

# Why Your Brain Loves ‘Solution Talk’ – And What Coaching Has To Do With It.

In today’s high-paced, results-driven business world, **effective** coaching must do more than feel good – it must work. **Research** shows that to find creative solutions leading to behavioural change, you – and your **brain** – should be in the **appropriate state**. This state is triggered by **Solution Talk** rather than **Problem Talk**. So, let’s explore how you can get there and understand some **scientific basis** for it!

### From analysis to possibilities

Steve de Shazer, one of the founders of the solution-focused approach, used the terms ‘**Solution Talk**’ and ‘**Problem Talk**’ to describe a way of conversing in therapy and coaching. In short, Problem Talk emphasizes the analysis of **difficulties, deficits, and causes**. Solution Talk, in contrast, emphasizes your **strengths, successes and future possibilities**.

Example questions of **Problem vs. Solution Talk** are:

What did you feel when the problem happened?

What do you want instead and what is important about that?

What was it like when the problem occurred?

If you get... what difference would this make to you?

What stands in the way of you finding a solution?

What has worked in the past?

Has this problem been around for a long time?

When you are the best version of yourself, what will be different?

De Shazer **believed that the language used in the conversations shapes the client’s reality**. If you talk mainly about problems, you reinforce a problem-focused worldview. But **talking about solutions helps create them**. By shifting the conversation toward what you want and what already works, change becomes more likely and faster. Therefore, helpful coaching conversations should always integrate **key features of Solution Talk** like:

- **Describing preferred futures** – you talk about how they want things to be.
- **Highlighting resources and strengths** – what you already do that helps.
- **Focusing on small, concrete steps** – what’s possible and realistic next.

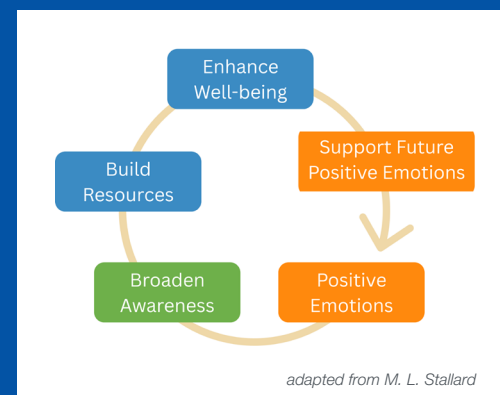
### Your Brain on Coaching: What we know from neuroscience that helps you grow

Neuroscience confirms that the way you think and talk about your lives directly shapes your ability to change. The **Broaden-and-Build Theory** by Barbara Fredrickson says that positive emotions **broaden your thought-action repertoire** (you think more creatively, flexibly, and openly) and **build long-term personal resources** (like resilience, optimism, and problem-solving skills).

When a coach helps you to shift from Problem Talk to **Solution Talk**, the conversation generates **positive affect** – feelings such as hope, curiosity, and confidence. Those emotions trigger a **broadened mindset**, allowing you to see more options and perspectives that help you connect ideas in new ways as well as imagine possible futures more vividly.

Over time, this broadened positive thinking **builds enduring resources** like stronger self-efficacy and optimism. On a social level you can have better communications and relationships, on a **cognitive level** greater creativity and flexible thinking.

Solution Talk like the questions described above **evoke positive emotions and agency**, setting off the broaden-and-build cycle:



*“Solution talk creates solutions,  
problem talk creates problems.”*

Steve de Shazer

### You are more motivated by possibility than by fear

The **Intentional Change Theory (ICT)** by psychologist Prof. Richard Boyatzis explains sustainable growth through the **Positive Emotional Attractor (PEA)** rather than the **Negative Emotional Attractor (NEA)**.

**PEA** activates the **parasympathetic nervous system** (rest-and-digest), creating a calm, open state that supports emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility. It engages the **default mode network** and **prefrontal cortex**, enhancing imagination, empathy, and integrative thinking, and releases **dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin**, which boost motivation, learning, and connection. This promotes **neuroplasticity**, enabling lasting change.

In contrast, the **NEA** triggers the **sympathetic nervous system** (fight–flight–freeze), activating the **amygdala** and **limbic system**, narrowing focus to threat and short-term survival. It limits access to the **prefrontal cortex**, reducing creativity, openness, and learning capacity.

In a coaching session the **PEA** is activated when you are engaged in Solution Talk regarding your **hopes, dreams, values, and strengths**. The **NEA**, by contrast, is triggered by **problem analysis and issues like weaknesses or fear**. While both states are important NEA should be active in very low doses only.

And while this may sound idealistic or overly simplistic, a **large and growing body of research shows it works!** Studies regarding **Solution-Focused Brief Coaching (SF Coaching)**, a coaching approach that is 100% based on solution talk, increases goal clarity, motivation, and psychological well-being – often in just a **few sessions**. You don't need months, a few weeks can be sufficient.



### About the author

**Dr. Isabel von Korff (EMBA 2009)** lives in Düsseldorf and offers 1:1 and team coaching for executives and leaders based on the solution-focused brief method. She combines her science background as molecular biologist with her business experience in the pharmaceutical industry and as a founder to best serve her clients. Her love for the approach is fuelled by the sound science as well the elegance and effectiveness that she sees in her daily work. All leaders, watch out for a compelling book on this topic (German title: 'Führe Menschlich. Oder lass es!') that will be co-written by Isabel and that will be available end of this year.



### Take Home Message: What is in it for you?

Without a single minute of coaching, you can also **benefit** from this knowledge creating the conditions for sustainable, meaningful growth – for you, your team, and your organization.

1. More solution talk than problem talk. For instance, start every weekly team meeting with a **positive opening round**: “What has been going well in your last week's work?”
2. When people approach you with problem talk, **honour the existence** and the experience of the problem and ask: What do you want instead? This may lead to **surprising new perspectives!** (Works for yourself as well!)
3. Write down 5 things you are **really good at**. Then **5 more!** And **5 more!**

In a world that often focuses on what's broken, this approach is a timely reminder of **what's possible**.

**Dr. Isabel von Korff (EMBA 2009)**



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