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## Book Review - Solution-Focused Practice: Effective communication to facilitate change

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## **Solution-Focused Practice: Effective communication to facilitate change**

Guy Shennan  
2014. London: Palgrave Macmillan  
Paperback. 216 pages. £16.99 (\$A38.95)

### **Review by Frances Huber**

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*What have you been pleased to notice about how you've been working recently?*

*What else have you been pleased to notice?*

Guy Shennan suggests that the normal response to having heard, or read, a question is to begin answering it and, with the above questions in the first Activity Box in Chapter 1, he challenges and engages the reader. This follows a quote from Nancy Kline:

People think better throughout the whole of the meeting if the very first thing they do is to say something true and positive about how their work or the work of the group is going (Kline, 1999, p. 107).

Thereby, he tosses the reader into the deep end of Solution-Focused practice with focused, thought-provoking, "difficult" questions and ideas, then holds their hand with explanations, transcripts from work with real-life clients and his own reflections of his Solution-Focused journey.

Shennan is clear that his aim is "to provide a comprehensive guide to any professional who wishes to use Solution-Focused practice" (p. xiii) and he describes his book as having the same components as a comprehensive Solution-Focused training course. Immediately noticeable is the terminology he uses. While acknowledging that Solution-Focused was originally developed as a therapy approach, he rarely uses the term Solution-Focused Therapy to

refer to the approach. Rather, he prefers the broader term Solution-Focused Practice (SFP) and shows that the process is the same whether the context be therapy, supervision, coaching or some other change-related activity. The subtitle of the book is *Effective communication to facilitate change* and the author is clear that SFP is relevant for “anyone whose job involves talking with people in order to help them make changes in their lives, to move on in some way, to resolve problems or to achieve goals” (p. 3).

He proposes that SFP can be used “on any occasion when a helping professional is talking to someone” (p. xiii) and that this is “likely to be useful” as supported by the increasing evidence base for the approach. His stated aim therefore is that, by the end of the book, the reader will understand the whole approach and be able to figure out how to apply it in his or her own situation, both as a structured approach and, given the usability, also for more “opportunistic ways of unplanned conversations” (p. 7) and that this adaptability distinguishes his book from other beginner SF books.

For those who appreciate structure, a glance at the *Contents* indicates topics covered: Chapter 1 is an overall introduction to SFP, Chapter 2 plunges the reader into the *Solution-Focused Process* followed by chapters about *Contracting*, the *Preferred Future*, *Instances*, bridging these last two with *Scaling Questions*, *Acknowledgement and Possibility (with Coping Questions)*, *Putting It All Together* and *Applications and Adaptations* — until you emerge from Chapter 10 *Becoming a Solution-Focused Practitioner*, armed with practice tips and answers to frequently asked questions and as well as a list of useful SF questions (Appendix 1) and resources (Appendix 2), including details of the SFT list, international SF associations and SF journals.

Each chapter is separated into small parcels of information beginning with a quote and an introduction followed by explanations and case transcripts and with frequent appearances of the Activity Boxes, with practical exercises to help the reader consolidate learning, and boxes of Reflections, engaging the reader with questions about the material presented.

In the *Preface*, Shennan traces his own Solution-Focused Practice journey as an experienced social worker, working with difficult families, constantly reacting rather than being pro-active, until he attended a 4-day SF training course in 1995. For the first time, his weekend “got in the way” of him working with clients—rather than enjoying his weekend as time out to “recharge the batteries and replenish the soul”, he was anxious to get back to work and use these new skills! He then relates his early experiences of asking three archetypical SF questions — the miracle question, coping question and scaling question — emphasizing the book’s focus on practice, rather than being theoretically driven.

A single paragraph denotes the development of the Solution-Focused approach by an “inspired group of therapists” (p. xiv) in Milwaukee in the 1980s, acknowledging Steve de Shazer as most responsible for the dissemination of the SF approach via his prolific writings. Shennan also acknowledges being most influenced by working from 2004–2010 in collaboration with Harvey Ratner, Evan George and in particular, Chris Iveson, at BRIEF in London — and is clear that it is the BRIEF version of SFP that the book represents.

He is gently persuasive about SFP explaining its increased popularity due to the interrelated usefulness and usability across many settings as reflected in his own use of the “shape shifting” (p. xii) approach providing counselling and mentoring to adult offenders, youth workers, consultants, occupational therapists, physiotherapists and psychologists.

Some differences in SF language are apparent. Shennan uses the term “contracting” as used by BRIEF to describe the initial “best hopes” process versus “setting a common project” as used by Harry Korman in Sweden, based on his observations of de Shazer’s language. He also uses the term “instances” to describe the pieces of the miracle that are already occurring for the client to differentiate these from exceptions (to the problem).

The book is sprinkled with SF wisdom such as the SF practitioner makes full use of each opportunity when it becomes available, that even one question can lead to a shift in thinking or moving forward and to treat every session as if it might be the last. He explains the focus on simplicity and minimalism whilst addressing common concerns and criticism of the approach such as merely “being positive”, not discussing the past, repetitive questioning and the acknowledgement of emotions.

Shennan maintains the first person, warm and encouraging conversational tone as if chatting together over a coffee — or tea and scones, as pertaining to the English setting. He plants seeds for the reader to muse over and to predict further questions, explained later in the book, increasing their confidence in understanding the approach. Knowing Guy Shennan as a man of creativity with a twinkling eye, I was perhaps only disappointed that the book did not contain a single picture, cartoon or diagram to illustrate aspects of SF work.

When I recently taught a two-day introductory SF workshop in Sydney, I brought in a variety of SF books for people to peruse during breaks. My group participants leafed through Guy’s book and exclaimed with enthusiasm about the useful case examples and the step-by-step progression of the SF approach to consolidate their learning.

This book is ideal for self-directed initial SF learning and also has practical applications as an adjunct to formal SF training. The exercises in the boxes

would be particularly useful for SFP students in a group or class setting and used as group reflections and to generate discussions, as well as being useful for the solo student. Frank Thomas, a Professor of Counseling and Counselor Education, says that Shennan's book is one that "will be required reading for all my students".

As a somewhat experienced SF practitioner, I didn't discover anything "new" in this book but I enjoyed the clear explanations of SF principles and practical applications and I always find value in reading real-life transcripts. As a trainer, I appreciated noting how he draws a student into the SF journey. Shennan's book is a valuable addition to any developing SF practitioner's bookshelf.

### **The reviewer**

Frances Huber is a registered psychologist, Senior Associate at the Brief Therapy Institute of Sydney and also a psychologist at Hawkesbury Community Health Centre (a public community mental health centre in the outer suburbs of Sydney). She sees a range of clients and is committed to using the Solution-Focused approach. Frances also provides Solution-Focused training and supervision.

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