

# What's this book about?

**An interview with Peter Röhrig by Jenny Clarke, co-editor of the English edition**

*Jenny Clarke: My first question: What is the essence of the solutions focus approach for you?*

Peter Röhrig: For me "essence" is a very big word. The very special thing for me is that solution focus means a focus on effectiveness. And it's a very friendly and respectful way of consulting. By encouraging clients in their belief that they can master changes self-sufficiently. Solutions and ideas emerge in a dialogue, in the interaction between the client and the consultant, instead of the traditional way of giving advice.

*So tell a little bit more about this emerging in the conversation. How do you think that works?*

I think it works by looking first at things that work instead of looking at things that do not work. Even in the greatest misery you can discover success. I had workshops with people who were really desperate about their working situation – and still they found some little diamonds, some things that functioned or at least functioned from time to time. By looking at things that work you will always find ways to broaden the perspectives and the possibilities of clients. (For instance with the exercise "What's in it for me?" by Björn Johansson and Eva Persson in this book).

*What's your most surprising success story that you can think of?*

There is a story that refers to my own development. When I started consulting and training I worked a lot with medical doctors. They are clever people and they don't have much time for their own training. They expected for instance that they could learn everything about leadership within three hours on a Wednesday afternoon.

*Of course, because they are diagnosticians, they like diagnosis.*

Yes – and they like recipes. They expected three-hour-recipes on how to work with their nurses in a more efficient way. So when I started that I made up my mind a lot about what could I pack into these three hours of leadership training that was absolutely necessary to know for doctors. I had a lot of stress and still it was never enough! After three hours doctors said: Well that was interesting but I still have so many very important questions to be answered, for instance "How can I be a leader?"

So when I discovered the solution focused approach I started to change my attitude and my behaviour as a trainer. I thought much more about responsibility – what I was responsible for and what the participants responsibility was. I started to lean back and ask them what they knew already and what they wanted to learn. There was always a lot of things they had already in their repertoire and even of behaviour. So I could build on that which made it much easier for everybody. In three hours we could work on their situations and they went away with very practical and tangible ideas fit for their own practice.

That made a great difference. I realised the difference especially in the way I felt after such a workshop. I felt relaxed and satisfied and that was quite opposite than what I felt before.

*In this short story you gave examples of three out of six SIMPLE principles that Jackson and McKergow developed: 1. The solution not the problem, in other words:*

*what do they want? Why not ask them? 2. Make use of what's there. Take what they already know and build on that. 3. Every case is different. Every one of these doctors and their particular staff are in a very different situation. Which only they know about. And I think the other three are probably into it as well. In fact everything you said about interaction and dialogue is possibly a principle: Things happen in between people, in conversations.*

*My next question is going to be about how you discovered the ideas of solutions focus and what attracted you.*

To make a long story short: By chance I discovered a workshop by Lilo Schmitz who offered to give an introduction in solution focused consulting. When I read that headline "Solution focused consulting" I thought "Well, that's what I am doing already. At least it is what I want to do. I should know more about that." I went there and discovered a new way of thinking acting as a facilitator for me. I gladly worked with Lilo for years. At first as a student with a wonderful teacher who had a lot of confidence in my abilities. She really walked her talk. One of her favourite sentences was "Just try it out!" By her confidence and trust she gave us so much security that we succeeded to do things we would not have thought ourselves being capable of. That's how it started for me.

Lilo worked mainly in the social sector. So we started to translate solution focused ideas into management and training. We developed a solution focused leadership training and did that successfully with many people.

*How did you do that translation from therapy to things more appropriate in your own context? How did you go about that? It is not easy, we took ages for that.*

Actually I just did, what Lilo said: I tried it out. The best ideas I get from my clients, from their questions and the things they want to achieve. I work for instance a lot in quality management and development. And people always wanted a more simple access to ideas of quality management. Away from the idea that it is very bureaucratic, a lot of extra work and documentation. So I tried to support them with a simple approach. For instance I started workshops by asking people to think about the qualities in their personal work and write them down. And to write down qualities in their organisation. So we had some first ideas we could put on the wall and have a look at them together to in order to learn something about quality. (See below my exercise "Quality mirror").

This was a completely different approach than they were used to. Usually they started with looking at problems, deficits and weaknesses: "Where are the urgent things we have to fix? How can we keep or raise our standards?" These were their usual questions. So I offered them quite a different kind of walking into that field. And actually it was not my idea but the clients idea.

*Again because who would know best – them or you? This reminds me of another example of the first principle: solutions not problems. And I do not know if this is true as well in German as it is in English. I suspect it is: That word "solution" to ordinary people tends to mean "What we have to do?". For us it kind of means "What do we want? What is the Future Perfect or the miracle situation?" It amazes me how rarely we ask the question – even to our clients: "What do you want?"*

It's very similar in German. The word "solution" – "Lösung" – implies action, some way to do it, rather than possibilities. And my work is much more about possibilities. I

work with my clients in a “possible world” supporting them to make it very colourful and with many interesting details so that ideas emerge how they could follow these possibilities. And then there might emerge solutions in that common meaning of the word. First tiny steps set in a general direction.

*And then the world is different. You used the phrase earlier “broadening perspectives” it’s like having a buffet. Because usually people come to us when they are stuck. There are no possibilities.*

Or too many possibilities or sometimes just two – yes or no – and there is always more in between. That reminds me to tell you something about the field in which I work with the solution focus. Very often it is teambuilding, which means they feel stuck, because cooperation and mutual information doesn’t work the way they wanted. Another very important field is conflict resolution. And also strategic work on questions like “How can we master the future?”

*Given the world the way it is, given that we can’t.*

That’s the nice thing about planning: The harder you plan, the more you are struck by chance.

*Yes, that’s right! And somebody said „Just because the plan is no good doesn’t mean that planning is pointless.” That brings us neatly to the book. You have given three or four activities about quality development, kind of situations in which you found solutions focused work useful. In the book there are many others. How do you want people to use this book?*

I can only talk about how I like to use collections of methods. For me they are a kind of treasure chests: Collections of different ideas from different people who share their experience. Colleagues who work in different fields who have developed good ideas how to do it even better. I can look at these ideas and find out how appetising they are for me, in which situations I could try to use them, which methods could fit to my personal style of facilitating etc.

*Good point about the personal style. And what I like enormously about this book is exactly that: So many different voices here, so many forms of experience. This is very generous of them and you to bring all this together. The book is laid out in a way that may imply some kind of process. Would you like to say something about that?*

No, I think it’s self-explaining. Actually I had some resistance against structuring. My very first idea was to make it just in an alphabetical order of authors or contributions. Then I thought that might be a bit too strange.

*I think the structuring you did was helpful.*

And I have another idea how people could use this book. You know how to travel on a globe? You turn it around, close your eyes, put a finger on it and find an interesting place. So working with the book could be just flipping it through and stop at an interesting page and find a random idea how I could work next time.

*I agree with that. I think it could be worth doing exactly that, just flipping through it and wait until it opens at a page. The titles of many of them of course let you know what you could find.*

Yes, the titles of many. And sometimes the titles are a bit mysterious to make readers curious.

*And then I was going to ask about who the contributors are, what kind of work they do, what kind of a range there is.*

Most contributors come from the SOLWorld-network ([www.solworld.org](http://www.solworld.org)). That makes a difference to other collections where authors write down all the activities they collected, saying "I gathered them from here and there and this is, how I do it!" I asked all the experienced colleagues I know - and I am glad to know so many people who work solution focused all over the world who have accepted to contribute. Our annual conferences have a strong spirit of sharing. So I have seen a lot of them working there. And the cooperation is even more intense in the SOLWorld Summer Universities that we organise.

*You must have had some criteria for deciding what is and what isn't solution focused. So can you say something about what it is about this collection that in your mind they have got in common, that makes them qualify for inclusion in this book?*

I only asked facilitators or process consultants who are experienced solution focused practitioners. They all tried it out, they know what works and they have something to share. That was my first and most important criterion. The second is a bit more soft. I asked for descriptions of methods that make it more or less obvious that these colleagues work with a solution focused attitude, that they work with solution focused principles, not only with solution focused tools.

*These principles are what you said so nicely in the beginning: For instance the belief in the client, the emergence of ideas, the finding little diamonds and so on?*

Because of that criterion I had to reject some contributions. That was not easy. And still I found it a good experience because it made me think about very good reasons for rejecting. So in the end, for the contributions I had to reject, the authors could all accept it.

*I just like to pay tribute here to the way you do that. This friendliness and encouraging nature of the way you do your work. And I can imagine how carefully you thought about good reasons. Good reasons meaning acceptable reasons.*

One very crucial point which was not so easy for me was that some people sent me contributions which were clearly about training. I had asked for contributions about workshops. Of course there is an area where workshops and trainings go together. In fact, most of my trainings nowadays are workshops in which I work interactively and on participant's cases and with minimal input. But many contributions were on training solution focused ideas – and that's something different.

*So the book addresses facilitators, consultants, managers and allied trades? And it is not a training book, although trainers might find interesting stuff in it?*

Exactly.

*What else should I be asking you about?*

This is a question I am not prepared for. Actually I would like to talk about the benefits of the book.

*I thought this was obvious because it has got Peter Röhrig's name on it. So why should people use the book? What are the benefits?*

I think it is a very practical book. All activities are described in detail. You can easily use them in your own practice. And – on the other hand – it is not a recipe book. The activities are described in their proper context. So you can think about adopting them if you have an idea in which context you want to do something different. Most articles do not only describe what happens but also how the interventions are staged, how they work, what the background is, what is special about them. I really like that most authors wrote something about their personal preferences, about how they like to work with that activity, what experience they made, what surprised them.

And it is a book written by 50 authors from all over the world, which provides a big variety of facilitation methods. These professionals have very different experiential backgrounds and still stand side by side and complement each other. They all work solution focused and speak to us in various ways. Some address more your brain, some more your heart, some more your belly, some write humorous some more serious. So it is really very personal what they write about.

*That's lovely. And this brings me back to the universality of the approach. Sometimes people say it is very North-American, very positive and I think they haven't got it. It is about the clients, where they are coming from and what they want. That means that it can't be culture specific. All that we can do is encourage that dialogue that you talked about in the context of the person that you're talking to and support them to find new possibilities. I am sure that this book can contribute a lot to this.*