizes a "solution-focused" approach.

F: Did you see some examples of that in this activity: talking him into troubles?

D: Oh yeah, I directed him right into something cause I wasn't watching what I was doing closely enough and gave him bad guidance and he touched the object.

F (to son): What was your experience with that?

Son (S): Well, it's different, for so many years I haven't had that kind of encouragement, I like encouragement. That to me made me do good. I've not always given my parents reason to give me encouragement, always getting in trouble all the time and doing what I'm not supposed to. There was no reason for them to give me that (encouragement). I haven't heard it that much, and that is my fault cause I was playing dumb with them, I didn't know where I was at and didn't know what my situation was. I thought it was all my problem.

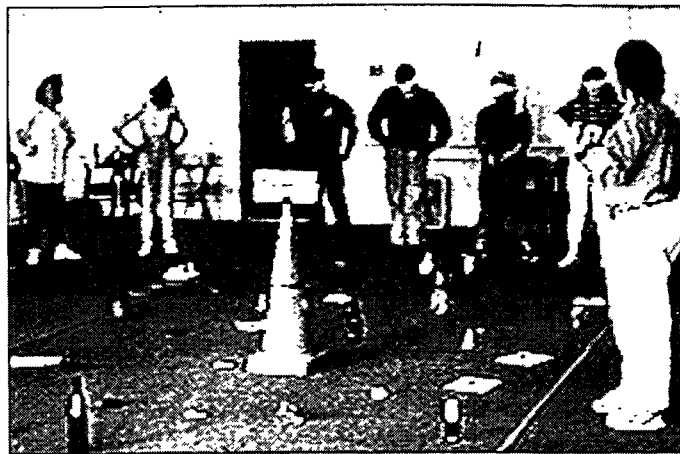
Notice how in the exchange of this debriefing, as with most adventure experiences, clients are focused on examining how their actions in the experience were similar to behaviors in their "real lives." Although this brief excerpt does not show the entire dialogue between the father and son, the discussion centered around what the father could have done better in guiding his son and why his son's troubles/problems occurred in the first place. This is not an uncommon focus for typical debriefings given the "problem solving" direction of the processing approach. Other questions similar to this type of approach used by facilitators of adventure experiences might include:

- How can we go about finding the causes of the problem?
- What keeps the problem going or maintains it?
- Who did what when things started to fall apart?
- Why is the problem happening?
- How could we have worked harder to accomplish more?

One can see these questions seek to resolve client issues by understanding the problem enough so its causes can be eliminated. This "problem-solving" approach can be found throughout the field and associated writings of adventure programming and other areas of experiential education.

However, the introduction on the "solution-focused" side offers a different approach to producing functional change. In the following hypothetical debriefing designed for comparison, note how differently the facilitator directs clients' attention:

Facilitator (F): What kinds of comments and feelings do you have about our "drug field" here and the activity? Was there anything in general that came out?



*Blindfolded students participating in Mine Field as part of family weekend.*

Lee Gillis ©1995

One Dad (D) responded: I think that one of the simpler things that it points out is there are no real good books that I know of that tell a parent how to be a parent. This is a good example of how too much guidance can cause just as many problems as not enough guidance. Finding that very narrow margin that is the exact amount that gets you through life is a very difficult position to find. So, I noticed I can talk my son right into troubles as well as talk him out of troubles.

F: Did you see some examples of that in this activity: talking him out of troubles; finding that "narrow margin" (of good guidance) when you were talking to your son during this activity?

D: Well, when I directed him (in the activity) away from some of the liquor bottles and drugs and toward resources that could help him, I guess I let him know clearly where to go. This reminded me of when he was smaller. I was able to communicate clearly and positively what I wanted him to do.

F (to son): What was your experience with your Dad's clear communication?

Son (S): Well, I liked the encouragement from my Dad. That made me feel good. I know I've made it difficult for them to give me that (encouragement).

F (to son): What did you do that makes it possible for your Dad to give you positive encouragement?

Son (S): I guess I was doing a better job of listening during the activity -- this made it possible for me to hear my Dad's encouragement. I liked that very much.

In this particular debriefing, the facilitator's goal is to help clients identify, construct, and implement solutions to the problem. In providing a "solution-focused" approach, the change process does not center around the problem, but rather: (1) looks for what clients want (i.e., solutions) rather than what they

don't want (i.e., problems); (2) looks for what is working for clients rather than what is not; and (3) if certain things are not working for clients, assists them in doing something different (e.g., Walter & Peller, 1992).

Notice how the son, even in the previous "problem solving" debriefing excerpt, initially focused on one possible "solution" to the issue (i.e., encouragement from his father) and not on the issue of bad guidance. It is elements like this, along with other pieces found in the solution-focused introduction, that form the basis of solution-focused approaches. But what is this approach and how is it achieved?

## Solution-focused approaches to functional change

Focusing on solutions for producing change for clients is not so much of a series of techniques, but more of a philosophical shift in approaching client issues. Developed by a number of solution-focused therapists (e.g., Berg, 1994; deShazer, 1985, 1988, 1991; Hoyt, 1994; Kiser, Piercy, & Lipchik, 1993; O'Hanlon & Martin, 1993; Walter & Peller, 1992) and based in part on the writings of Milton Erickson, solution-focused approaches center around several principles:

1. Nurturing the development of solutions can reduce or eliminate problems by taking a functional approach utilizing clients' inner resources.
2. It is easier and more beneficial to construct solutions rather than eliminate problems.
3. It is easier to encourage clients to repeat already established successful behavior patterns than it is to try to stop or change existing problematic behavior.
4. Efforts and activities centering around finding solutions are distinctly different from efforts and activities designed to solve problems.
5. The initial elements of solutions can often be found in clients' exceptions to their problems (e.g., times when problems aren't occurring).

Note that the focus of most psychotherapeutic approaches center on what causes and maintains the problem (Walter & Peller, 1992). With solution-focused approaches the facilitator does not ignore the problem, but places it in a present, manageable, and correcting perspective within the context of developing client solutions. Examples of questions used by solution-focused facilitators exploring problems might include:

- How does the problem present itself? (e.g., "What does the problem look like?")
- What does the client do related to the problem?
- When does the problem occur? Are there times when the problem does not occur, or it occurs a lit-

tle less often than other times?

- With whom does the problem occur? Are there times when the problem does not occur with this person or occurs a little less often? (If appropriate) Are they people with whom the problem doesn't occur?

## Merging solution-focused techniques with adventure processing techniques: A common ground

How do solution-focused approaches change the manner in which adventure experiences are processed? The following four examples are presented to illustrate how the use of solution-focused methodology can be successfully integrated with common techniques used in adventure experiences.

### (1) Finding, accessing, and utilizing exceptions to the problem

As stated earlier, solutions to client issues can often be found in clients' exceptions to their problems (e.g., de Shazer, 1988; Walter & Peller, 1992). One example of this is when the therapist inquires "when the problem is not happening, what is happening instead?"

One technique commonly used in adventure programs is the "stop-action" or "freeze" technique. This technique is where clients or facilitators "stop" or "freeze" the action of the experience to analyze what is occurring (e.g., taking advantage of an educational or therapeutic moment). For example, say that during the middle of an adventure experience, cooperation between group members has become quite dysfunctional. At a particularly opportune time, a client says "stop" and wishes to discuss why things have gone so badly.

During this discussion, a problem-focused facilitator might center clients' attention on identifying, analyzing, and discussing those problematic elements that led the group into such an utter lack of cooperation. The intent of this verbal discussion would be to increase the group's ability to correct this problem. The information gathered from such an intervention may help the group understand the *problem* better, however, this discussion may have nothing to do with providing the group with a *solution* on how to cooperate better. In fact, this discussion might even make it more difficult to eliminate the problem as it becomes more entrenched in the group's thinking, language, and reality.

Utilizing a different approach, a solution-focused facilitator might ask the group to identify, analyze, and discuss times during the adventure experience when they were actually cooperating. If the group states there weren't any such times, the facilitator would ask the

group to consider and discuss what it might look like if they were cooperating (i.e., a “hypothetical” exception). To center the clients’ “mind set” around such solutions, the facilitator would also ask them to highlight and concentrate on: (a) what they would look like if they were cooperating better; (b) what they would be doing differently if they were doing a better job of cooperating; and (c) how they would know they were cooperating better.

### (2) Sensitizing clients to seek positive behaviors versus avoiding negative ones

Another solution-focused technique having strong applications to adventure programming is to encourage clients to seek out and recognize positive and desired emotional states and interactional patterns (e.g., Kiser, Piercy, & Lipchik, 1993), rather than focusing on avoiding negative and dysfunctional ones.

One example of sensitizing clients to seek positive behaviors can occur with direct frontloading techniques (e.g., Priest & Gass, 1993), where the facilitator asks clients to consider possible growth areas prior to an adventure experience. A problem-focused facilitator might frontload clients’ attention on issues that have been particularly problematic for the group in the past. This may include issues concerning how problems will hinder success, how the group will deal with these problems once they arise, and how the group will work to overcome these problems.

Utilizing a different approach, a solution-focused facilitator might frontload the activity by challenging each group member to do something to make the other group members feel better about their ability to work together toward their therapeutic objective during the actual adventure experience. The facilitator would also direct the group to “have their antenna up” to figure out by the end of the activity what the other group members did to support them (e.g., Kiser, Piercy, & Lipchik, 1993, p. 236). Examples of other solution-focused frontloading techniques include having the group identify: (a) those behaviors that might help bring about success; (b) how to optimize these successful behaviors; and (c) when the group feels successful behaviors are most likely to happen during the adventure experience.

### (3) Scaling

Another example can be seen with the processing technique of “scaling” (e.g., Berg, 1994). This technique is found in some adventure programs where the facilitator asks clients to rate their abilities on a scale of some sort.

For example, after completing an experience a facilitator asks a group to evaluate how they communicated using a scale from 0-10, with “0” representing a total lack of communication and “10” being totally successful. After considering their efforts, the group rates their efforts as a “5.” To assist the group in developing their communication skills, a problem-focused facilitator would center clients’ attention on identifying, investigating, and eliminating those problematic elements that prevented the group from obtaining a score of 6, 7, or higher. A solution-focused facilitator would ask the group to consider those positive elements that “made” the score a “5,” prevented the score from being lower (e.g., a “3” or “4”), and focus on building those attributes to increase the evaluative score (e.g., “Nice job—what were the things that you did to make the score a ‘5’ and not a ‘4’ or ‘3’?”). The facilitator could also ask the group the things they will be doing differently to receive a score of “6” or “7” for communication (e.g., “What small thing

could you do as an individual to make your score move from a ‘5’ to a ‘6’?, “What will you be doing differently as a group when your group is at a ‘6’ or a ‘7’?”).

In this scaling process, the solution-focused approach assists the group and facilitator in gaining a more concrete perception of the problem, but only in light of how it pertains to possible solutions. This approach also emphasizes what clients are doing already that is useful, which directs clients to highlight, access, and utilize their strengths.

### (4) Seeding change through a solution-focused question/response process

As stated by Kiser, Piercy, and Lipchik (1993), “the question/response process is a primary means of developing a cooperative solution-focused therapist-client relationship. When done well, it connects solution-focused therapists and clients cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally.” (p. 240). Based on these authors’ work, sample questions encouraging a solution-focused question/response process for adventure experiences might include:

- As you begin this next activity, who do you think in the group will first notice when you begin to work together better?
- When you start acting differently (i.e., positively or not negatively), how do you usually feel? Describe to the group how they will be able to recognize these changes when they begin to occur.

*It is easier to encourage clients to repeat already established successful behavior patterns than it is to try to stop or change existing problematic behavior.*

- When you are feeling as distraught as this, who is usually the most helpful?
- What can the group do that will help you be more cooperative?
- When working in the group, roughly what percentage of the time do you feel that group members are treating you with respect? What are they doing at that time?

## Conclusions

It is interesting to note that the origins of adventure programming (e.g., Walsh & Golins, 1976) have often identified the characteristics of problem-solving to be a critical focus for the field. This article challenges some of these assumptions, questioning whether the field is reaching its true potential by investing so much effort in problem-solving perspectives. While not ignoring the problem, solution-focused processing centers attention on the problem in a present, manageable, and correcting perspective within the context of developing client solutions.

In fact, it seems most adventure experiences are naturally oriented toward producing solutions. It is important to recognize that certain processing techniques may detract from the inherent strength of adventure experiences by centering so much attention on the "problem" and not the "solution." This is seen in the debriefing that followed the "problem-solving" facilitation approach in Figure 1.

It also may be easy to see how the actual experience itself, and not just the associated processing, can be oriented to produce client efforts in developing

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solutions rather than "struggling" with problems (e.g., there are actual "solutions" in the Mine Field, not just consequential "problems" from which solutions are supposedly derived). Facilitators are encouraged to take advantage of the solution focuses inherent in each experience, as well as during associated processing, when working with clients.

It is obvious that solution-focused processes contain strong applications for adventure therapy. There also seems to be a number of other applications for other experiential educators, particularly in educational and corporate development settings. Practitioners outside the field of adventure therapy are encouraged to adapt the principles advanced in this article and apply them to these settings.

While the solution-focused principles discussed here may seem incredibly simple to some practitioners, it is important to recognize there are several "layers" in understanding these concepts

and applications (e.g., Berg, 1994; de Shazer, 1985, 1988, 1991; Hoyt, 1994; Kiser, Piercy, & Lipchik, 1993; Walter & Peller, 1992). As professionals advance beyond a "technique" stage of utilizing these concepts to a more theoretical and philosophical perspective, the level of understanding on how to utilize solutions seems to become more intricate and comprehensive.

Finally, professionals are encouraged to center their efforts on utilizing what clients bring to therapy. While this concept is not limited to only solution-focused therapy approaches, it is the authors' experience that solutions "co-constructed" by therapists and clients (or clients alone) are generally more successful in generating lasting client change than those created solely by the therapists.

## Notes

1. There are a number of helpful readings on how to process adventure experiences. Some of these include, but are not limited to; Gass (1993), Schoel, Prouty, and Radcliffe (1988), Nadler and Luckner (1992), and Priest and Gass (1993, 1994).

2. The Mine Field activity is outlined in a number of resources (e.g., Rohnke 1984, 1995). The general objective is to travel through an outlined area that has a number of obstacles. This must be done by the participant without the use of sight (e.g., eyes closed, blindfolded). The activity is often structured or "framed" in a manner that heightens the relevance for the client (e.g., Graham, 1991; Greif & DiBenedetto, 1995, pp. 82-83).

3. Note that "real" abusive substances are not used in this activity, only facsimiles that are close in appearance (e.g., empty beer cans & vodka bottles).

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