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## Changing How We Think About Change

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## Changing How We Think About Change

Evan George

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BRIEF: The Centre for Solution Focused Practice

What happened to the word “change?”

I have recently completed four really enjoyable days of training in Liverpool and what the training has left me thinking about, amongst many other things, (including how much I like the city of Liverpool, of course), is the small word “change.” In fact, I have come to realize just how uncomfortable I feel with the word.

The realization came to me during a discussion. We were talking about what we can ask when someone is finding the ‘best hopes’ question hard to answer. One of the groups, very appropriately, suggested that we might reframe the question. What she might ask, I wondered, and her first thought was something on the lines of “so what do you want to change?” I immediately knew that this was not a question that I would ever want to ask. The first reason for my certainty was simple. If you ask, “so what do you want to change?” inevitably it invites the client into a problem-framed response, “well it is their behaviour that I want to change.” The question is not a million miles from “so, what brings you here today?”, again a question that will pretty well guarantee a problem-based answer. The second reason was trickier to articulate. I just don’t use the word change! Now isn’t that strange? A therapist (or counsellor or coach or consultant) who feels uncomfortable using the word change. So, what is going on I began to wonder.

It seems to me that the idea of change is fading into the background of the way that we conceptualise as Solution Focused practitioners. Obviously, the mechanics of the change process disappeared long ago; certainly in the BRIEF version of the approach. We do not ask prospective strategy questions, “How are you going to do that?” questions. We take the mechanics for granted linguistically jumping over them, focusing on the difference that the change makes. This is in some ways a development of the miracle question. The client wakes up and the change has happened. We are not interested in inviting the client to focus on how it is going to happen; what they must do to have it happen. We merely invite the client to describe their miracle day, how they will be able to know that the miracle has happened. I

notice that I tend to do something similar with the scale question. “Imagine that you move one point up on the scale and find yourself at 4” (for example). “How will you know that you are at 4?” People are invited to “find” themselves one point higher in my questions; the process of the change has disappeared. We do not invite the client to be interested in the prospective ‘how’.

Now, this disappearance of the prospective process of change, which in some ways we can date back to the early days of the approach (even though Steve de Shazer regularly [and rhetorically in my view] insisted on asking clients “so how are you going to do that?”), seems to have strengthened its hold on the way that many of us use the approach. Our friends and colleagues Elliott Connie and Adam Froerer are I think to be credited with the appearance of the word “version” in our conversations with clients. For example, we might ask, “imagine that you wake up tomorrow the confident and optimistic version of you – what is the very first thing that you will notice?” What interests me about the word ‘version’ is that any sense of change disappears. The “confident and optimistic version” is already there, latent in the client’s life. It is not an unrealized possibility that the client has to put in place or construct. It really is already there. Clients can wake up living the life of that version of themselves. If clients answer the question, they are implicitly accepting the premise.

This small, but in my view significant, tweak to the way that we think and the way that we construct our questions builds on the clarity that BRIEF’s Chris Iveson brought to our thinking some years ago. Chris challenged whether we are in the business of change. We are, he counter-proposed, in the business of perspectives. We invite clients to look into the shadows of their lives, the hidden corners, and to notice the elements of the preferred future that are already in place, just not noticed, invisible and perhaps unseeable while the light is shining so strongly on the problems and difficulties that have come to occupy the fore-ground, the front-stage, of our clients’ lives. The brighter the light that shines on the problems the deeper the shade that obscures the instances and exceptions. As we look into a bright light our eyes, quite literally, find it harder to see in the gloom, the behind, the beyond. And in our lives our perception seems to operate rather like our eyes. So, people are not having to make changes, we are merely inviting them to shift their gaze. This really is quite a step from the early days of our approach when Steve de Shazer emphasized that one of the characteristics of “well-formed” or “workable” goals is that they should be perceived by the clients as involving their “hard work” (de Shazer, 1991, p.112). Even the word ‘goal’ has disappeared! We have come a long way in our thinking.

## Reference

de Shazer, S. (1991). *Putting difference to work*. New York: Norton.

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