Go MAD
Thinking

4 steps to successfully create a solution focused culture

Introduction

In a world where technology seems to advance and affect our decisions every day, people still remain the most important asset of an organisation.

Effective systems enable successful business, but it is the people who think most effectively that create the **most** successful businesses. So many systems exist within organisations these days; performance management systems, communication systems, IT systems, back office process improvement systems.

But, here is a question for leaders:
"How many **'thinking'** systems do you have in your organisation?"

Of course the answer is, "As many as you have people."
Are you utilising this asset? Most organisations are not, simply because it is not widely understood what constitutes 'highly effective thinking.' For example, research from Bersin by Deloitte shows that less than 1% of organisations dedicate more than 25 minutes each week to learning.

Outline

In this article we explore a series of steps that can and have been followed to create a successful problem solving culture within organisations.
As a result, employee engagement will rise, talent retention will increase and organisational performance will not only improve, but will grow sustainably so long as the culture is role-modelled, maintained and encouraged from the top down.

Organisations, and in particular the HR departments within them, are becoming increasingly concerned with self-developing workforces and their commitment to learn.

Why? Well, time is precious and shaving hours off inefficient processes can make huge impacts on areas of the business in terms of productivity. It also prevents skill gaps emerging and helps to highlight talent in management teams.

So, how can you accelerate the development of your workforce?

One way is to engage and equip them with the skills to become more solution focused. Dr Cyril Hellier, Psychological Services Strategic Officer, describes solution focused thinking like this;

> "Solution focused practice assumes that change and development is always achieved by people drawing on their individual/collective resources."

> "The ideas at the heart of solution focused practice have repeatedly demonstrated their powerful capacity to resolve difficulties and build potential."

In this way, a shared solution focused mentality amongst employees could also increase engagement in the workplace. He goes on to say;

> "Solution focused practice is future-focused. It generates detailed pictures of the preferred future based on the best hopes and ambitions of clients, leaders, team-members and key stakeholders in organisational life. Such images motivate and inspire people to take action. There is a basic and profoundly simple premise in solution focus that if what you are doing works, do more of it and if it does not, do something different."

Assuming the organisation has a clear vision and aligned set of objectives, the effect of a future-focused and solution-focused workforce could be enormous in terms of bottom line growth.
But, how do you encourage your people to be more solution focused?

To digest the approach to what seems like a huge task, we have broken down the journey of developing a solution focused culture into 4 steps; Engage, Interrupt, Develop and Questions.

1. Engage

..and empower your people to constantly search for solutions

It is inevitable in organisations, that from time to time, objectives are missed, projects fail and the latest wave of recruits fall short of the required (and expected) grade. The problem here is when senior leaders treat such shortcomings as finite. If a lack of belief and motivation is felt from key personnel or teams, this can lead to targets simply being increased rather than reasons being identified, or projects/initiatives getting shelved. Compare this response to one based on the reaction of a team focused on results and prepared to 'find the answer.' For maximum momentum, not only should organisational leaders remain focused and aligned to objectives, but they need to equip their people with the tools necessary to replicate this and resources to 'nudge' them back on track should they begin to fall off it.

It is essential to point out that the creation and sustainable existence of a problem-solving culture relies on the successful selection of advocates and their alignment to the new desired behaviours. Human resources play a vital role in highlighting and monitoring/supporting role modeling from top executive ranks, through managers and supervisors. Once this internal influence becomes consistent, the wider workforce can be empowered through the involvement of solution focused approaches and its benefits or celebration of successes it naturally brings.

If a company with 6860 employees (average amount for a company in the UK with 250+ employees as of 2015, according to ONS) enabled just 10% of its workforce to save just 10 minutes a day, this would result in over **570 hours** of increased productivity every week.

'What could your organisation achieve with an extra 28,500 hours, or 14 FTE's, next year?'

So, give your staff direction and support them in adopting the solution focused culture you want to create, which will lead to higher productivity.

2. Interrupt

..habitually ineffective thinking
and help your people improve it

We are all guilty of having unhelpful habits, some more than others. The first step is to simply identify them. Then you can equip your people with the tools to replace them with more helpful or productive ones.

Research conducted by DCOE – Defence Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health say;

"Research indicates it is possible to form new, positive habits, just as it is possible to break negative ones. During the past 10 years, scientists have increased their understanding of why our brain motivates us to habitual behaviors.
The term habit refers to a behavior that is done automatically with little thought. A habit can be thought of as being composed of three parts: a cue, a routine and a reward (Duhigg, 2012).
Although habits can be automatic and the urge to repeat them strong, bad habits can be broken and new positive habits can be consciously formed."

Imagine if the majority of people in your organisation 'automatically' went in search of a solution when faced with an obstacle instead of accepting it. We described earlier how a shared solution focused mentality amongst employees could increase engagement and one reason would be the anticipation of success, or better yet the acknowledgement of that success by colleagues and peers.

The DCOE tell us;

"Human beings respond positively to success and this success helps ingrain new behaviors (Paul, 2012)."

So, pay attention to the breaking of existing bad habits by your people and orientate them towards goals and new positive habits once broken.

Wendy Wood & Dennis Rünger created the following framework depicting three ways in which habits interfere with goals to guide behaviour.

Ref.1
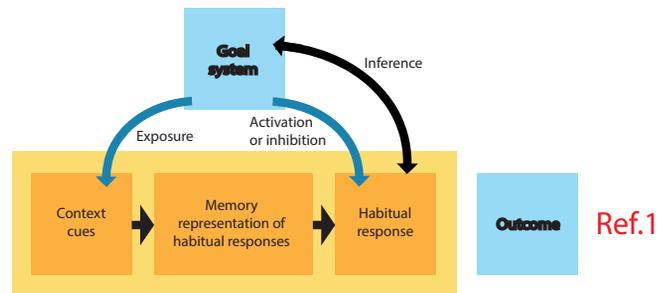
In their 2015 annual review on the 'Psychology of Habit' they describe how;

" Goals energize and direct action by defining a desired end state.
In our three-pronged model, habits and goals interact through habit formation, habit performance, and inferences about the causes of behavior.

First, goals influence habit formation by initially motivating people to repeat actions and to expose themselves to performance contexts. This is illustrated by the arrows from goal system to context cues and habitual response in Ref.1.

Once habits form, context cues come to automatically activate the habit representation in memory.
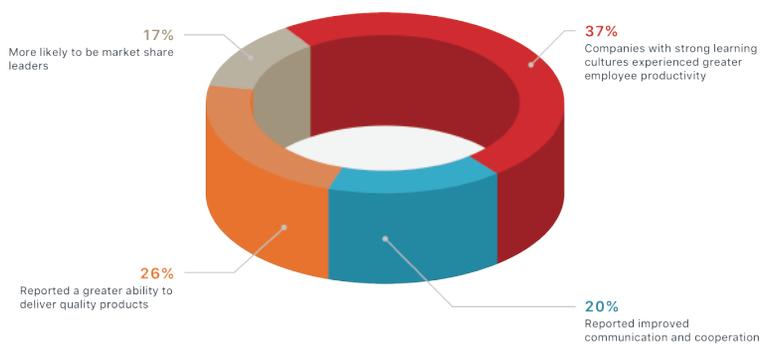
Second, people act on the habit in mind as well as on their prevailing goals by tailoring their behavior to the current circumstances."

In this way habits offer a powerful method of creating and maintaining a desired set of behaviours in individuals or teams, increasing the chance of success and the impact of a solution focused culture.
So, help your people to break bad habits and create new positive ones with a different way of thinking, which will lead to an increase in successful goal delivery.

3. Develop

..problem solving through
your people's conversations

37%
Companies with strong learning cultures experienced greater employee productivity

17%
More likely to be market share leaders

26%
Reported a greater ability to deliver quality products

20%
Reported improved communication and cooperation

Ref.2

A 'Common Language' is key in the sustainability and continuous improvement of an organisation's solution focused culture.

One thing that links every individual in an organisation is communication.

In an article posted by Field Service News they describe solution-focused mind-sets as;

"In successful organisations, this is embedded in the DNA of its people which drives themselves forward to deliver results that makes the real difference. How does your team measure up? Perhaps a good place to start is to review how your teams manage problems and the language they use. Most technically orientated organisations pride themselves on solving problems. The language of solutions concentrates on 'Yes and…', seeking possibilities and opportunities. It is in fact solution focused thinking that really drives the organisation forward in creating competitive advantage. A self-learning organisation is one that has the rigour to identify and quantify problems, yet the discipline to shift to solution thinking, develop forward momentum and achieve results."

If the conversations had within an organisation are consistently future thinking, solution focused and results driven then not only will the success of the company follow, but attraction of the very best talent will rise due to the feeling that 'this is the place to be' – induced by the common language used between employees.

The most crucial of these conversations will include managers in the organisation, some of which will be selected advocates of the culture mentioned earlier. Conversations with structure and focus are often referred to as coaching conversations. This doesn't mean that organisations necessarily need to hire or train technical 'coaches', rather they have the skills to have conversations with more of a diagnostic approach – 'How might we possibly solve this?' or 'How could we possibly achieve that?'

Andy Gilbert, founder of Go MAD Thinking and acclaimed expert in coaching conversations, describes coaching as,

"One person helping another person with their thinking by simply asking great questions."

4. Questions

..will allow your people to resolve issues and generate ideas and ways forward

The fact high quality questions elicit better responses is nothing new. A good question is one that stops you in your tracks and really gets you thinking.

And there is the secret to a great question.

It is one that evokes a deeper thought process – perhaps resulting in a new idea or greater clarity on something.

In a recent survey report written by Expedite, a HR consultancy, questions were explored as an important element to thinking,

"Recent Thinking Effectiveness Audits revealed that up to 51% of questions asked in Executive and senior management meetings are poorly constructed or phrased in a sub-optimal way."

This can create a massive waste of time and resource by focusing participant's minds on answering/responding to low quality questions.
If you want to change or influence a person's thinking (and subsequent actions and results) first change the question. Leaders and managers need to give more conscious thought to designing high quality questions (to open or focus the mind) before and during meetings.

Unfortunately, when 100 HR Directors were asked, "How much emphasis do leaders pay to influencing the thoughts of others through the conscious design of high quality questions?" only 5% of respondents considered it to be a top priority (Ref.3).
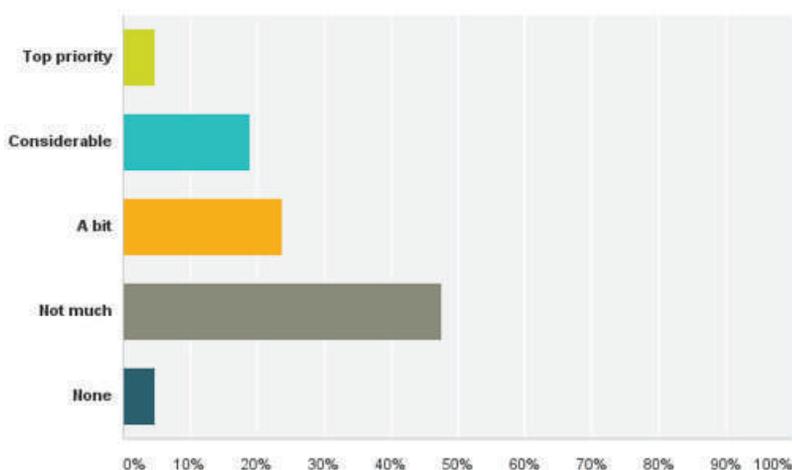
Ref.3

Questions can be designed to help people do two things; focus their mind or open their imagination.

Most questions asked in the many meetings an organisation has on a daily basis are 'focus the mind' questions concerning objectives, targets and timelines.

Goal-setting is just one example of how a focused question can be explored and therefore lead to greater clarity. Ponder on this question for a moment, "When do you want to achieve that?" This is a commonly asked question in both 1:1 and team meetings, but leaves room for 'feelings' by including the word 'want' and allows for vagueness in the response. For example, "By Christmas", or "Well I'd like to, but…" Now compare it to this better-designed question, "On what exact calendar date will you have achieved the following measurable..?"

It is clear to see what difference a well-designed question can make on the outcome of a conversation or meeting. The compound impact it can have when universally used across an organisation is huge. Perhaps it is reasonable that most questions in meetings are asked for specific answers, but there is a significant time and place for opening people's imaginations.
Realisations and new ideas lead to innovation in an organisation and are possible when the mind is truly opened up to fresh possibilities.

Ben Furman, an internationally renowned teacher in solution-focused coaching, describes the importance of imagination when being solution-focused,

> "It is interesting to me that we, who work in this field, so rarely use the word imagination.
> Why not?
> Why don't we speak about imagination even if that is an integral part of any solution-focused process.?
> "Just suppose" is an opening line in a lot of SF questions. Just suppose equals "Let's imagine" or "May I ask you to imagine".
> To talk with clients about preferred futures is to ask them to use their imagination."

The most talented creative thinkers often aren't born that way but have developed the habit of asking themselves really useful questions. If organisations want to improve productivity or lead in innovation, their people must share this habit through a solution focused culture.

So, encourage the use of imagination, especially in groups, through the use of better-designed questions, allowing employees to go to new, innovative places in search of solutions. Encouragement will lead to repetition, which in turn will create the desired habits.

Our aim

The aim of this article is to highlight areas that organisations can improve on when it comes to the 'thinking habits' of their people.

An employee that completes tasks with no requirement to think will most likely be found in your lowest employee engagement scores and could be (some would argue should be) replaced by an automated process.

By engaging employees and teams to search for solutions the benefits to an organisation go much further than simply the happiness of their workforce.

Solutions are difficult to explore if blocked by a focus on issues or challenges and so this must initially be addressed. Once this has been highlighted, employees must be equipped with the conversational coaching skills to help identify and overcome hindering thoughts, in order to become more solution focused. The model below can be used to identify areas of hindering thoughts before exploring more solution focused thoughts.

Go MAD® Thinking Effectiveness Model Ref.4

Coaching is deemed as an executive skill and something acquired with experience and knowledge, however this assumption should be challenged and the skill gap bridged by introducing the method of designing high quality questions.
Just imagine for a moment the compound effect of every manager asking every team member a question succinct enough to get an improved response within a shorter time.

So it's worth dedicating the time to reflect on how that could then affect each colleague's engagement in their daily duties to the organisation and how positively they refer to their company when speaking with friends and family outside of work.
Whether focusing on financial strategy, people development, innovation or any other organisational goal, one thing remains true: better thinking leads to more productive actions which inevitably improves results.

Where would better thinking make the biggest difference in your organisation?

Conclusion

This article sets out to explain the importance of harnessing the 'thinking' within the organisation.

More importantly, to cultivate solution focused thinking systems, which lead to a problem solving culture.

Engaging people, interrupting thoughts, building effective habits and utilising high quality questions to drive the move to this type of culture were explored as key stages in this process.

Moreover, the importance of embedding these to create a sustainable culture was established.

Particular emphasis is placed on the far reaching effect of developing the workforce's ability to ask high quality questions. Asking a question at a key moment can change the direction of the thinking, altering the actions, bringing a change in the results achieved. If this is the right question, asked at the right time, to the right person it can cause a ripple effect and lead to greater than imagined improvements.

In conclusion, aligning strong process management with solution focused thinking across the organisation will result in a problem solving culture. This culture will be effective in identifying efficiencies, encouraging personal development and aiding the feeling of empowerment in making positive changes that benefit the business. These benefits will be demonstrated in the improvements made to the bottom line.

Resources

The author would like to thank all individuals referenced in this article for the quality of work previously completed and the acknowledgement of supporting this article.

Ref.1 - Figure 1 from the 2015 annual review on the 'Psychology of Habit',
Wendy Wood and Dennis Rünger, Department of Psychology, University of Southern California,
http://www.psychannualreviews.org/, Annu. Rev. Psychol. 2016
Ref.2 - Pie diagram from the article on 'Learning cultivation in Organisations', http://apogy.com/
Ref.3 - Bar graph of results from survey question, "How much emphasis do leaders pay to influencing the thoughts of others through the conscious design of high quality questions?" asked to 100 HR Directors and summarised in Survey Report March 2017,
Expedite, HR Consultancy, http://expedite-consulting.com/, The Value of Thinking Time - Survey Report March 2017
Ref.4 - Go MAD Thinking Effectiveness Model, designed by Andy Gilbert and trademark owned by Go MAD Ltd

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