

Another TOOL in the evaluation toolbox

The conversational skills utilized in solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) have great utility in the realm of evaluation. **Solution-focused questions** are helpful when planning an evaluation, conducting interviews and focus groups, as well engaging in continuous improvement dialogues with staff from evaluated programs. Solution focused skills have been adopted outside of a therapeutic counseling context in education, case management, coaching, organizational consultation and group work (Gaiswinker & Roessler, 2009; Macdonald, 2007 & Metcalf, 2008; Visser & Bodien, 2002, 2004). This poster presentation extends solution focused skills even further and shows how they are **useful in evaluation dialogues with stakeholders and interview respondents**. They are especially helpful in identifying and clarifying program theory and logic, promoting strengths-based program improvements, and obtaining rich qualitative data about program impacts and the interaction effects between interventions and participants.

SKILLS: It's all about the questions

- **The Miracle question(s)** helps stakeholders describe what will be observed (i.e., outcomes) when goals are achieved
- **Scaling questions** help specify what steps along the way are necessary to achieve goals/ outcomes; as well as the indicators of success that can be measured
- **Exception questions** are very helpful when programs are struggling to meet goals because they highlight incremental dimensions of progress and identify strengths and skills of stakeholders
- **Other useful questions topics:**
 - Best hopes
 - Why a proposed solution or activity will make a difference
 - What will people notice when things are better
 - How people managed to achieve what they've accomplished so far

One focus group: Two types of responses

Contrasting traditional and solution-focused questions:

Typical Direct Question:

What would you recommend to improve the program?

"Nothing, they are doing an outstanding job"

"I don't see anything that could be better"

"Everything's been fantastic"

"[The financial coach] does a fine job. He seems into what he does"

- It is noteworthy that 3 of the 5 responses to the solution-focused question would not require funding and would have been suitable answers to the first question.

Solution-focused question:

If I were to going to give this program another \$100,000 next year, what would you recommend that the program administrators do with the money?*

"Purchase a mobile bus and bring it on-site where people are"

"Put more of the [initiative's] programs together and coordinate them to make them work more effectively"

"Involve other community agencies such as the Veterans Administration and Texas Workforce Commission"

"Find closer offices"

"Set up emergency appointments, like primary doctors... had to wait two weeks to see someone"

Solution-focused dialogues are useful in multiple evaluation models

Utilization-focused (Patton, 2008), empowerment (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005) and participatory (Cousins & Earl, 1992) models of evaluation practice require meaningful involvement from stakeholders. Solution-focused dialogues offer conversational skills that support stakeholder involvement by:

- (1) helping stakeholders articulate detailed descriptions of anticipated program outcomes and intended uses of the evaluation
- (2) recognizing and honoring the expertise that stakeholders bring to the planning process
- (3) identifying incremental progress and using those gains to support continuous improvement
- (4) allowing stakeholders to individually identify and reflect on their roles in contributing to program outcomes

Key components of solution-focused dialogues:

- (1) Driven by questions: *"the expertise of not-knowing"* (Gaiswinker & Roessler, 2009).
- (2) Assumes participants have the capacity to envision and achieve the outcomes they are seeking.
- (3) Questions are designed to elicit deep reflection, examine issues from multiple perspectives, and identify crucial factors that promote progress towards goals.
- (4) Dialogues are goal directed and future oriented.
- (5) Questioning promotes responses with high specificity and detail.
- (6) The questioning process situates the evaluator as "co-pilot" rather than the driver of the dialogue.
- (7) Strengths and assets are identified, amplified and studied to determine their utility for future planning.
- (8) Pauses and prompts of "what else?" are used to encourage continued critical and reflective thinking.