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BOOK REVIEW**Coaching A-Z: The Extraordinary Use of Ordinary Words**

Haesun Moon

Page Two, 2022, 302pp, ISBN 978-1774580462, £12.99 paperback (Kindle edition available)

Review by Mark McKergow

Author, Speaker & Teacher of Solution-Focused Work

This excellent new book, the first solo effort from Canadian Solution Focus (SF) practitioner Haesun Moon, takes a novel approach. Rather than going through the usual range of SF questions, the author focuses on how individual words, carefully deployed, can transform a coaching or therapy conversation.

This work is very much within the established SF tradition of examining actual dialogue and the use of words very closely, and it feels very good to help practitioners of all kinds look at such tiny details. Although the book is clearly aimed at a coaching audience, the author addresses the question of ‘who is this book for?’ early on. She writes, “is this a book about therapy or coaching or training? And the quick answer is a big, smiley Yes” (Moon, 2022, p. 5).

The book starts by looking at Haesun Moon’s realisation that, while originally coming from a communication science background and therefore being interested in stories, not all stories cure. She then presents the four quadrant model (Preferred Future, Resourceful Past, Troubled Past, Dreaded Future) a very useful set of distinctions which can first be seen (in a different order) in *The Solutions Focus* (Jackson & McKergow, 2007, p. 3). One difference, however, is that while previous authors have sought to focus on the first two elements, she hints that all four might give clues which can inform an SF conversation.

The heart of the book is the A-Z mentioned in the title. For each letter of the alphabet, Moon finds a single word and looks at how it can be used in coaching or therapy conversations. For example, A is for ‘Already’. She invites us to: “focus on the efforts a person has made in the desired direction, rather than on next steps” (Moon, 2022, p. 9).

And of course, this is a fundamental piece of SF practice. What is delightful here is the invitation to look at the world ‘already’ and think about how adding it in really changes the nature of the conversation. So (in my own example):

“What have you done to exercise more?”

Can turn into:

“What have you done already to exercise more?”

The first can sound rather accusatory, the second is more clearly a request for some facts about prior efforts. The author connects the word ‘already’ with personal and everyday stories about her own experience which offer easy-to-connect-with insights into how come this word can be important, as well as stretching out to think about how looking to the past can also inform the bigger picture of why this change is important to the client, which is a good focus before we come onto how to do it.

Each chapter ends with a set of reflection questions which, while they could be used in a coaching context, seem more inclined to help the reader explore the ideas within their own lives. I like this approach very much; having learners ‘feel the difference’ has always been important to me as an SF teacher, and people are much more inclined to believe their own experience than any amount of learned discourse (which can help to amplify in professional contexts, but is rarely the starting point).

And that’s just the first chapter! There are 25 more chapters, each just a few pages but packed with practical wisdom and personal vignettes from the author’s own experience and family life. Personal favourites – F for ‘First’ (as in ‘what do you notice FIRST?’), which is very different from a simple ‘what would you notice?’) and Y for ‘Yet’ (as in reflecting ‘I don’t know what to do’ as ‘So you don’t know what to do YET.’)

These delicious, tiny and profound adjustments to language have been part of SF work since the very start (and indeed before, with Steve de Shazer’s early hero Milton Erickson’s close focus on suggestion). This is a wonderful book

that helps the reader be even more aware of our language and how we can tweak it to help both our clients and ourselves. Very highly recommended. And of course, this is an English language A-Z – how might it be in other languages?

Reference

Jackson, P. Z., & McKergow, M. (2007). *The solutions focus: Making coaching & change SIMPLE* (2nd ed.). Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

The reviewer

Mark McKergow is an author, speaker and teacher of solution-focused work in organisational settings, and is the co-director of SFWork, the Centre for Solutions Focus at Work, based in Edinburgh, Scotland. His latest book is *The Next Generation of Solution Focused Practice* (Routledge, 2021).

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