

Title: **Solution-Preventing Tools versus Solution Supporting Tools**

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Category: **Research-based papers**

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Solution-Preventing Tools versus Solution Supporting Tools

Abstract

The resource-based view of the firm (RBV) indicates that Human Resource Management (HRM) can generate sustainable competitive advantage through recruiting, developing and retaining exceptional human talent. To recognize and to develop exceptional talent, viable assessment instruments are necessary. Traditional performance appraisals, which focus on deficits and problems, came under attack as their outcome often resulted in a decrease rather than an increase in performance, and they often seemed to prevent development of talent instead of supporting it. From an RBV view the development function of performance appraisals becomes even more important. This paper suggests the application of Solutions Focus to improve traditional performance assessment tools, and to strengthen their development function. It focuses on the strengths of Solution-focused Assessment (SFA) as a development-supporting tool. The flexibility of SFA allows the modification of existing HR instruments and helps to find "differences that make a 'difference'" in order to support development and change. As an HRM method it supports the achievement of competitive advantage and can additionally improve the heavily criticized performance appraisal systems. This shows that SFA can provide an accessible bridge between RBV-theory and HR practice.

Introduction

Change and flexibility are, more and more, essential components of successful organizations in turbulent environments with strong competition. The resource-based view of the firm (RBV) explains the importance of developing valuable and scarce resources and capabilities, which are said to be the source of sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Barney & Wright, 1998). A key goal for Human Resource Management is to create and develop capabilities and competitive advantage. There is evidence that HRM generates "human capital advantage" through recruiting, developing and retaining exceptional human talent, providing value that cannot be

easily imitated by other organizations (Barney & Wright, 1998; Boxall, 1996). To recognize exceptional human talent and competences, the use of viable assessment instruments is crucial. However, do traditional performance appraisals in HR Management support or prevent development?

Our thesis is that most of the instruments in HR-management in use do not fit into post-modern approaches to change such as systemic thinking. Such approaches rely on mechanistic assumptions and very often focus on deficits, analyze failures and weaknesses, or concentrate on particular traits. Consequently traditional instruments often prevent change because they stabilize the perceptions of the actors and so are based on pitfalls. In contrast it will be demonstrated how these pitfalls may be overcome through "solution-supporting" principles, and how to design new or redesign traditional instruments into solution supporting and development supporting tools.

Instruments of HR management, such as 360-degree feedback, assessments, staff surveys or evaluations, are used with the aim of effecting change and development amongst staff. The main focus of the use of HR instruments should, therefore, be to ensure there is motivation and commitment to implement change in the workplace (Lueger, 2002).

In reality, classic HR instruments often achieve the opposite. Traditional instruments focus too much on the current situation (in fact the past), and force the assessors to commit to individual values (e.g. on scales). Additionally, the differences important for finding solutions are neglected. In many cases it thus becomes impossible to focus properly on the next steps to be taken and the future. Changes effected through procedures used in business practice that settle on values that do not take differences into consideration, become *more difficult*. Therefore, a "change in the design of HR instruments" is called for. Such a modification must overcome difficulties such as unwillingness to change and unmotivated staff. "Solution-focused assessment" (SFA) is presented as an alternative based on the principle of detecting and analyzing "differences that make a difference" (Lueger, 2006a, 2006b).

The purpose of this paper is to examine how the RBV and Solution-Focused Assessment (SFA) can improve traditional HR instruments, especially appraisal methods and development methods, and to explore how SFA can provide an accessible bridge between RBV-theory and HR practice. To accomplish this, we will first shortly review the application of the RBV to theoretical HRM. We will then discuss current criticism of traditional assessment methods and their possible negative effects. To respond to this criticism we will introduce an alternative approach, the Solution-Focused Assessment, which seems to be more compatible with the RBV and a better way to develop people and organizations.

The resource-based view of the firm and HRM

The resource-based view of the firm (RBV) is one of the most central theories in the field of HRM. It blends concepts from organizational economics and strategic management (Barney, 1991; Conner, 1991). A fundamental assumption of this view is that organizations can be successful by gaining and maintaining competitive advantage (Porter, 1985). It shows the importance of developing valuable, unique and scarce resources and capabilities, which are said to be the source of sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Barney & Wright, 1998; Collis & Montgomery, 1995; Wright, McMahan & McWilliams, 1994). Competitive advantage is gained by implementing a value-creating strategy that competitors cannot easily copy and sustain (Barney, 1991), and for which there are no ready substitutes. To gain competitive advantage two conditions are needed: first, the resources must be variable among competitors, and second, these resources must be difficult to obtain. The basic objective is to generate and retain these strategic resources (Jackson & Schuler, 1995).

This growing acceptance of internal resources as sources of competitive advantage helped to justify HR's assertion that people are strategically important to a firm's success, and it has provided the traditionally atheoretical field of HRM a profound

theoretical foundation. So the integration of RBV into the HRM literature should be of no surprise (Wright, Dunford & Snell, 2001).

HRM greatly influences an organization's human and organizational resources and can therefore be used to gain competitive advantage (Schuler & MacMillan, 1984). This is supported by concepts such as knowledge (Argote & Ingram 2000; Grant 1996), dynamic capability (Eisenhard & Martin, 2000; Nelson & Winter, 1982; Schreyögg & Kliesch-Eberl, 2007; Teece, Pisano & Schuen, 1997), learning organizations (Fiol & Lyles, 1985, Fisher & White, 2000) and competence (Czerny, 2009; Erpenbeck & Rosenstiel, 2005; Heyse & Erpenbeck, 2007; Steinkellner & Czerny, 2008) as sources of competitive advantage which all indicate an intersection between strategic resources and HR issues (Wright, Dunford & Snell, 2001). There is increasing evidence that HRM can generate "human capital advantage" through recruiting, developing and retaining exceptional human talent that provides value and cannot be easily imitated by other organizations (Barney & Wright, 1998; Boxall, 1996).

The RBV has proven to be integral to the conceptual development of the HRM literature and RBV based HRM research has evolved in the last decade. The main cause for this might be the recognition that RBV provided a compelling explanation for why HR practices lead to competitive advantage. So the theoretical application of the RBV has been successful in stimulating a substantial amount of activity in the field of HRM (Wright, Dunford & Snell, 2001).

So far there are only a few studies that demonstrate that the HR practices actually impact the skills or behaviors of the workforce, or that these skills or behaviors are related to performance measures (Wright, Dunford & Snell, 2001). Arthur (1994) and Huselid (1995) found a positive relationship between HR practices and turnover. Wright et al. (1999) found that appraisal and training practices were related to the skills of the workforce. We need to recognize, however, that the inimitability of these competencies may be caused by unobservability, complexity and / or path dependence. So there might be no simple causal relationship between HR practices

and sustainable competitive advantage, and HR management systems might impact this advantage in a variety of ways (Wright, Dunford & Snell, 2001). These difficult aspects explicitly invite a more complex, less reductive view of organizations, their system-level, intangible resources (Colbert, 2004) and their HR instruments. System-level resources (Black & Boal, 1994) are those organizational capabilities that exist only in relationships – in the interactions between persons and / or things. The importance of system-level, intangible resources has been highlighted throughout the RBV literature (Colbert, 2004).

On a more general level many studies confirm that a clear pattern is emerging in HRM research suggesting that HR systems geared toward increased commitment and employee-involvement can have a big positive impact on organizational outcomes (Lepak, 2007). A consistently positive relationship between high investment HR systems and aggregate performance measures has been found (e.g., Arthur, 1994, Delery & Doty, 1996; Guthrie, 2001; Huselid, 1995; Ichniowski et al., 1997; Koch & McGrath, 1996; Richard & Brown Johnson, 2001; West et al., 2002; Wolf & Zwick, 2003; Youndt et al., 1996). These consistent findings support the view that people, more than other organizational resources, may be a strong potential source for achieving a sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Pfeffer, 1994; Lepak, 2007).

In summary, the RBV demonstrates the importance of human resources and HR practices for achieving competitive advantage. HRM greatly influences an organization's human and organizational resources and can therefore be used to gain competitive advantage. It highlights the importance of system-level, intangible resources and the importance of the interactions between persons, inviting to a more complex, less reductive view of organizations and their HRM instruments. With this focus on system-level resources, on interactions and on a more complex, less reductive view of organizations, the RBV supports our thesis, that most traditional instruments in HR-management do not support but prevent the achievement of competitive advantages.

Effects of traditional performance appraisal methods

Performance appraisal is the ongoing process of evaluating and managing both behavior and outcome in the work place (Carrell et al., 1995: 348). Performance appraisals are in most companies an essential part of performance management. They serve three purposes: feedback, development, and documentation. Several years ago the main purpose was feedback – to tell employees how they had done over a period of time and to let them know what pay raise they would receive. Today performance appraisals should also focus on development concerns (DeCenzo & Robbins, 2005), and from an RBV view the development function becomes even more important.

Most authors recognize that no performance appraisal system can be perfect. Many factors are known that can distort appraisals. Often this may be the result of poor appraisal training or obsolete measures. Problems for appraisals can also be caused by the dynamic environment in which employees work. Some jobs change so frequently that it is almost impossible to properly define job descriptions and objectives for the next year (DeCenzo & Robbins, 2005). HR executives are dissatisfied with their current performance appraisal systems (Schrage, 2000) and as result, performance appraisal come under attack (Bröckermann, 2001; Curth & Lang, 1990; Grassl, 1996; Grote, 2000; Nelson, 2000; Pfau et al., 2002; Schrage, 2000; Segal, 2000; Ulmer, 2000). The outcome of yearly performance appraisals frequently is a decrease rather than an increase in performance (Latham et al., 2005). One proposal for improving performance appraisals is to focus on the provision of performance feedback designing the performance review more as a counseling activity than a judgment process (Robbins & Judge, 2007: 627), and to take the social context (e.g. feedback culture) more into account (Levy & Williams, 2004).

Other authors suggest avoiding appraisal systems and using instead employee dialogue, meetings and the use of systemic language (Brandt & Schache-Keil, 2000; Bröckermann, 2007; Grassl, 1996; Steinkellner, 2007, 2009). More optimistic are

Marcus & Schuler (2006) who write that some of the criticism is justified, but that chances of performance appraisals are higher than their risks, and DeCenzo and Robbins (2005): 'Regardless of potential problems, one can expect performance management systems survive in some format'. Latham et al. (2005: 85) suggest a shift from traditional annual performance appraisal to continuous performance management with included coaching: "Together, performance appraisals that lead to ongoing coaching ensure a highly trained, highly motivated workforce. It is the essence of performance management".

The authors also believe that performance appraisal methods will survive, but we do not think that assessor training and avoiding known distorting factors will be a successful way forward. In addition to the above-mentioned issues, these traditional assessment methods have more fundamental problems. They prevent change and development because they are too static and they also stabilize current situations. They prevent the achievement of competitive advantage instead of supporting it as requested by the RBV - the central thesis of our paper.

Instruments like performance appraisals or 360-degree feedback produce a "stability trance" because only one value can be indicated (e.g. on a five point scale the rating for performance or teamwork is "2"). When people involved in that rating see and analyze the result of the rating they construct a specific reality: they assume that this dimension is stable (the performance is "2", not "3" and not "1"), and they do not consider that there are always differences of behavior (the performance is sometimes a little better and sometimes a little bit worse). In other words they neglect one basic theorem of change management: "The only thing that's constant is change!" (Heraclitus). They cannot see what they cannot see (Heinz v. Foerster): it is difficult for them to focus on the differences because the format of the instruments creates assumptions of stability. If something is stable it is more difficult to find steps of change, because the phenomenon is stable. As a consequence the development of change targets becomes more difficult and often even impossible.

HR management practitioners and managers know that two typical variants of reactions from persons involved can be discerned when using HR instruments:

- If the results shown by the respective instrument are good, the participants tend to be satisfied and everything remains as it is;
- If the results are mediocre or bad, the persons concerned often do not, or only perfunctorily, accept the assessments (e.g. in staff interviews, surveys...). As a result, no real changes take place.

Studies (e.g. Bernardin et al., 1995) also support the existence of this pattern: bad results lead to demotivation and prevent behavioral change. This means that the objective of HR instruments is not achieved when it would be most important: improvement of performative behavior and change.

The central problem lies in the fact that the procedure in quantitative and also qualitative assessment forces the assessors to give an "either/or", which results in a person being either "good" or "bad". This in turn creates deficits and weaknesses (e.g. when a superior tells his employee: "you are only moderately customer-oriented") that are solely the result of the method used. Put differently: concept and design of the HR instruments result in constructions of reality that create attributed

The creation of a "non-changeability trance" through traditional HR instruments

As HR instruments consistently concentrate on the question "What is it like?" and neglect any differences, the participants develop a construction of reality resembling a "stability trance" concerning the features under analysis and so the development of change targets becomes more difficult and often even impossible. The question "What is it like?" rests on the wrong assumption that it can be meaningfully answered by using traditional survey methods. The basic principle of change management ("The only thing that's constant is change! ") is undermined by the method in which HR instruments are used in practice.

Change processes and conversations (e.g. in workshops, performance reviews) based on traditional ratings tend to be difficult especially when the rating is low (and at the same time change is important). People involved in such processes start to argue and to list examples of differences in behavior or performance. An example illustrates a very common pattern of conversation: Assume the assessment with an "overall performance" scale of a staff member is 2 (on a 5-part scale). If the employee concerned and his/her superior discuss this value, the employee refers to examples where he finds his/her performance "very good" or at least "good" (and there are of course examples), while the superior refers to examples and experiences where it was difficult and problematic. The more examples are given by one person that refer to positive experiences, the more examples and details referring to negative events will be listed by the other person. It is fairly obvious that this reinforces latent or manifest conflicts and that any definition of steps for change is very difficult.

This pattern, however, is the result of a "conceptual trap of the tools" of the methods of diagnosis and assessment in use. The conversation has to take place in a "prison" of "either/or" and the participants cannot escape to a "possibility space" of "as well as" because of the traditional design of the instruments.

Analyses involving traditional HR instruments and the range of methods used are therefore of a reality-stabilizing nature and thus inherently averse to change: they guide our perception towards establishing "What is it?" and therefore towards one individual value.

In fact, these differences naturally exist (see figure 1) and need a conceptual and instrumental framework of "as well as", as an employee's performance (and every criterion for analysis like leadership, sales, customer satisfaction, etc.) is sometimes better and sometimes worse. These differences and especially the *positive* differences constitute the ideal basis of finding solutions for change, as positive differences signal confidence because it has already been sometimes better. In addition, focusing on differences provides a link between past and future, as well as

between "better" and "worse". Making use of these differences, however, requires other methods of analysis and rating.

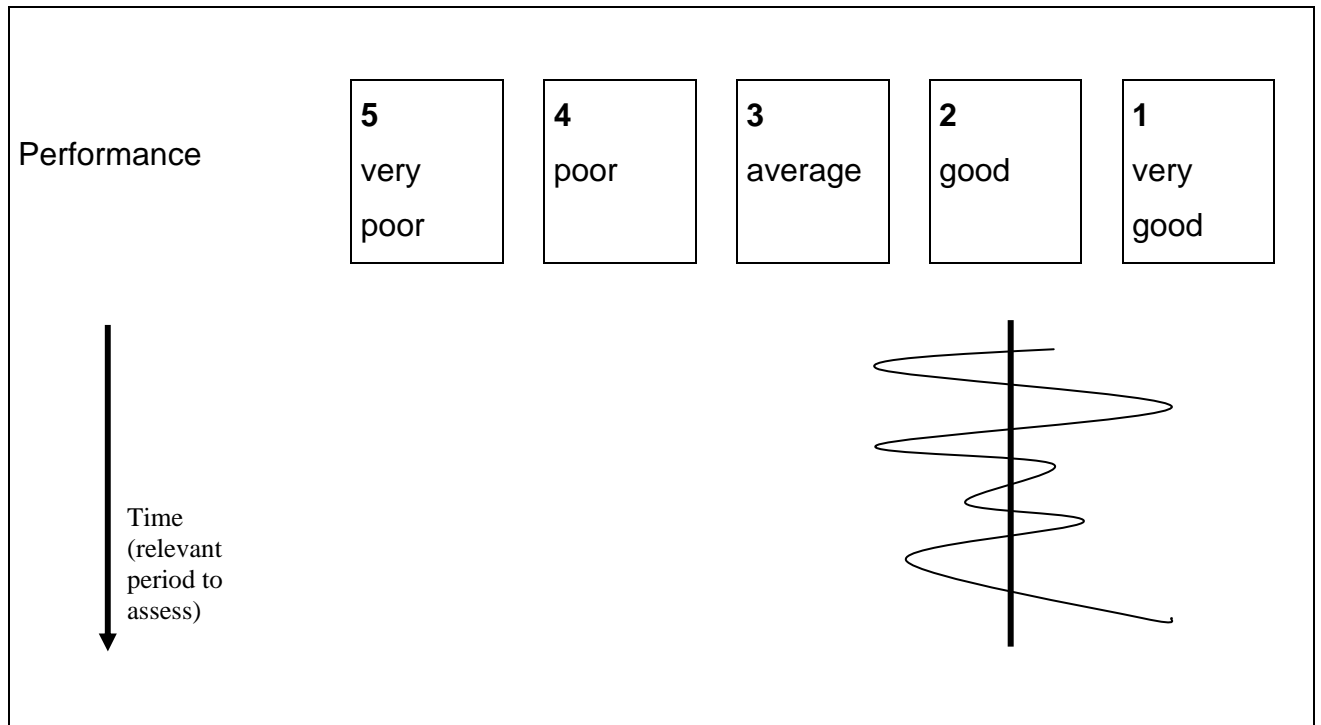


Figure 1: Stability versus variability of dimensions

Traditional HRM instruments can therefore be seen as “machines” that create a “non-changeability trance” by their methods. The reality-stabilizing effect of focusing on single values results in the "neglect of differences that make a difference" (Bateson 1981) and so suggests that relevant phenomena such as the behavior of people are constant in all situations. The methods used result in assigning stable characteristics to things or employees focused on in a particular situation. But this stability has been created through the method and the conceptual procedure. The unpleasant effect now is the perception that phenomena are constant and that stable phenomena are difficult to change. For this reason, change becomes more difficult when using traditional instruments. It is clear to see that resistance, frustration and conflicts in companies emerge through this conceptual trap.

Possible alternatives to overcome this trap are positive approaches to change (McKergow, 2005) as Positive Psychology (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001),

Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2003; Haar & Hosking, 2004) and Solutions Focus (de Shazer, 1988, 1997; de Jong & Berg, 2001).

We suggest the application of Solutions Focus to design or redesign tools by putting differences to work (de Shazer, 1997). Therefore we refer to two “solution supporting principles“:

1. Visualizing positive differences in instruments
2. Focusing on the concrete differences that can be recognized when it is a little bit better

The following section presents these alternatives that more closely resemble the important basic principles of change and development.

Solution-Focused Assessment

The approach used within the framework of "Solution-Focused Assessment" is a methodological alternative integrating systemic solution-focused basic attitudes into instruments. It is not only an instrument, but a different approach in devising instruments, which can easily be applied to existing assessment instruments. Solution-Focused Assessment (Lueger, 2005) is based on the following principles:

- The principle (Bateson, 1981) that information is a difference that makes a difference;
- The basic ideas of the "solution-focused approach" (de Shazer, 1997), and in particular the idea that language creates reality. This change-supporting design for HR instruments is based mainly on two principles:
 - Assessments are to refer to "something" (the situation) and not "someone" (the person); and
 - Terminology in assessments focuses on categories of "interaction".

The use of these solution-oriented principles enables a focus on other realities and that take more complexity into consideration.

The first principle focuses on differences instead of determining individual values (which is enforced by traditional instruments). The focus here is on the rating (e.g. performance, behavior) differences occurring with time. The above example of a staff member illustrates, that things occasionally can be worse or become disastrous, and sometimes goes better. This difference can be seen as a potential, when the method supports the client system in finding out what the specific difference regarding "better" is. For this, two sub-components are necessary:

- Recording and visualizing the relevant differences;
- Exploring the positive differences: finding and inventing (de Jong & Berg, 2001) of specific details regarding what is different if things go better.

Solution-Focused Assessment records these differences, by means of quantitative and also qualitative procedures reproducing the difference of better/worse. To put it simply (see figure 1): the area right and the area left of the line are shown to be an important difference and so it is symbolized that at different times it is different (after many practical applications of SFA it has turned out that it is mainly the area right of the line and thus the positive difference that is central). In this way a resource- and solution-oriented view is practically engrained within the instrument, because it is signaled that there are sometimes positive developments. And this furthers confidence, as the participants see that sometimes their actions lead to positive effects.

After having described the theoretical background of SFA, we are now able to show how standardized HR instruments can be adapted to serve change and development. One easily implementable redesign procedure to visualize positive differences is a rating which takes variations in the relevant dimension (e.g. performance) over the period reviewed into account. Traditional rating instruments can be modified for example by asking a rater to distribute 100 points across the scale or by using lines which represent the positive differences (Lueger, 2005). With quantitative methods, scales are not (just) answered by ticking boxes, but their different natures are directly reproduced on the scale (Lueger 2002: 471pp) If, for

example, the performative behavior of a staff member is assessed, the range of occurrences (e.g. between the values) is shown.

The Solution-Focused Assessment focuses on the positive difference by using "solution talk" as described below. This makes it possible to work out either in workshops or in individual conversations, what exactly is different, if something goes better.

The second principle is the use of a language focusing on the positive differences. De Shazer (1996: 85) calls it "solution talk". Using again the example above regarding the performative behavior of a staff member, some questions can illustrate a conversation focused on positive differences:

- What happens specifically when the rated criterion (e.g. performance) is "better"?
- What do the top management, customers, etc. notice when something is working better?
- What specifically is different then?
- How do you accomplish that? What is helpful?
- What should happen to increase the likelihood of "better events"?
- How do you prevent bad things from happening?
- And many more...

The use of solution talk helps to work out concrete steps of change and enhances, therefore, the probability of successful change.

Particularly helpful in this context are the techniques and principles of the "solution-focused approach" (de Shazer, 1997; de Jong & Berg, 2001), which in a short time creates confidence for change and specific starting points for activities. Especially the "first basic theorem" of solution-focused guidance ("If something works, do more of it"), that provides very useful orientation for formulating the specific questions. It makes sense to implement the principle "the clients are the experts" here, as the participants in a change project have the most detailed know-how on what is different

when it works better. Working out these details also strengthens the competence perceived and facilitates the necessary identification and commitment.

Naturally, in proceeding in this manner, time and again results will be generated that refer to problems and trouble and so show worse values (if an employee/department lies within the negative area of a dimension, e.g. customer support does not work properly). It is particularly in this case where the difference-oriented approach can help by visualizing the range, as problems can be discussed in a slightly less demeaning manner and after a period of "lament" the positive difference can be addressed and then worked on again. "Accusations", on the other hand, become less likely, as they rely on the assignment of characteristics, as mentioned earlier, which require stability (the employee is unreliable, the R&D department does not cooperate, etc.). These assignments, however, become less likely, as stabilizing assignments are liquefied.

The range of depictions of differences can go from two to N items on a scale (with N being the length of the scale). This approach can, of course, also be combined with "ticking" individual values, which then represent some mean value of the range. This is helpful e.g. in HRM, when, in 360-degree evaluations a "value on the scale" is expected from the HR department.

In companies with technical/exact corporate cultures, a variant of the approach has proved useful in which points are distributed along a scale. Here 100 points are allocated to the existing values, which in turn represent their range. Thus the frequency of the differences occurring is depicted (Lueger, 2005).

The description necessary in many change projects and the comparison of several dimensions and/or several departments/units when describing the initial situation are also facilitated through Solution-Focused Assessment. In this context, figure 2 shows the analysis of six dimensions on the topic of leadership.



Figure 2: Difference-oriented analysis by differentiating characteristics

Of course, in such cases, just like in the traditional approach, differences can be seen that also show less good values. In the example given, for instance, support from the management, in the view of the staff, works far better (7.0) than the information flow (4.1). By integrating the range and the differences between better/worse, it is somewhat easier to consider the "difficult" subjects – that is, not so good values – as again a signal is given that sometimes things work better. If consultants/moderators again and again put the main focus on the positive differences, regardless of the setting, in most cases much more positive dynamics are more likely.

Evaluation of solution supporting tools

In a recently conducted evaluation study (Kotrba, 2006) on the effect of the use of "solution supporting tools", a group of employees and supervisors has been

examined concerning the difference before and after the implementation of the solution-supporting principles in the field of performance appraisals. The most important findings are:

- People involved have the feeling that the rating is more fair
- They believe that it is more objective (although the rating is done by the same observer)
- Goals and steps for change had been defined more specifically and precisely
- Appreciation for the performance was provided more often than earlier

These results are also supported by the findings of effects of “solution-focused work”. Hoffmann and Luisser (2007) showed in a study at Kraft Europe that “solution focused training” using the same principles led to more effective leadership behavior and an increase of performance indicators such as fewer customer returns after failure in production.

Conclusions

This paper shows that Solution-Focused-Assessment can help to improve traditional HR instruments such as performance appraisals or 360-degree feedbacks to support positive change and development for humans and organizations.

SFA in all its forms is based on the following basic principles:

- Recording positive differences and taking more variety into account;
- Using terminology that focuses on the situation and on interdependences (fit and interaction) to enhance acceptance;
- Making a link between "better" and "worse" by implementing the "as well as" principle in instruments;
- Making a link between past and future;
- Improving the confidence that change is possible, which supports acceptance amongst the persons concerned.

The most important stimulus for constructing these now time-proven principles of SFA is probably a statement by Steve de Shazer, which is best expressed in the oft-quoted sentence: "We can know what's better without knowing what's good".

The examples listed in this paper (for further examples in different management contexts see Lueger, 2006b) aim at outlining the flexibility of the principle of Solution-Focused Assessment and focus especially on their strengths as development-supporting tools. The flexibility of Solution-Focused Assessment allows the modification of existing HR instruments and helps to find "differences that make a 'difference'" in order to support development and change. As an HRM method it supports the achievement of competitive advantage and can additionally improve the heavily criticized performance appraisal systems. This shows that SFA can provide an accessible bridge between RBV-theory and HR practice.

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