Incorporating Solution-Focused Techniques into the Federal Strategic Planning Process

By James B. Mortensen

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(ABSTRACT)

This study is a qualitative examination of the potential use of solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) techniques in the context of federally-mandated strategic planning. Facilitators with strategic planning experience were selected from a large government agency to receive training and provide their insights about the utility of SFBT in their work place.

Study participants received a training class in which they were familiarized with SFBT. Prior to the training session, a survey instrument was administered to identify the facilitation approaches favored by the participants. A follow-up survey was administered to the participants immediately following the training. This questionnaire contained both closed- and open-ended items. One week after the training, a small group session was conducted to gather additional feedback from the participants.

Results from the questionnaires and the small group session demonstrated that there was unanimous agreement that SFBT techniques would be useful in a federal strategic planning setting and that they would be likely to use the techniques themselves. The participants showed a strong preference for using the Miracle Question, though all of the techniques presented in training had support. When asked to match SFBT techniques with various planning phases, Action Descriptions was the selection most often made.

Overall, participants described SFBT as being applicable in a number of work settings, specifically those that required delineation of work processes,

outcomes and measures. Some concerns were noted regarding credibility of the model if therapeutic terms, such as "Miracle Question," were used with senior executives in the agency and there was some concern regarding the lack of a conflict-resolution model in the SFBT framework as presented. There was agreement that additional training would be useful before the participants implemented SFBT in their facilitation activities.

<u>Dedication</u>

To my Heavenly Father - may I complete the journey, accomplish the goals, and serve the people that I promised you I would. And when I come back home and you open the door, may your feedback be "Well-done."

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

It's been a long journey. And it never would have happened without the invaluable support of numerous people along the way. (And whoever said that life was about the journey, must have not have made it to the destination yet). Though the helping hands have been too many to name, I would like to recognize and say "Muchísimas Grácias" to a few – in no particular order.

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To Joanne, wife, friend, single mother. There is nothing I can say that will begin to acknowledge all the dreams, comforts, hopes and time you have sacrificed for my pursuits. Thank you.

To my Father and Brother, where my faith failed me, I found You waiting. Even in the darkness, You did not leave me. To Your light…

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Chapter One: Introduction

(a) FINDINGS.—The Congress finds that—
(1) waste and inefficiency in Federal programs undermine
the confidence of the American people in the Government and
reduces the Federal Government's ability to address adequately
vital public needs. (Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, Sec.
2)

Responding to public dissatisfaction with the federal government during the early 1990s, the United States Congress developed a legislative framework for the improvement of government operations, with a focus on improving management practices and a greater emphasis on accountability for results (United States General Accounting Office [GAO], 1997). As part of this framework, Congress enacted the Government Performance and Results Act [GPRA] (1993). The purpose of GPRA is to shift the attention of government administrators away from the activities they are currently engaged in and "to a focus on the *results* of those activities" (GAO, 2002, webpage, italics added by author). The Results Act requires nearly all federal agencies to submit five year strategic plans containing agency mission statements, goals and objectives, and strategies to accomplish those goals and objectives. GPRA provided a three year implementation window for agencies to develop and publish their strategic plans and requires the plans to be updated at least every three years thereafter. The deadline for the first submission of strategic plans was September 30, 1997.

This study explores the potential value of a specific therapy model in bettering the federal government's strategic planning process. The following paper presents the development and implementation of a pilot project to determine the potential utility of solution-focused brief therapy (Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000) techniques in facilitating the development of effective strategic

plans. Included in this thesis is a discussion of strategic planning in the federal

sector, a history and overview of solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT), research

on SFBT, the development and implementation of an SFBT training session for

federal strategic planners, and the feedback provided by the participants of the

training session. The research presented here is not intended to provide a

definitive model for the effective implementation of SFBT in federal strategic

planning so much as explore with experienced planners the potential that the

model might offer to them when facilitating planning sessions.

Statement of the Problem

In 1997, Congress's oversight arm, the GAO, performed an initial review

of federal agency strategic plans and found that the first attempts of federal

agencies at implementing GPRA had mixed results (GAO, 1997). The GAO

noted that a large majority of the plans they reviewed were significantly deficient.

They identified such problems as a lack of linkages between missions and goals,

a lack of useful performance measures, and little detail on the effectiveness of

strategies to be implemented. Overall, the GAO report suggested that federal

agency strategic plans fell significantly short of GPRA's intent.

History of Strategic Planning in the Federal Sector

For most of the twentieth century, strategic planning efforts occurred

primarily in the private sector (Bryson, 1988). Federal strategic planning was

applied mostly to the military. However, the federal government *has* pursued

several reform efforts since the 1950s (GAO, 1997). In that time, four waves of

planning reforms have been instituted to link budgeting priorities with Agency

results. The first reforms were efforts to downsize government bloat after World

War II. Additional efforts included initiatives by Presidents Johnson, Nixon and

Carter to create frameworks, objectives and budget linkages in the planning process (GAO, 1997). These efforts attempted to link executive branch objectives with congressional budgets. The early emphases on budgets and programs led agencies to focus on processes rather than results.

Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA)

In 1993, Congress, responding to a growing wave of anti-government sentiment, decided to mandate a new approach to planning in the federal sector. As a result, they passed the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA). The act stipulated that "(a) No later than September 30, 1997, the head of each agency shall submit to the Director of the Office of Management and Budget and to the Congress a strategic plan for program activities." GPRA is the primary legislative framework through which agencies are required to set strategic goals, to measure performance, and to report on the degree to which goals were met. (GAO, 1996).

GAO Report

Where the earlier government reform initiatives tended to focus on performance measures based on gross output or workload measures, GPRA focuses on a more quality-based, targeted approach. The Act attempts to rectify the performance disconnect by forcing a clear linkage between strategic objectives and the action plans implemented to accomplish them. In a GPRA implementation guide developed for federal executives, the GAO laid out the basic requirements of the Results Act (1996). First, the Act would require agencies to emphasize their missions and related goals, the process to achieving those goals, and how to reform their organizational design to better accomplish the goals. Second, the agencies needed to follow a strategic

planning process to develop their missions, goals and objectives. Third, agencies' performance needed to be measurable in light of their stated goals. And fourth, the performance measures needed to be sufficiently complete to give an accurate picture of the agency's progress.

In 1997, the GAO, operating in its capacity as Congress's oversight arm, performed an initial review of federal agency strategic plans and found that the first attempts of federal agencies at implementing GPRA had mixed results (GAO, 1997). The GAO noted that 21 out of 27 plans were incomplete. In his testimony before Congress, L. Nye Stevens, Director of Federal Management and Workforce Issues for the GAO, identified the following deficiencies in federal strategic plans: overlapping program efforts, limited influence of the agency on the outcome of the performance measure, the lack of results-oriented metrics and the lack of an organizational culture that focuses on results (Managing for Results, 1997).

The GAO report was even more detailed in its discussion of strategic plan short-comings. The problems the report identified fell into four general areas: first, the plans did not link the various elements within the plans themselves, i.e. mission and vision statements with long-term strategic goals and annual performance objectives. Second, the plans did not adequately describe the linkage between long-term strategic goals and annual performance goals and the linkage between the goals and daily activities. Third, the agencies' abilities to gather performance information was questionable and decreased their ability to measure performance. And fourth, the plans did not adequately provide for feedback on whether goals were reasonable, strategies were effective, or that corrective actions could be taken. The results of this report indicated that federal strategic planners had additional progress to make to satisfactorily

comply with the intent of GPRA. In addition to the GAO, Franklin (2001) also suggests that the outcomes of GPRA as a culture-change mechanism have been "puny" (p. 137). Clearly the GPRA strategic planning framework has not accomplished its intended goal.

Rationale

Roberts (2000) identifies the first order of intervention in addressing the GAO-identified problems as the introduction of the language and skills of strategic planning to federal managers. Other authors agree that planners need additional skills acquisition but it should be the acquisition of the right skills. Mintzberg (1994) asserts that the planning process most often used is actually strategic *programming* not strategic planning. He describes programming as "the articulation and elaboration of strategies…that already exist" (p. 107). In therapy parlance, that process is often referred to as doing "more of the same" - repeating the existing strategies that led to identified difficulties (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989). Mintzberg advocates for planners that are enabled to more creatively identify the strategic initiatives within an organization. Planners' intent should be "to pose the right questions rather than to find the right answers" (Mintzberg, 1994, p. 112). Strategic planners should not be the experts in programming strategy so much as the facilitators of its development. Their purpose should first be to foster the development of a positive vision of the future and to lead the search to find innovative solutions within the organization. Then these strategic planning facilitators can put their programming skills to use developing the concrete steps to implementing the new, more strategic vision. Given the importance these authors confer to the facilitators, it is surprising that there is a such a lack of research into effective facilitation models for strategic planning. A search of the business journal database, ABI/Inform on the term

"facilitation styles" returned one article and it was a practitioners article from 1989. Variations of the phrases "facilitator style" and "facilitation model" returned no results. Searches for the same terms in ArticleFirst and the Social Science Index delivered similar results.

Since the strategic planning research proffers little in the area of facilitation methodologies, it may make sense to turn to the field that is based on various types of facilitation models though by another name – psychotherapy. Coincidental to the rise of strategic planning in the federal sector has been the growing use of the solution-focused brief model of therapy (SFBT) in the mental health field (Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000). The purpose of SFBT is to help clients develop a vision of a preferred state and then to assist them in utilizing their current resources to accomplish this vision (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989). The strength of solution-focused therapy is its focus on concrete, measurable steps towards the client's identified goals and its positive perspective of client strengths. It is SFBT's emphasis on measurable steps and attainable goals which appears to provide some potential solutions to the problems identified in the GAO report.

The similarities between Mintzberg's version of strategic planning and solution-focused therapy are striking. Berg and Miller (1992) describe solution-focused therapy as helping a client identify a positive vision and then assisting the client in identifying those do-able steps to make the vision a reality. O'Hanlon and Weiner-Davis (1989) further describe SFBT as a process wherein the client envisions a future free of the identified problems, and the therapist subsequently facilitates the client's definition and clarification of the desired end-state, making it behavioral, and breaking it down into small, manageable steps. This closely parallels the strategic planning process mandated by GPRA, where

the organizations must state their purpose, have a future orientation, be focused on the results and have a plan for achieving those results. Since the strength of solution-focused therapy is a focus on the future and identifying those steps to make it happen, integrating solution-focused techniques into the strategic planning process may address the linkage issues identified by the GAO as well as the other criticisms regarding a lack of creativity and vision in the planning process.

Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this study is not to determine the best model of strategic planning. Instead this inquiry addresses one potential cause for the concerns that the General Accounting Office identified, specifically that there has not been a clear facilitation method identified and implemented for use in strategic planning.

As noted previously, Roberts (2000) identifies appropriate training of facilitators as the key to the development of effective strategic plans. van Maurik (1994) states that facilitation success is a result of the facilitators' personal style, knowledge and the methods used. He further suggests that "the challenge to all facilitators is to develop a range of styles" (p. 31).   van Maurik proposes a model which categorizes various characteristics of personal facilitation styles into four separate approaches. An effective facilitator will be able to draw from each of the approaches depending on the needs of the group being facilitated. One purpose of this study is to see if familiarizing facilitators with SFBT will expand their abilities in each of van Maurik's facilitation approaches.

SFBT is both a process and a philosophy. As such it is very much nested in the philosophies of systems theory and social constructivism where problems

are created and continued within the context of human relationships (Lee, 1997). Ginter (as cited in Cottone, 2001) describes social constructivism as the result of interpersonal negotiations on what is "real" (p. 39) and factual. According to the constructivist perspective, belief systems are not based in objective reality but are instead constructed by people (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2000). It is the responsibility of the therapist to co-create with the client a solvable problem (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989). In the context of this study, it would be the responsibility of an SFBT-oriented facilitator working with an executive planning group to co-create a strategic plan that fulfilled GPRA requirements and led to successful change within an organization.

Because SFBT outcomes parallel those intended by GPRA-compliant strategic plans, this study will examine the potential utility of SFBT as a facilitation methodology. To this author's knowledge, this study is the first time SFBT has been suggested specifically for the use of strategic planning in the federal government. Therefore it is exploratory in nature and is being implemented as a qualitative pilot project. In keeping with the solution-focused principle of the client as expert, this study will present SFBT as a coherent, though not exclusive, method for leading groups through the planning process to federal planning facilitators and will ask them to determine its usefulness.

Research Questions

The specific research questions driving this study are focused on the facilitators' receptivity to solution-focused principles and techniques in facilitating strategic planning. Will they see SFBT as a useful methodology? Does SFBT expand their range of facilitation styles? Would the facilitators actually use SFBT in their planning sessions?

As this is a qualitative study, it is not the intent of this author to prove nor disprove a particular hypothesis. The enumeration of the following questions will make explicit the specific biases of this author.

QUESTION ONE: Will study participants see SFBT as a useful model for facilitating planning sessions?

Due to the parallel nature of strategic planning and SFBT, it is expected that participants will be comfortable with the overall solutions-focused approach. It is believed that participants will find SFBT's emphasis on goal setting procedure and the development of realistic goals, particularly useful in creating the linkages that were noted as missing by the GAO.

QUESTION TWO: Will study participants feel comfortable personally using SFBT principles and techniques in their facilitation sessions?

By nature, SFBT fosters a collaborative relationship between the therapist and client (Berg & Miller, 1992). In using a non-confrontational approach to facilitation, it is expected that facilitators will be more comfortable working with senior executives who may also be in their direct chain of command. Thus, SFBT provides the facilitators a method where they can feel effective without placing them in a combative situation.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The following literature review provides information on the specific areas of emphasis for this study; namely, strategic planning and solution-focused principles and techniques as a facilitation method for GPRA-based strategic planning. The review begins with an overview of strategic planning and the planning steps mandated in the Government Performance and Results Act. The main body of this chapter reports on SFBT: its background and basic principles, core techniques, and efficacy studies of SFBT in a therapeutic setting. The final section suggests an integrated SFBT facilitation model for strategic planning based on the strengths of SFBT as described in the research.

Strategic Planning

Strategic planning is the process wherein an organization identifies its purpose and goals, develops a vision of itself in the future and then defines a course of action to reach that future end-state (Donald, Lyons, and Tribbey, 2001). The process also identifies the participants necessary to carry a plan to fruition. There are a number of variations on these themes, but the focal point of strategic planning is the future repercussions of current choices (Bryson, 1988).

Strategic planning offers a number of benefits over its predecessor, which is often referred to as long-range planning. Long-range planning tended to be rigid - relying on assumptions that did not allow for significant changes in the organization's operating environment (Bryson, 1988). Long-range plans were more of an extension of the business plan than a responsive approach to changing conditions. Strategic planning offered the benefit of greater flexibility

with a focus on issues resolution. This flexibility made strategic plans a useful "bridge" between legal mandates and operational realities (Bryson, 1988, p. 9).

Militaries were the first users of strategic planning (Lerner, 1999). However, It became popular in the business world during the 1960s and 1970s. It fell out of favor for a time, as other approaches such as Portfolio Balancing came into vogue (Ghemawat, 2002). The increasingly complex environment of globalization led to a resurgence in prominence in the late 1980s and 1990s (Bryson, 1988; Lerner, 1999; Mintzberg, 1994). Because the strategic planning process forces organizations to think strategically instead of reactively, it became a method for making public agencies more responsive to their constituencies (Bryson, 1988).

Though there is general agreement regarding the importance of strategic planning, the empirical research is equivocal regarding its benefits. In their review of strategic planning efficacy studies, Phillips and Moutinho (2000) report mixed results. In general, they note that many firms gain no benefit from strategic planning and in those that do the gains are limited. Boyd (1991), in his meta-analysis, found a number of methodological problems limiting the reliability of the planning research. Capon, Farley & Hulbert (1994) in a subsequent study found that when more rigorous measures of analysis were used there was a clear benefit from using strategic planning, though planning was not a critical condition of success.

Bryson (1988) suggested – five years before GPRA was enacted – that strategic planning would have lasting power in the government because it was a process that could lead to the more effective implementation of lawmakers' policies. He noted that effective government strategic planning addresses issues in a manner advantageous to the organization and its key stakeholders.

It was this desire to make the federal government more responsive to the

American public that led Congress to adopt the Government Performance and

Results Act in 1993 (Franklin, 2001).

The Stages of Strategic Planning

        The term strategic planning has broad meaning and covers a wide

number of ideas.   In fact, Ghemawat (2002) makes the case for a multiplicity of

approaches. The purpose of this paper is not to advocate for a particular

process, but is instead to examine a potential methodology for making a specific

process – GPRA-specified strategic planning - better. GPRA was implemented

to foster results management within federal agencies. Results management is

usually described as being composed of four basic components, including

clearly defined missions, stakeholder buy-in of results-oriented goals,

informative performance measures, and management accountability (Caudle,

2001).

        The culmination of agency planning is the strategic plan. GPRA

mandates a very clear and specific format for strategic plans in the federal

government. Therefore, the process laid out in the following section has been

taken directly from the Results Act.

        Vision Statement

        Though, GRPA does not mention the creation of vision statements, it is

included here because they have become standard fare in federal strategic

plans. The vision statement is the management's idealized version of itself

(Bryson, 1988). This visualization of the future (Donald, et al., 2001) sets the

goal post from which the rest of the strategic plan flows. It serves as a point on

the horizon that guides decision making, motivates employees and managers, and captures the values of the organization.

Mission statement.

GPRA requires that strategic plans contain "a comprehensive mission statement covering the major functions and operations of the agency" (§ 306. (a) (1)). An organization's mission statement is a statement of purpose - what the organization sets out to accomplish through its operations. It answers the following questions: *Why* does the organization exist? *What* does it do? And, *How* does the organization do what it does? (GAO, 1996).

From that definition, the creation of clear mission statements would seem to be a straightforward process. Yet useful mission statements that avoid ambiguous buzzwords have proven to be far more difficult to develop than would appear. Harpooning the wordy, vacuous mission statements that have become commonplace, Dilbert cartoonist Scott Adams sponsors a "Mission Statement Generator" on his website that issues forth statements composed of random adjectives (Youd, 2002).

Strategic goals and objective.

The completion of the mission statement sets the stage for planning. The Results Act requires that strategic plans provide "general goals and objectives, including outcome-related goals and objectives, for the major functions and operations of the agency" (§ 306. (a) (2)).

The first part of strategic planning addresses the questions – *Who are we and what do we do?* And*, Who do we want to be?* The second half of strategic planning focuses on *How do we get there?* The goals and objectives are the bridge between strategy and action. The goals take the broad scope of the

mission statement and divide it into specific areas of focus. The purpose of the plan's objectives is to take these areas of focus and make them more concrete and results-oriented. GPRA stipulates that these goals and objectives should be "objective, quantifiable, and measurable" (Sec. 4 (b)).

Action plans and identification of milestones.

The action plans and milestones are (or should be) derived from the strategic goals and objectives (See Figure 1). They are the final piece of the strategic plan before implementation. According to GPRA, these plans should be "a description of how the goals and objectives are to be achieved, including a description of the operational processes, skills and technology, and the human, capital, information, and other resources required to meet those goals and objectives" (§ 306. (a) (3)). The action plans and their milestones should clearly relate to the strategic goals and objectives. And they should include methodologies and indicators for measuring accomplishment of both the milestones and the over-arching goals.
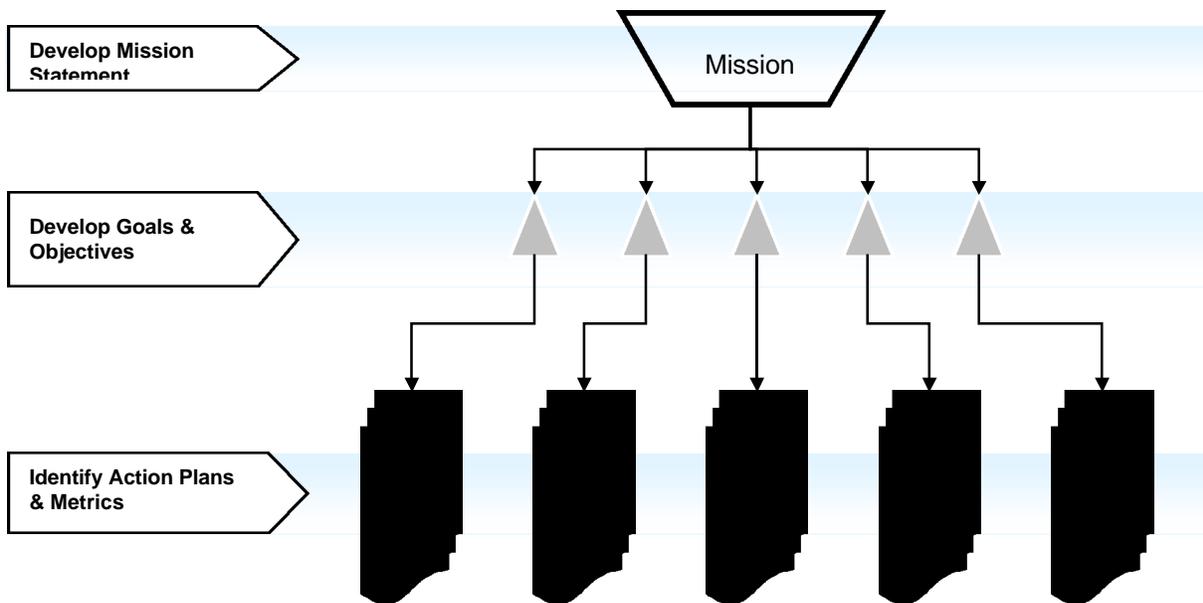
Figure 1. Schematic of the GPRA Strategic Planning Process.

<u>Shortcomings</u>

A number of hindrances to effective GPRA implementation have been noted. Caudle (2001) stresses the importance of developing an organizational culture supportive of the focus on results, including buy-in from the senior leadership. Yet, the Congress and the presidential administrations since passage of the bill have been less focused on the results themselves as they have been on spinning the results to their political advantage (Barr, 1997; Laurent, 2000). The political leadership at the capstone of the planning process is a critical component. The strategic plans need to account for the policy decisions and directions set by the legislature and presidential directives. Without being relevant to these parties, the opportunities for enhanced operational effectiveness offered by implementing GPRA will remain unfulfilled (White, 2001).

In additional to a lack of support from the political leadership, the GAO found a number of shortcomings within the plans themselves (GAO, 1997). One of the most significant weaknesses found was a lack of linkages between parts of the plans, i.e. between the mission statements and strategic goals, and between the goals and the action plans. In a strategic plan, the daily actions of the organization and its personnel should clearly flow from the action plan, which should flow from the strategic objectives, which should flow from the goals, etc. In a majority of the federal plans examined, this linkage was not evident (GAO, 1997).

Additional weakness were observed in regards to the agencies' methods for measuring performance and the performance measures they used. There was a tendency for the agencies to measure output instead of outcomes, e.g. product flow versus intended results. And because the agencies were

dependent on service delivery by contracting organizations, they often did not have the ability to assess the measures they had selected (GAO, 1997).

The fourth major flaw in federal strategic plans was the lack of a built-in feedback mechanism to track whether targeted goals were reasonable, and whether the strategies to implement those goals were working.

Summary of strategic planning.

The concept of strategy has existed for millennia; however, it has only been in the last 50 years that business organizations have pursued strategic planning as a method for achieving competitive excellence. And it has only been in the past 15 years that strategic planning has entered the public and non-profit realms. The research indicates, though not very strongly, that strategic planning offers some benefit to the organizations that use it.

The federal government began implementing strategic planning as a method to be more responsive to the American public (GPRA, 1993) after the Results Act was adopted into law by Congress. Agency implementation of the Act has been uneven due to a number of factors, including a lack of consistent political support (Laurent, 2000). The GAO noted a series of problems within the plans themselves as they were submitted by the authoring agencies. The key issue was the lack of linkages between the various parts of the plans. Roberts (2000) suggests that empowering strategic planning facilitators with the appropriate tools and techniques is the first step in effective implementation of GPRA.

<u>Solution-Focused Therapy</u>

The strategic planning process as outlined closely follows processes used in the provision of solution-focused therapy. SFBT, like strategic planning, creates a vision of the future and then develops concrete steps for getting there. SFBT moves "away from explanations, problems, and pathology, and towards solutions, competence, and capabilities" (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989, p. 6). It is far less concerned about how problems developed than it is with how they will be solved.

<u>Background of solution focused brief therapy.</u>

Solution-focused therapy was developed by Steve de Shazer, Insoo Berg and their colleagues at the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989). As connoted by its name, SFBT avoids the traditional pathological focus of therapy in favor of finding solutions. There is little emphasis placed on history taking or clinical diagnosis (Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000; Stalker, Levene & Coady, 1999). This solution-focused approach to therapy is based on the premise that the dynamics of the status quo are different than the dynamics of change. In discussing various therapeutic approaches, Watts & Pietrzak (2000) describe SFBT as emphasizing empathy, respect for clients, focusing on the strengths and abilities of the clients, and stressing measured progress rather than a perfect end-state. Solution-focused therapists search for exceptions to the problem, times when the problem either doesn't exist or has been mitigated (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989). SFBT is also very goal focused. Goals are to be small, detailed, optimistic, behavioral, and pragmatic (Berg & Miller, 1992).

The solution-oriented approach leverages a client's existing strengths and abilities to assist them in moving towards a desired outcome. Berg & Miller

(1992) articulated a list of seven basic principles in solution-focused work. They are the following: an emphasis on mental health; utilization; client-determined view; parsimony; inevitability of change; present and future orientation; and, cooperation.

One of the key differentiators between SFBT and traditional psychotherapies is the emphasis on mental health. The basic premise is that healthy behaviors and patterns exist but have not been previously identified (Berg & Miller, 1992). Finding the success skills of the client requires acknowledging the client's perspective and strengths, which has the tendency to reduce resistance from the client.

Utilization of the client's processes, behaviors, and symptoms is a principle that grew out of the work of Milton Erickson (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989). Even the "weeds" (p. 15) in the patient's life could be used for the client's benefit. This philosophy requires the therapy to be adapted to the characteristics of each client rather than vice versa. It is the responsibility of the therapist "to access these resources and help clients put them to use in the appropriate areas of their lives" (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989, p. 16).

The focus on client skills and resources leads to a third principle in SFBT, that the client is the expert of his or her own problems. Pathological prognoses should not be foisted upon the client by the therapist. The therapist becomes the student guided by the client's perception of the key treatment issues and solutions (Berg & Miller, 1992). A solution-focused approach eliminates the need to delve into hidden and perhaps unknowable intrapersonal dysfunctions. Instead, "the client's view is simply accepted at face value" (p. 8).

Another important element to SFBT is the emphasis on parsimony or simplicity throughout the approach (Berg & Miller, 1992). The desire is to keep

solutions as simple as possible and add complexity only when necessary. This minimalist approach is seen in the avoidance of developing convoluted explanations for presenting problems. In the SFBT perspective, the purpose for therapy is to assist the client in developing a workable solution to the presenting issue. Once that is accomplished, therapy is terminated. There is no need for the development of elegant theories requiring complicated treatment plans. The principle is to simply initiate the desired change and then to step out of the way (Beg & Miller, 1992).

Building on the concept of initiating change is the SFBT assumption that change is constant. The solution-focused belief is that change is so unavoidable "that clients cannot prevent themselves from changing" (Berg & Miller, 1992, p. 11). The role of the therapist is to find changes that are in the direction of the desired solution and to help the client magnify them (O'Hanlon and Weiner-Davis, 1999).

Amplifying positive change requires a present and future orientation. One of the methods an SFBT therapist uses to avoid pathologizing the client is to orient the client first to the here-and-now and thus out of the problematic past (Berg & Miller, 1992). Then the client and therapist co-develop a vision of a future without the problem. This "possibilities" thinking leads to the implementation of unique techniques to be discussed further in the chapter.

The social constructivist underpinnings of SFBT are evidenced in the cooperative nature of the model – the seventh basic principle described by Berg & Miller (1992). SFBT is a collaborative, non-confrontational approach (Nickerson, 1995). Together the therapist and client co-create a picture of a desirable future and the solutions that will be used to create that future (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989). The difference between SFBT-oriented

cooperation and that of other therapies is that in SFBT the therapist seeks to cooperate with the client's reality instead of persuading the client to accept the therapist's perspective. In this shift in emphasis, the therapist is no longer working to obtain the client's cooperation with a specific treatment plan, but rather seeks to co-develop a solution-oriented reality with the client (Berg & Miller, 1992).

The purpose of these principles is to create a context that facilitates change by making change desirable, do-able, and friendly. The methodology of SFBT is to find existing exceptions to the presenting problem in order to replicate the successful processes in other areas of the client's life. Throughout therapy, the therapist works with the client to help them create a new and more positive perspective on their ability to manage the problem and to co-create new solutions (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989). Throughout the process, the therapist uses compliments to build the client's confidence and to keep the focus of therapy on the client's successes.

The principles listed previously have led to the development of a number of solution-focused techniques. Some examples of solution-focused interventions include: scaling questions, exception questions, miracle questions, and pretreatment change questions (McKeel, A. J., 1999; Berg & Miller, 1992; Lee, 1997). An examination of SFBT reveals that the various techniques and approaches appear to cohere into a linear, though reiterative, process. The first phase of solution-focused therapy is directed towards developing a cooperative relationship between the therapist and the client (Berg & Miller, 1992). The next phase shifts the orientation of the client and therapy to a present and future orientation in a process where the client envisions a solution to his or her presenting problem. The third step is to help the client develop concrete steps

to make his/her vision a reality. And the final phase is concerned with supporting the client's progress. The total length of this process is usually less than six sessions (Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000).

Solution-Focused Therapy Phases & Techniques

Since the SFBT practitioner views the client as the expert, the therapist refrains from offering advice and relies instead on the use of well-developed questions as their primary intervention (De Jong & Berg, 2001). Insoo Berg, as quoted by Schorr (1997, p. 205), stated that "the question is the intervention." Within each phase of therapy, there are number of useful, and often similar, questioning techniques.

Developing a cooperative relationship.

In developing the client-therapist relationship, solution-focused clinicians take the approach that the client is the expert in his or her own change processes, thereby bypassing the issue of client resistance (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989). During this initial phase, the therapist and client negotiate outcome goals supportive of the client's motives (Nickerson, 1995). Berg and Miller (1992) classify client participation in therapy in three classes - that of customer, visitor or complainant. The customer-type of participation is found in the client who comes to therapy and jointly develops with therapist a solvable issue, and then sees him- or herself as part of the solution. The client-as-customer is willing to perform the actions they have identified on their way to the solution.

Another class of participation – or lack thereof – is that of the visitor (Berg & Miller, 1992). The visitor has not developed a mutually agreed upon goal with the therapist and sees the problem as being someone else's. Quite often,

visitors are attending therapy because they have been sent to treatment by someone else, i.e. court-ordered clients.

In the complainant-type relationship with the therapist, the client and therapist have cooperatively identified a presenting problem or even a potential solution; however, the client will have a number of reasons for resisting participation in therapy, including the belief that their case is particularly hopeless or that therapy has failed before. The key characteristic of this type of relationship is that the client does not see themselves as part of the solution (Berg & Miller, 1992).

COPING QUESTIONS

These complainants can be very difficult to work with when using a traditional approach. Berg and Miller (1992) suggest that a good technique for use in a complainant relationship with the client is a type of question they refer to as *Coping Questions*. These questions can be helpful in re-orienting the client away from the perspective of a problem-filled past to a perspective of small successes in spite of the obstacles. Examples coping-type questions include "*How* do you keep going in spite of these obstacles?" or "How did you manage to accomplish that when so and so was interfering?"

Developing a future orientation.

FIRST SESSION TASKS

In SFBT, the therapist works with the client to get unstuck from the problem-saturated past and to develop a hopeful, future orientation. Early solution-focused therapists noted that some tasks worked in a variety of situations, much like a skeleton key can unlock a number of different doors

(LaFountain, Garner & Eliason, 1996). One of these formula-type tasks used for reorienting a client towards solutions thinking is the *First Session Task*. In the *First Session Task*, the client is directed to identify something about their life that they want to continue in the future (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989).

Similar to other techniques, *First Session Task*s invite clients to focus on things that have been going well by asking them to describe something that is occurring in their life that they want to continue (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989). This task provides reassurance to hesitant clients that the therapy session can build on previous, and often unrecognized, successes. Often, a *First Session Task* is given at the end of a therapy session as homework to accomplish before the next session. These tasks orient the client towards the future and those areas of positive momentum they currently have.

MIRACLE QUESTIONS

The central technique in solutions-focused therapy is the *Miracle Question*. It, too, is used for orienting a client towards a better, more hopeful future. However, it also serves the critical role of allowing the client to set the goals of therapy. This technique embodies all the principles of the solution-focused approach and creates the opportunity for the client to make a clear break from the problem-saturated past.

With the *Miracle* Question, the therapist asks the client to envision a future where the presenting problem has been resolved (De Jong & Berg, 2001; Lee, 1997). Berg and Miller (1992) provide the following example:

I want to ask you a slightly different question now. You will have to use your imagination for this one. Suppose you go home and go to bed tonight after today's session. While you are

sleeping a miracle happens and the problem that brought you here

is solved, just like that (snapping a finger). Since you were

sleeping, you didn't know that this miracle happened. What do you

suppose will be the first small thing that will indicate to you

tomorrow morning that there has been a miracle overnight and the

problem that brought you here is solved? (p. 78).

This type of question creates a future frame that is problem free. As

such, it allows the client to describe what the problem-free future means to him

or her. If the miracle is truly next to impossible, i.e. winning the lottery, it is not

the therapist's role to contradict the client, but rather to help the client find those

pieces of the miracle that are achievable, and to help them find the portions of

the miracle that are already happening. The *Miracle Question* also helps the

client to take responsibility for implementing the solution in their own lives (Berg

& Miller, 1992).

Once the miracle has been stated, the client is asked to describe the

miracle until a very clear picture is developed. The therapist works with the

client to develop a picture of the miracle in "detailed and measurable terms"

(Berg & Miller, 1992, p. 79). Follow-up questions might include: What would be

the first thing you noticed?, Who else would notice the change?, How would you

feel about the change?, etc.

<u>Making the vision a reality.</u>

ACTION DESCRIPTIONS

One of the key principles in solution-oriented change is to make goals "concrete, specific, and behavioral" (Berg & Miller, 1992, p. 37). A powerful method for this process is to have clients use *Action Descriptions* to describe their goals.

Potential questions eliciting *Action Descriptions* include, What would you be doing when that [a positive goal] happened?, Who was with you?, How did you know you were making progress? or How would you describe your actions to someone else?

Action Descriptions turn vague state-of-being concepts into clear behaviors. This moves the desired end-state from being conceptual and somewhat amorphic to concrete and actionable. The *Action Descriptions* also help to evaluate progress by making the goals more tangible and visible.

EXCEPTION-FINDING QUESTIONS

Exception-Finding Questions arise from the presumption that change is a constant (Lee, 1997) and that there is always an exception. The *Exception-Finding Question* seeks to help the client identify times when they are not experiencing the issue bringing them to therapy (LaFountain, Garner & Eliason, 1996). Quite often clients are already having some success accomplishing their desired goals (Berg & Miller, 1992). The exception question suggests to the client that they think about a time when the issue was less intrusive and asks 'What is or was different when the problem wasn't happening?' (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989).

SCALING QUESTIONS

The use of "*Scaling Questions*" is another important technique for making vague concepts and goals more concrete. In responding to *Scaling Questions*, clients have the opportunity to place their current state or progress on a scale - usually using 1 and 10 as the anchors (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989). For a couple in conflict, a *Scaling Question* might be, 'On a scale of one to ten, with ten being "things are really good between us," where would you put your relationship right now?' Such questions are a simple evaluation tool for helping clients to assess their situation and goal attainment (Lee, 1997).

Often a therapist will use *Scaling Questions* to help a client identify how close to a goal they are, their level of commitment to that goal, and what the smallest steps are for making incremental progress up the scale (Nickerson, 1995). Using the previous example, a therapist might ask the follow-up question 'What would it take for your marriage to move from the 5 you mentioned to a 6 or even a 5.5?' This helps the client to break the problem into small, solvable chunks.

Maintaining progress.

Solution-focused therapy uses the evaluation phase as a way to reinforce the progress that has been made and to keep the client focused on the positive (Berg & Miller, 1992). Berg and Miller (1992) suggest examining the chain of events and elements that went into the successes accomplished during therapy. They also suggest the following series of questions (p. 132):

"When did this success happen? What did you do? Who else noticed? What did they do when they saw you doing that?…What was going on at that place that helped you do things that way? What else did

you do?…How did you know it would work? What gave you the idea to do it that way?"

These type of questions lend themselves to a productive examination of processes that lead to successful goal attainment. In those cases where the previous solutions are not directly applicable to the deficits in reaching the stated goals, the positive questioning process may still reveal success strategies that could be adapted.

Research on solution-focused therapy.

In 2000, Gingerich and Eisengart published a review of the SFBT outcome research. They noted that despite the widespread use of SFBT in mental health settings in the United States and abroad there ihas been a paucity of well-formed efficacy studies on the approach. Only in the past few years have controlled studies been published in the literature. Early research into the success of SFBT showed favorable success rates; however, these studies were often case studies or were otherwise methodologically inadequate to be generalizable.

In their review of controlled studies (2000), Gingerich and Eisengart examined only those studies that used comparison groups or single-case repeated-measures design. To be included, the studies also had to be focused on the outcomes at the end of therapy or later. For the purpose of the review, solution-focused brief therapy was defined as "(1) a search for pre-session change, (2) goal-setting, (3) use of the *Miracle Question*, (4) use of *Scaling Questions*, (5) a search for exception, (6) a consulting break, and (7) a message including compliments and task" (p. 479).

Gingerich and Eisengart (2000) identified 15 studies meeting their criteria for a controlled study of SFBT. They classified these 15 studies into 3 levels of quality, ranging from well controlled to poorly controlled, based on American Psychological Association standards for determining empirical support for psychological treatments. Of the five well controlled studies, all outcomes were positive to some extent. The research examined the use of SFBT with depressed college students (Sundstrom, 1993), a parenting group (Zimmerman, Jacobsen, MacIntyre & Watson, 1996), orthopedic patients (Cockburn, Thomas & Cockburn, 1997), prison inmates (Lindforss & Magnusson ,1997) and anti-social adolescent offenders (Seagram, 1997).

The use of single session SFBT interventions with the college students found that the approach was equally as successful as the empirically-validated Interpersonal Psychotherapy for Depression model in producing positive change. In the study of the solutions-focused parenting group, parents were found to have statistically significant increases in several parenting factors, including: Role Image, Rapport, Communication, Objectivity and Limit Setting. The use of SFBT for psychosocial adjustment and return-to-work rates for orthopedic patients made a very clear contribution. Seven days after the completion of treatment, 68% percent of subjects returned to work versus 4% of the control group. After 30 days, 92% of the patients receiving SFBT treatment had returned to work versus 47% of the control group.

In the study of SFBT with adolescent offenders, participants received 10 weekly SFBT sessions in addition to the standard services they were receiving. The control group received the standard services, but no SFBT sessions. The study reported that at the end of the therapy sessions, the treatment group was significantly more optimistic, showed greater empathy, and fewer anti-social

tendencies. At the end of a six-month follow-up period, 20% or the treatment group had run away or were taken into secure custody versus 42% of the control group. With this evidence, it is clear that treatment with SFBT can lead to a significant improvement. Unfortunately, several of these studies lacked a comparative treatment; therefore, in these cases, it is unclear if SFBT would more effective than another treatment methodology.

Though the other 10 studies reviewed by Gingerich and Eisengart (2000) pointed to a positive impact by SFBT interventions, the authors found several deficiencies of varying levels in the studies that calls into question the validity and/or generalizability of the research results. Nevertheless, it appears SFBT offers significant promise as a treatment modality in a number settings.

Solution-focused therapy with other populations .

Over the past ten years, as familiarity with the approach has grown, solution-focused techniques have been applied in increasingly diverse therapeutic situations. Lee (1997) suggested that SFBT is useful with a diversity of clients. An online search of the Social Science Citation Index found 37 records from 1999 – 2002 where the phrase "solution focused" was used as a key word in the article. Article titles reveal SFBT being used with mandated clients (De Jong & Berg, 2001), male cross-dressers (Dzelme & Jones, 2001), a group for Hispanic children of incarcerated parents (Springer, Lynch & Rubin, 2000), classes for parents of challenging teens (Todd, 2000), and nursing home residents (Ingersoll-Dayton, Schroepfer, & Pryce, 1999).

Because the purpose of this study is to examine the application of SFBT in strategic planning – with critical processes taking place in a group-setting - research examining the use of SFBT in groups is of particular interest.

Nickerson (1995) published a study describing the application of solution-focused therapy in a group format for mentally ill veterans, though he did not provide any outcome measures beyond client satisfaction. A number of veterans at a VA hospital were included in a group therapy session once each week for approximately 45 minutes. For most of the group, the first session was their only group session due to the brevity of their stay in the hospital, though some participants received SFBT in an individual setting. After a very brief explanation of SFBT to the participants, a volunteer from the group was asked the *Miracle Question*. The focus of the miracle was whatever problem that brought the veteran to the hospital. Group leaders found that veterans were able to envision the miracle and to describe one or two things they would do differently in their lives after the miracle occurred. A series of questions asking for further descriptions of the miracle as well as *Scaling Questions* were asked. The veterans generally responded favorably. Of particular interest for this study is that the other group participants were asked if they had seen the volunteer doing any of the positive things described in the miracle.   Positive responses from other members of the group appeared to be very important for the volunteering veteran. This process continued in turn with the other participants. At the end of the session, the therapist asked the group their opinions of the therapy. The response was positive.

Schorr (1997) recounts the use of a solution-focused approached with an anger management group where he describes the SF framework as being "invaluable" (p. 201). The anger group was selected from clinician referrals and represented a wide demographic and functional range. The group started with a total of 13 individuals and finished the course of therapy, after 8 weeks, with 9. The group leader used a combination of an SFBT and a psychoeducational

approach. The skills presented were a variety of anger management techniques; however, they were couched in the solution-focused approach so as to draw out existing success stories in the group. For example, the group coach initiated a discussion about relaxation breathing by asking the question "Did anyone here ever have a grandmother who told them to take a few deep breaths before reacting?" (p. 202). In response, group members were encouraged to share their own experiences and success stories.

SFBT techniques used in the group sessions included *Exception-Finding Questions*, *Scaling Questions* and the *Miracle Question*. The group coach used a *Scaling Question* that was modified to fit the purpose of the group with a series of words denoting a range of anger levels, including "irritated" and "ballistic" (p. 204) as the anchors. The *Miracle Question* was used to help the participants visualize what life would be like without something provoking their anger. To gauge the success of the SFBT group therapy, the State-Trait Anger Inventory was given as pre and post-test. In the pre-test it was noted that 67% of the participants had levels of anger which were significant enough to create problems in interpersonal functioning, as well as indicating psychological or physical disorders. The post-treatment test showed this percentage falling to 40%. There were no control groups to separate out the SFBT effect. Even so, the study indicated that SFBT could be useful in a group context.

Though the number of venues where solution-focused brief therapy is being used is steadily increasing, the focus of the efficacy and effectiveness research has stayed mainly in the health care realm. A search in ABI/Inform, an extensive *business* article database, retrieved no hits on the phrases, "*Miracle Question*" and "brief therapy", and "solution-focused" located no SFBT related articles.

Only one research-based article was found that was even tangentially relevant to the application of SFBT in a corporate setting. This study was published by Priest and Gass in 1997. In their study, they compared the application of "problem-solving" versus "solution-focused" facilitation styles in corporate adventure training. The study included participants from two corporations, one with high levels of functional team behavior, and one with low levels. Level of functioning was determined by the Team Development Inventory (TDI-I). The TDI-I was administered to the subjects one month prior to the training and two months after. Members from each corporation were split into two groups, with 20-23 in each group for a total of 86 subjects in four groups. Two groups, one from the functional company and one from the dysfunctional company, were randomly assigned to team-building exercises guided by a problems-solving model. The other functional and dysfunctional teams received training that was solutions-focused. Seventy-five percent of the participants returned the survey instrument.

The results showed that all four groups experienced improvements in teamwork; however, the dysfunctional group receiving solutions-focused training improved significantly (statistically and practically) more than the other three groups. The authors concluded that for functional groups, problem-solving and solution-focused approaches were equally effective.   Groups stuck in dysfunctional processes benefited significantly more from a solutions-focused perspective. It is important to note that this study like most other solution-focused research targeted the intra- or interpersonal potential of the SFBT approach. Even this study did not emphasize actual businesses processes or products.

Caufmann and Berg published a practitioner article in 2002, discussing the use of a solutions-focus in corporate coaching. In this article, typical problem-solving strategy sessions within a business are described as demoralizing and focused on obstacles, thereby reducing the possibility of measurable progress. "Solution-focused coaching" on the other hand, shifts both the tone and the focus of strategy sessions to a positive, resolution orientation (Caufmann & Berg, 2002). The authors suggest adapting the aforementioned SF techniques, e.g. the *Miracle Question*, for resolving a number of corporate problems, including mergers, inter-departmental conflict, disputes in family-owned businesses, etc.

Beyond the two articles just discussed, there has been a dearth of journal articles on the application of solution-focused principles in the corporate world. In 2001, Louis Caufmann, co-author of the aforementioned practitioner article, published a book in Dutch on the use of SF techniques in business settings. According to the foreword written by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Berg for the book, it was the first book written on the application of SF for business (L. Caufmann, personal communication, July 11, 2002). He is currently writing an English-language version.

In April 2002, Jackson and McKergow published The Solutions Focus, discussing the use of SF principles in a corporate setting. In the book, they recount the experience of the Glasgow Group, a management consulting company (M. McKergow, personal communication, July 15, 2002). The book provides a case study discussing the use of a solution-focused approach in strategic planning for a non-profit film institute in Canada. In the strategic planning offsite with the non-profit's employees, the Glasgow Group focused on organizational strengths as a foundation for the company's future (Glasgow

Group, 2002). *Exception-Finding Questions* were used to identify moments of success in prior chaotic situations. *Miracle* and *Scaling Questions* were used to develop descriptive action plans for the future. When there was a gap noted between current skills and future needs, the question was asked "When this is no longer an issue/problem, what will we be doing?" (webpage). Participants responses were built into the planning. The Glasgow Group credits their solution-focused approach with helping the non-profit employees to have a greater sense of optimism, an increase in team cohesion, and greater organizational alignment.

These two books indicate that there is a growing interest in the application of solution-focused principles to business and large organizational systems. Gingerich and Eisengart (2000) suggest that the numerous case studies and pilot studies published on SFBT in clinical settings were the precursor and foundation for more rigorous studies into the efficacy of SFBT in the field of psychotherapy. Perhaps, practitioner articles and books on the application of SF principles in organizational systems are also a prelude to the development of a body of controlled research in this nascent field as well.

Summary of research on solution-focused therapy.

Though solution-focused brief therapy has been in practice for the last 20 years, it has only been in the past 10 years that the research has gone beyond non-generalizable investigations and case studies. A review of the current research indicates that SFBT is being shown as an effective methodology for treating a number of presenting problems, including depression, out-of-control adolescents, criminal recidivism, alcoholism, and numerous others (Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000). The use of solution-focused techniques and principles is also spreading beyond treatment of the individual and into group settings. Case

studies and research show SFBT being applied in school counseling, anger management, veterans groups and parenting groups (LaFountain, Garner & Eliason, 1996; Schorr, 1997; Nickerson, 1995; Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000). Two new books published within the past year describe the use of a solution-focused approach in business settings as well. However, only one controlled study has been published to compare the effectiveness of a solutions-focused approach vis-à-vis other modalities in a corporate context (Priest & Gass,1997). This study did indicate that use of SFBT with a dysfunctional corporate team was both very effective in and of itself and more effective than a problem-solving strategy.

Integrating Strategic Planning and the Solution-Focused Approach

        Similarities between models.

        Stalker et al. (1999) suggest that an important component in therapy is matching the appropriate therapeutic model with the individual characteristics of a client. Roberts (2000) makes the case that a "one-size-fits-all" (p. 298) model of strategic planning is ineffective. Certainly, in the competitive demands of a business environment, a model which didn't appear to have a prima facie fit would receive little attention. The clear parallels between strategic planning, and specifically the model mandated by GRPA, and solution-focused brief therapy overcome this initial hurdle. The four phases of SFBT closely parallel many aspects of GPRA strategic planning. Both processes focus on the future and begin with the development of a vision of a success future. Both mandate the development of clear, actionable goals. And both encourage the development of action planning that leads to the implementation of short term milestones and the eventual implementation of the envisioned future. In fact,

SFBT is particularly strong in the area that the GAO noted federal strategic plans were falling short – the linkages between missions, goals, and action plans.

Getting participant buy-in.

Participant buy-in is critical to the strategic planning process. Though federal executives are mandated to submit strategic plans (or perhaps because they are mandated), there are often nay-sayers to the process. Many planning participants refer to various strategy initiatives as "the flavor of the month" (Franklin, 2001, p. 134) – indicating the perspective that "this initiative too shall pass." De Jong and Berg's (2001) work with mandated clients may fit well with executives forced into strategic planning. The terms they use for involuntary clients such as "resistant, "uncooperative," and "often hostile" (p. 361) could just as easily describe many participants in planning sessions.

A more traditional psychotherapy approach might require confronting the client and overcoming their resistance. A solution-focused entrée to working with such a complainant would be to identify what the client might be a customer for. It may be necessary to explore the concerns in more detail with the complainant to find an area where the complainant *is* interested in taking some ownership of the process (Berg & Miller, 1992).

SFBT provides the important framework that the criticisms offered by the complainants in strategic planning may in fact be accurate and their information could prove instrumental in developing more effective strategic plans. Suggestions from Berg, Miller and other solution-focused therapists for working with these "resistant" clients may encourage their buy-in to the process. DeJong and Berg (2001) describe the role of client-as-expert to be "pivotal" in the

solution-focused approach. Rather than manipulating complainant-type clients into compliance, the facilitator should seek for their expertise and insights into co-creating solutions. Solution-focused practitioners tend to view a client's "resistance" as the client's assistance in identifying more useful approaches.

Hearing and empathizing with the client accomplishes two things. First, it gathers potentially useful information about the process. Second, it works to cooperatively bring the client into the process. Mintzberg (1994) describes mandated planning as "calculating" and as not accounting for participants' preferences. He further states that "strategies take on value only as committed people infuse them with energy" (p. 109). Thus the solution-focused collaborative approach, where the client is heard and respected as important, may prove particularly suitable to federal planning sessions where cooperation is otherwise mandated.

USING *COPING QUESTIONS*

In the "flavor of the month" scenario (Franklin, 2001, p. 134), complainants argue that nothing changes, and that *this* strategic planning effort will be no different. These individuals can bog down the process rapidly. However, they can also be a source of very useful information.

Coping Questions can help elicit cooperative feedback from people who doubt the efficacy of strategic planning. It is a useful technique for bringing complainants into the solution-development process. These type of questions start with a hearing-out of the complainant's concerns. Listening closely is important as it allows the facilitator to understand the complainant better and to later more effectively co-create solutions wherein the complainant actively desires to contribute (Berg & Miller, 1992).

One of the methods of this line of questioning is to focus on what the organization *is* accomplishing. Then the facilitator talks about how these accomplishments are successes and how these examples show how adaptive changes have been made in the past.

In an organizational setting, individuals may affix the failure of past initiatives on the lack of support or interference from higher authorities in the bureaucracy. Some responsive *Coping Questions* to this "passing the buck" might include: How have you continued to lead in this organization even with this oppressive oversight?, How are you adapting to your customers with such a lack of support? or What are some of the ways you have managed to work around their interference? Another potential question might include, What are some of the ways this planning session can help you do what you're already accomplishing?

These questions acknowledge the challenges that team members have encountered in previous efforts, while also recognizing that they have made progress despite the obstacles. The purpose of asking these *Coping Questions* is to hear the complainant, collect useful information, and to co-create a solution in which they wish to participate (Berg & Miller, 1992)

FIRST SESSION TASKS

Using a *First Session Task* in strategic planning could aid the facilitator in orienting the planning team towards the future and to build on any positive momentum they currently have (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989). With an modified *First Session Task*, the facilitator might ask the planning team, "What is going on in this organization that you would like to have continue or that you would not like to lose in a re-organization?" A common aphorism in the business

world is that 20% of the employees are accomplishing 80% of the work. This 20% may be the initial area of focus for the adapted *First Session Task*.

MIRACLE QUESTIONS

Another potential technique for developing mission/vision statements and strategic goal setting is to use *Miracle Questions*. Alan Kay of the Glasgow Group (2002) reported using *Miracle Questions* effectively in strategic planning. A common *Miracle Question* adapted to strategic planning might be, "If a miracle happened and you came to work tomorrow and this organization was everything you described in your vision statement, what will be different?" Possible follow-up questions include:

- Are there small pieces of this that are already occurring?

- What do you need to do to make it happen more?

- How will your job be different?

- Which of the organization's constituencies will be among the first to notice?

- What will they notice?

- How will they respond?

The facilitator continues to ask these questions to make the vision "vivid and concrete" (De Jong & Berg, 2001, p. 370).

Miracle Questions can also help clarify goals (Schorr, 1997). By using this process, the facilitator has helped the planning participants to identify a conceptual target as their strategic goal. Used in conjunction with *Scaling Questions*, the facilitator could also help planning executives create numerical targets for the purpose of evaluating their progress. These questions can be

combined with developing *Action Descriptions* to make the mission/vision statements more concrete.

ACTION DESCRIPTIONS

The line of questioning that leads to *Action Descriptions* would require clients to describe in concrete terms how their vision and mission statements translate into every day actions. The answers to these questions provide the groundwork for developing action plans and metrics. An activity that encourages the development of *Action Descriptions* would emphasize the *who, what, when, where,* and *how* that are critical to effective action plans.

EXCEPTION-FINDING QUESTIONS

Quite often clients are already having some success accomplishing their desired goals (Berg & Miller, 1992). This is equally true of organizations. Many companies and agencies seek to be highly innovative and efficient. As noted in the discussion of the *First Session Task*, it is probable that in some way they are already accomplishing this. The fact that any organization currently exists is evidence that it did something successfully at some previous time. By working with team members to identify those success stories, they may see possible solutions to implement and to expand upon as they move towards their goals. Identifying past organizational successes creates the possibility for future successes. Potential discussion questions include:

- What goals is the organization currently accomplishing?

- What successes has this organization had in the past?

- Who have been past leaders when the organization had these successes?

- What did these leaders do to contribute to the successes?

- How did the workforce contribute?

- How did the leadership engage the workforce?

- Who else contributed to the successes?

- What did they do?

- How did they initially buy in to the effort?

- Who outside the organization noticed the success?

- What parts of the success did they notice?

The answers to these questions will provide methods and actions that can be implemented to accomplish the current goals. This will also create a context of potential for positive change.

SCALING QUESTIONS

Using *Scaling Questions* in strategic planning may help the planning group break the actions plans down into manageable pieces. With *Scaling Questions*, clients place their current state or progress on a scale usually using 1 and 10 as their anchors (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989). A management team might put accomplishment of various elements of their vision statement or their strategic goals as 10 on a 1 to 10 scale. They could then be asked to identify on this scale how close they are to a 10. Once they have identified their current state and had the opportunity to discuss their subjective measurement, they would then be asked what it would take to move them up a point on the scale, e.g. from 5 to 6.

To further leverage the utility of *Scaling Questions*, the management team could also be asked to evaluate the organization from the perspectives of key

stakeholders, such as the workforce, the "tax-paying" consumer, or overseers in the chain-of-command. Giving strategic planners the opportunity to take these additional perspectives serves a dual purpose. It provides management a reality check for their goals; and it helps them design their action plans to have maximum impact across stakeholder groups (Roberts, 2000).

EVALUATION

The focus of both the Results Act and strategic planning is on creating successful results. In order to measure success, the Results Act mandates evaluation and measurement steps. Solution-focused therapy uses the evaluation phase as a way to reinforce the progress that has been made and to keep the client focused on the positive (Berg & Miller, 1992). Because the Results Act requires measurements that are quantifiable, this positive perspective can be useful in framing the results.

The natural tendency will be to look at how far short of the goal organizations fall in the measurement of their accomplishments. From personal experience of the author, this "focus on failure" leads to an endless round of blaming and buck passing. In contrast, solution-focused therapy sticks with its principles to reinforce further progress. By looking at the chain of events and elements that led to goal attainment as envisioned in the strategic plan, planners will be have identified successful processes for replication in future iterations.

Chapter Three: Methods

Project Design

The purpose of this project is to gather information from federal strategic planning facilitators regarding the potential utility of a solution-focused methodology in facilitating strategic planning sessions. The study is also intended to assess the likelihood of these facilitators to use solution-focused techniques and to identify any concerns they might have regarding the use of SFBT in their organization.

The methodology used in this study generally follows the naturalistic-ethnographic format used in qualitative studies (Heppner, Kivlighan & Wampold, 1992). Central to this type of research is the collaborative relationship between researcher and participant wherein there is a "working alliance" (p. 196). Typically, multiple methods of data collection are used and participants are often used to validate and clarify conclusions derived from the data.

The reason this study is needed is that a number of weaknesses have been identified in the federal strategic planning process, specifically in the implementation of the Government Performance and Results Act; and it is hypothesized that a solution-focused approach may offer some potential remedies to some of the identified weaknesses. Therefore, this study pilot tests SFBT concepts and techniques with a group of facilitators experienced in federal strategic-planning activities.

As previously identified, the weaknesses of federal strategic planning are:

1. Mission and vision statements not linked with long-term strategic goals and annual performance goals;

2. Lack of linkage between stated goals and actions;

3. Lack of objective and measurable outcomes; and,

4. Lack of evaluation methods (GAO, 1997).

Almost always, federal executives bring in facilitators to guide the planning team in the process. These facilitators generally come from private-sector consulting firms or internal planning/organizational development staff.

This study focuses on the facilitators as keys to improving the strategic planning process. As a first step in assessing the efficacy of SF principles in strategic planning it was decided that assessing facilitator receptivity to the proposed solution-focused would be a first step. The method for familiarizing facilitators with solution-focused principles was the development and delivery of a three hour training course to a group of six experienced government facilitators. As part of the training, participants received a training manual containing the basics of the course. One week prior to the delivery of the training, a pre-training questionnaire was sent to the participants. This questionnaire assessed the participants experience, comfort level and style of facilitation. At the end of the training, another questionnaire was administered to collect their views on the value of solution-focused principles and to see if their facilitation style had shifted. One week after the training session, the participants were invited to a small group session that elicited their feedback on the utility of the techniques that were presented to them.

Training

The short training module that was developed and implemented served the primary purpose of familiarizing the participants with solution-focused principles and potential applications for use in strategic planning. A GPRA

framework for strategic planning was used. The author of this study also served as the trainer that delivered the program.

Actual executive team meetings for strategic planning generally happen infrequently (Roberts, 2000). Therefore, most facilitators of strategic planning activities also have other responsibilities. The participants of the training for this study are involved in a number of planning and policy initiatives for their employer, all at the headquarters level. Therefore, to prepare them for a specific focus on GPRA, a two page overview of the Government Performance and Results Act was sent to each participant. During the introductory period of the training, GPRA was briefly reviewed again.

The remainder of the training was spent presenting solution-focused brief therapy in the context of GPRA-based strategic planning. The training included an introduction SFBT, a discussion of six SFBT techniques, and several exercises. The techniques that were presented included: *Coping Questions*, *First Session Task*s, the *Miracle Question*, *Action Descriptions*, *Exception-Finding Questions*. and *Scaling Questions*.

For the opening ice breaker the trainees were split into two groups. The members of each group briefly discussed one recent success in their work or personal lives for which they were particularly pleased. The purpose of this exercise, besides increasing familiarity among the participants, was to immediately orient the trainees to a success-based perspective. The other exercises that were implemented to increase familiarity and comprehension of *Coping Questions*, *Miracle Questions*, and *Action Descriptions*. All the exercises took place in groups.

For the exercise on *Coping Questions*, the class was broken into two groups of two or three participants. Each group selected a facilitator and the

remaining member(s) of the group took the role of complainant. The role of the complainant was to discuss why strategic planning was such a waste of time. The facilitator listened empathetically and intently for any positive exceptions. Afterward, the facilitator complimented the complainant for any positives noted and worked with the complainant to build on the exceptions. After a few minutes, the participants switched roles.

The role-play for the *Miracle Question* was somewhat more difficult. Remaining in a group of six, one person was selected as a planning executive, one was chosen to be an outside observer, and the other four filled the facilitator role in a round-robin. The first facilitator began with a work-related *Miracle Question*. After the executive's response, the next facilitator asked a related question that developed additional detail, building on information from the previous question. This activity was broken into two stages. The first stage went several rounds with the questions focusing on the executive's first-person experience of the miracle. Questions from the second stage asked the executive to describe the miracle from a customer's perspective. At the end of the exercise, each of the facilitators, the executive and the observer were asked for their feedback on each stage as well as a comparison between the two stages.

The third activity was an action description exercise. The group was again divided into two groups of three. One facilitator volunteered to lead each group throughout the activity. The facilitator was to take on the role of a documentary producer. The documentary he or she was directing was to be an examination of the processes and activities that went into attaining a strategic goal. The other two participants played the roles of project leads. The facilitator was instructed to focus on who the main characters would be, what systems would be filmed, what goal attainment would look like, etc. It was very important

for the facilitator/filmmaker to develop a clear visual of what his or her camera would be recording. The facilitator was told that his film crew would be filming at the six month and five year interval to detail the process and attainment of the goal. Feedback was again elicited at the end of the exercise. The training manual containing these exercises is available from the author upon request at jim_mortensen@yahoo.com.

Sample Recruitment

The selection was based on non-statistical snowball sampling method used in qualitative research (Gilgun, Daly, & Handel, 1992). The author of this study worked with a contact inside the agency to develop a list of individuals meeting the qualifications for experience based on the contact's knowledge of the workforce. The contact then discussed the study with the individuals on the list and invited them to participate. All invitees expressed interest; however, due to scheduling constraints the majority could not attend the training. Those who could not participate were invited to suggest an alternate that met the qualifications. Three of the subjects were on the original list, three were alternate suggestions.

After receiving verbal agreement to participate, each volunteer received a follow-up phone call from the author and each was sent an introductory letter describing the study in greater detail and seeking reconfirmation of the volunteer's participation. Follow-up contacts included the review of GPRA-based strategic planning (See Appendixes A and B) and the pre-training facilitation survey. Participants were assured that survey responses and small group participation would be kept completely anonymous. Prior to contacting

potential participants, the research plan was submitted to and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Participants

The sample consisted of six volunteers currently working for a very large US government agency. Each of the participants had experience facilitating federal strategic planning efforts. These were upper mid-level employees (GS 13s – 15s) with a mean of 13.7 years of facilitation experience. The maximum was 20 years experience; the minimum, 6 years.

These employees were involved with coordinating and facilitating planning efforts at the senior levels of the agency. Though no effort was made control for race or gender, the group had two males and four females; five were Caucasian and one was African-American. As part of a pre-training facilitation questionnaire, the individuals in the group were asked to provide a self-assessment of their skill levels as facilitators. Using a 1 to 5 Likert scale, the mean score was a 4.33, signifying that the facilitators believed they had strong facilitation skills. There was very little distribution with all scores being either 4 or 5. The high levels of experience as well as skill strength was an important factor in assuring that the facilitator has sufficient understanding of the strategic planning facilitation process to provide knowledgeable feedback.

Evaluation Instruments

Participants provide feedback in the evaluation process through three opportunities: a pre-training facilitation questionnaire, a post-training questionnaire, and a follow-up small group session. The majority of the data

was collected through the questionnaires. However, data were also extracted from informal conversations that occurred during the training. The small group session was conducted to build on the information provided in the second questionnaire.

Pre-training facilitation questionnaire**.**

The literature indicates that a critical issue in addressing weaknesses in the GPRA strategic planning process is the approach used by strategic planners (Roberts, 2000). As an initial part of this study, a pre-training questionnaire was developed and implemented that asked participants to identify various facilitation styles that they use (see Appendix C). The first, second and fourth questions on the survey were designed to assess the levels of experience and training of each of the participants. The third question examined the facilitation styles of the participants.

As noted earlier, there is very little research examining facilitation methodologies within a strategic planning context. In order to examine SFBT as a facilitation method, it was useful to compare it to some type of facilitation framework. The framework was selected from an article written by van Maurik (1994). His model was chosen less for its general acceptance in the literature than the fact that it was one of the very few articles that took a methodological approach to facilitation. The model provided a well-articulated frame for facilitating, was clear in its application, and was somewhat detailed in the characteristics of the various facilitator styles which it described. Again, its utility in this study was as a framework for identifying study participants' individual styles .

In the article, van Maurik (1994) segments facilitator styles into four separate approaches that can each be implemented depending on the particular needs of the group being facilitated. He identifies four styles based on two continuums; involvement in process and level of expertise. The approaches are Intellectual Command, the Incentives Approach, the Creative Group Catalyst, and the Supportive Coach. Each of these styles has a variety of components. The Intellectual Command (IC) approach is typified by an expert facilitator that adds knowledge to the team being facilitated, but does not intervene much in the team processes. Using an IC style, a facilitator will state their opinion, provoke questions, set challenges and "lead from the front" (p. 32).

In an Incentives Approach (IA), the facilitator relies on a significant amount of expertise *and* process intervention. The facilitator drives the learning and focuses the group. This facilitation approach also requires the facilitator to bring out emotions in the group and to manage conflict. On the opposite end of the spectrum, with little process focus, and not much knowledge added, is the facilitator as Creative Group Catalyst (GC). In this role, the team facilitator sets the agenda and serves as "chief explorer" (p. 32), but lets the group solve their own problems. The primary tool is to ask thought-provoking questions and stimulate group creativity. The final style is that of Supportive Coach (SC). This approach requires little knowledge input from the facilitator, but depends on him or her to push the process forward, to support team members that are struggling, and to empathize with the feelings expressed.

In the pre-training facilitation questionnaire, these four styles were broken down and listed as 17 separate items, following van Maurik's guidelines (1994). Participants were asked on a five point scale to assess how closely each style described them. All items on this questionnaire were closed-ended.

Follow-up Questionnaire

Immediately following the training session, the participants each received a follow-up questionnaire (See Appendix D). This questionnaire contained a number of closed-ended and open-ended items and was used to determine the participants' level of comfort and self-assessed competency with SFBT and how and where they feel SFBT would be useful within the GPRA strategic planning model. The questionnaire also guided the design of the subsequent small group session.

The closed-ended questions included items from the pre-training instrument, including the self-assessment of facilitation skills and style. These were included to identify if there was a training effect on these items. Other items included the scaling of utility of an SF approach in strategic planning and the likelihood of using particular SFBT techniques during the development of a strategic plan. An additional item gave participants the opportunity to determine which techniques they might use when facilitating specific phases of strategic planning.

The questionnaire also solicited feedback through open-ended items. These open-ended questions asked participants in what additional work activities they might apply SFBT, how they might adapt SFBT to be more useful in their work, to list the strengths and limitations of SFBT in federal planning activities, and if they would be comfortable using an SF approach in their agency.

Small Group Session

A final assessment activity was conducted in a small group session format. The group conducted one week after the training. In order to reduce

researcher-bias, a third party facilitator led the group. The facilitator was familiar with SFBT and had a glossary of SFBT terms but was not a practitioner of SFBT. This study's author was not in attendance. The facilitator recorded the responses and provided a summary to the author.

The purpose of the small group session was to elicit additional feedback regarding the utility of the training and SFBT techniques in GPRA planning. The questions for the session were developed from the results of the post-training questionnaire.

Design & Analysis

Following the training and survey of the participants, an analysis was conducted on the results. For the closed-ended questionnaire items, the targets of analysis were the means and frequencies. The number of participants (n=6) was sufficiently small as to render a statistical analysis not meaningful. Nor were the participants selected in such a way, randomly or otherwise, as to make the results generalizable to a greater population.

Qualitative data were collected through several methods for this study. Two formal instruments were used; the first being the post-training questionnaire, and the second being the small group discussion. Informal data was taken from conversations with participants during and after the training session. This informal data was useful for rounding out and clarifying feedback provided in response to the open-ended survey items. Analysis of the open-ended items was conducted to provide a qualitative perspective on the utility of SFBT in a strategic planning forum, as well as potential modifications and other applications (Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 1992). Responses to open-ended items were examined to identify central categories or themes across participants, if any, that existed. All responses to the open-ended items were copied onto a tally sheet and categorized by theme. A frequency count was conducted to determine the number of times each similar response was repeated. A theme was identified if it at least two participants provided sufficient detail to determine they were providing similar feedback. These themes were compared with conversations from the training for confirmatory and clarifying data.

As this was a pilot qualitative study, the purpose of the research was to gather an initial set of data indicating the potential usefulness of SFBT in federal

strategic planning. The project was not designed to provide statistically generalizable information, but rather to indicate whether additional practical application and research in this arena is warranted.

Chapter Four: Findings

Review of the Training

The training was delivered as scheduled on July 2, 2002. Six participants attended, three of whom were original contacts and three were alternate contacts. As the researcher was also the trainer, every effort was made to present the training not as a solution itself, but as an opportunity to collect feedback as to its potential utility. The participants were told the true nature of the study – specifically that they were a panel of experts in the field and that it was their responsibility to provide their professional opinion as to the utility of the SFBT method. Even the manual that accompanied the training was labeled a "familiarization guide" to rather than a training manual.

In general, the participants expressed an interest in potentially learning new facilitation skills. During the training, and more specifically the exercises, the majority of the participants adopted a cooperative stance towards the role-playing SF facilitators. Fortunately, one participant tended to be more critical and recalcitrant in cooperating. This participant provided for a more realistic facilitation situation. At the beginning of the session, the trainer asked the volunteers how they would know if the training had been of value to them. Most participants responded that they hoped to gain new skills. The previously mentioned participant, having attended numerous "useless" training sessions in the past said that the trainer would know by the "lack of steam coming out my ears." This participant appeared to be speaking seriously. All volunteers participated through the end of the course and all completed the surveys.

Quantitative Findings

Though this was a qualitative study, some quantitative measures were implemented. Similar to SFBT *Scaling Questions*, the numerical measures were useful in placing responses along a continuum to detect any shifts in the overall averages. Two questionnaires were administered, the facilitation questionnaire was administered in the week prior to the training. The follow-up questionnaire was administered immediately following the training.

Pre-training facilitation questionnaire.

PRE-TRAINING: ITEMS 1 & 2

All six participants in the training returned the pre-training facilitation questionnaire. The general purpose of this questionnaire was to assess the current level of experience and current facilitation style of the participants. The first item on the instrument was a self-assessment of facilitation skill. The respondents unanimously scored as having a strong facilitation skills. On a 1 to 5 scale, the mean was 4.33. No score was lower than a 4. The mean number of years experience of facilitation in the federal sector was 13.7, with a high of 20 and a low of 6.

PRE-TRAINING: ITEM 3

Item 3 on the pre-training instrument consisted of 17 statements randomly sorted. The respondents were asked to indicate their level of comfort in various facilitation roles (see Table 1). The styles were taken from an article written by van Maurik (1994). Each statement indicated a preference towards using one of four overall approaches to facilitation. The anchors ranged on a five point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. These anchors have been converted to a numerical equivalent. Because van Maurik did not provide an

equal number of roles for each facilitation approach, the individual items have been weighted so that no approach is emphasized. For example, there were only three items included in one of the approaches, and six in another. The mean score was set to be some number out of five. In the case of the category with only three items, each item contributed one-third of the mean score. In the case of the category with six items, each item contributed one-sixth of the score. The four general categories are Intellectual Command, Incentives Approach, The Creative Group Catalyst and the Supportive Coach. This instrument's reliability has not been validated.

Table 1. Mean Preference Scores for Van Maurik's Facilitation Roles

APPROACH ROLE	MEAN
Creative Group Catalyst	
Stimulating the group	**4.7**
Setting the agenda	**4.3**
Leading from the middle	**3.8**
Being chief explorer	**3.5**
Incentives Approach	
Focusing the group	**4.5**
Driving the learning	**3.8**
Giving a reason to learn	**3.7**
Drawing out positive and negative emotions	**3.7**
Leading from the front (used in both approaches)	**3.8**
Handling conflict	**3.5**
Intellectual Command	
Setting and receiving challenges	**4.0**
Leading from the front (used in both approaches)	**3.8**
Stating an opinion	**3.7**
Supportive Coach	
Listening and encouraging	**4.8**
Guiding action plans	**4.2**
Catching those in difficulty	**4.2**
Being overtly helpful	**3.5**
Leading from the rear	**2.8**
GC=Group Catalyst IC=Intellectual Command IA=Incentives Approach SC=Supportive Coach	

As stated, the scores were summed and weighted to provide an overall score for the related approach. Again, the scores were placed on a one to five scale, with one indicating the lowest level of comfort and five the highest level of comfort using a specific approach during a facilitation session. Table 2 shows the overall score for each approach.

Table 2. Weighted Means for Facilitation Approaches .

FACILITATION APPROACH	MEAN
Creative Group Catalyst	4.08
Incentives Approach	3.83
Supportive Coach	3.83
Intellectual Command	3.78

PRE-TRAINING: ITEM 4

The final item on the pre-training survey was an assessment of the participant's level of satisfaction with the formal facilitation training they had received. The mean score was 3.67 out of 5, with 1 being equivalent to very unsatisfied and 5 being very satisfied. The lowest response was 2, the highest 5, and the mode was 4. This mean indicated that participants were somewhat satisfied with the training they had received, but the satisfaction was far from complete.

Follow-up questionnaire – closed-ended items.

The follow-up questionnaire served two purposes. The first and main purpose of the post-training questionnaire was to collect the participants' expert feedback as to the utility of the a solution-focused approach in GPRA-based

strategic planning. The author of this study also used the opportunity to identify any training effect on the participants' facilitation skills.

Again, all six participants completed the survey instrument, however one participant chose not to complete Item 3. In order to maintain the anonymity of the respondents, no identifying information was included with the survey, making pre- and post-training matching of surveys not possible.

POST-TRAINING: ITEM 1

The first item on the follow-up survey instrument was a repeat of the facilitation skills self-assessment item on the first questionnaire. There was no change between administrations, with the mean score = 4.33 out of 5.

POST-TRAINING: ITEM 2

The second item asked the facilitators to evaluate the utility of a solution-focused approach to GPRA-based strategic planning. There was unanimous agreement that SFBT would be useful. The mean was 4.5 out of 5, with no score lower than 4.

POST-TRAINING: ITEM 3

The third item asked participants the likelihood that they would use during a planning session any of the six SF techniques presented in the training. Five of the six training participants responded to this item. All techniques were likely to be used. As noted in the table below, the *Miracle Question* had the highest rating and was unanimously stated as very likely to be used by each of the respondents. *Coping Questions* and *Scaling Questions* tied as the next most popular technique (mean = 4.8). *Action Descriptions* was third at 4.4. *First*

*Session Task*s and *Exception-Finding Questions* also tied with a mean of 4. The table is ordered by means from highest to lowest.

Table 3. Mean Scores for Likelihood of Use of SF Techniques.

SOLUTION-FOCUSED TECHNIQUE	MEAN*	MODE
Miracle Questions	5.0	5
Coping Questions	4.8	5
Scaling Questions	4.8	5
Action Descriptions	4.4	4
*First Session Task*s	4.0	4
Exception-Finding Questions	4.0	4

* On a 1 to 5 scale

POST-TRAINING: ITEM 4

During the training and in the familiarization guide it was suggested that some techniques might be more effective depending on the stage of strategic planning where they were implemented. Each respondent was ask to select as many techniques as they believed fit each stage of strategic planning. The respondents were instructed to circle the techniques they thought would be useful in each stage (see Appendix D).

All six training participants completed this question. For the first stage of strategic planning – *Developing a Mission Statement* – at least 5 participants selected the *First Session Task* and the *Miracle Question*. The second stage, *Strategic Goals & Objectives*, had 5 respondents selecting the *Miracle Question* and *Scaling Questions*, and 4 respondents each for *Action Descriptions* and

Exception-Finding Questions. *Designing Action Plans* had a unanimous

selection of *Action Descriptions* and at least 4 respondents selecting *Exception-*

Finding Questions and *Scaling Questions*. For the final stage of the planning

process, *Defining Milestones*, *Action Descriptions* was again unanimously

selected as a useful approach. No other technique received a majority count for

this stage. The results are presented in Table 4 as a frequency count for each

planning stage/technique combination. The selections where a technique

received a majority count are shaded green.

Table 4. Frequency Counts of Participant Matches for SF Technique to Appropriate Strategic Planning Stage.

PLANNING STAGE	SOLUTION FOCUSED TECHNIQUES					
	Coping Questions	First Session Tasks	Miracle Questions	Action Descriptions	Exception-Finding Questions	Scaling Questions
Developing A Mission Statement	3	**5**	**5**	2		1
Setting Strategic Goals And Objectives	3	2	**5**	**4**	**4**	**5**
Designing Action Plans	2	2	1	**6**	**4**	**4**
Defining Milestones	1	1	1	**6**	3	3

POST-TRAINING: ITEM 5

Item 5 was the last closed-ended question on the Follow-Up

Questionnaire and it was a repeat of the 17-item question on the pre-training

survey instrument. This question asked respondents how comfortable they

would be using various facilitation roles. There were several items that received

a higher score. Table 5 contains both the pre-training and the post-training
scores. The scores for most items were unchanged or increased. Those items
with decreasing means are denoted by an arrow.

Table 5. Pre- and Post-Training Mean Scores for Preferred Facilitation Roles.

ROLE	PRE	POST
Creative Group Catalyst		
↓ Stimulating the group	4.7	**4.5**
Setting the agenda	4.3	**4.3**
Being chief explorer	3.5	**4.3**
↓ Leading from the middle	3.8	**3.3**
Incentives Approach		
Focusing the group	4.5	**4.8**
Driving the learning	3.8	**4.3**
Leading from the front	3.8	**4.2**
Drawing out positive and negative emotions	3.7	**4.0**
Giving a reason to learn	3.7	**3.8**
Handling conflict	3.5	**3.5**
Intellectual Command		
Setting and receiving challenges	4.0	**4.2**
Leading from the front	3.8	**4.2**
Stating an opinion	3.7	**4.0**
Supportive Coach		
Listening and encouraging	4.8	**4.8**
Guiding action plans	4.2	**4.5**
↓ Catching those in difficulty	4.2	**4.0**
Being overtly helpful	3.5	**3.5**
Leading from the rear	2.8	**3.5**

As with the pre-training questionnaire, the weighted scores for each item were averaged into an overall approach score. Table 6 compares the before and after-training means for each approach. The greatest increase was noted in the Intellectual Command approach; however, the scores for this approach were weighted the most due to having the least number of items. Therefore the increase may be less significant than it appears, though the mean for each item in this approach did increase.

Table 6. Pre- and Post-Training Mean Scores for Preferred Facilitation Approaches.

FACILITATION APPROACH	POST	PRE
Intellectual Command	4.11	3.78
Incentives Approach	4.11	3.83
Creative Group Catalyst	4.13	4.08
Supportive Coach	4.07	3.83

Qualitative Findings

Post-training questionnaire.

Besides the closed-ended items that the post-training survey instrument, there were also four open-ended questions. The participants were given as much time as they needed to complete each question. The responses were analyzed for common themes across respondents. This approach was useful for items 1 and 4 but less so for the other two. All respondents provided some feedback with varying levels of detail and explanation. The following section

present the open-ended items and a summary of the participants' responses. If there were common themes they are noted below. In some cases, where there was not a clear clustering of responses around a common theme, individual responses are summarized and discussed.

OPEN-ENDED: ITEM 1

Are there planning processes other than GPRA planning where SFBT techniques might also be useful, i.e. Balanced Scorecard, BSM?

There were a high number of additional applications that were noted, most of them being specific projects currently ongoing within the agency. The general consensus was that solution focused brief therapy (SFBT) techniques could be used in any number of planning activities. The projects that were mentioned included policy development, modernization of business systems, business planning and the development of survey instruments. One of the respondents stated that SFBT would be useful in "any endeavor that develops a process, lays out expectations and measures performance." Two participants specifically noted that SFBT would be helpful in team situations, but did not mention how.

OPEN-ENDED: ITEM 2

What are the strengths and limitations of the solution-focused approach to federal planning?

Strengths - no common theme appeared in the comments. The strengths which were listed included the following: a clear fit with GPRA, minimization of "numbers fear", SFBT's focus on "actionable behaviors, and the fact that a solution-focus takes emotion out of the planning process.

Weaknesses – Again, there was no common theme running through the comments. Weaknesses listed included the following: therapeutic references may be a turn off, techniques not as useful in daily planning activities during duty hours, lack of a conflict-resolution model, and the potential difficulty in overcoming political realities within the Agency. A response to Open-Ended Item 3, seemed to fit here as well. The comment was that the leadership of the agency might find the *Miracle Question* as "fairy tale-ish" [sic].

OPEN-ENDED: ITEM 3

In what ways could you modify the SFBT approach to be more useful in GPRA planning processes?

No specific modifications to SFBT were suggested, with two respondents writing only that they were "not sure" and another leaving the question completely blank. Another respondent indicated there was no need for modification by stating that the linkage to GPRA was clear. The fairy tale comment was provided in response to this question.

OPEN-ENDED: ITEM 4

How comfortable would you feel using solution-focused techniques in a planning session in your agency (On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 = Very Uncomfortable)? Why or why not?

In answer to the closed-ended first part of this question, the mean was 4.1, indicating that the respondents would feel comfortable with using solution-focused techniques in a planning session in [THIS AGENCY].

All respondents with a score of less than five (4 of 6 respondents), indicated a desire for additional practice and/or training in SFBT. Two

respondents did state that they would be very comfortable. The lowest response was a three.

The original intent of this question was to ascertain any specific hindrances to the use of SFBT within this specific agency; however, the nature of the responses may indicate that their focus was more on their own abilities to use the approach and less on organizational obstacles.

Small group session.

Approximately one week after the training, the participants were invited to a small group session where they could provide additional feedback. Three of the original six participants attended the small group session. Those that could not attend reported scheduling conflicts. The results are reported below, with the facilitator's verbatim summary following the bolded questions used in the session.

Any additional thoughts since the training about SFBT…usefulness…things you liked…things you did not like.

"Respondents said the techniques and the training was useful to somewhat useful. To think of facilitation as a therapeutic intervention requires a different mindset and changes how the facilitator approaches the group session. For example, the facilitator would become more invested in the process and may have a preconceived notion of what a good thing / outcome might be. Also, some of the techniques can help people get off of an established position."

What is it about Solution Focused Brief Therapy techniques that helps to make the linkages between mission statements and action plans?

"Techniques require participants to come up with concrete examples of what they need to do tomorrow to get to the action or goal they desire.   Often in strategic planning sessions one usually ends up with mission statement and strategic objectives, seldom do you ask the participants how to get to those objectives. Organizations ([this agency] for example) will segment the planning process (strategic planning, operationalize the objectives, create tasks) and not provide the linkages that are needed."

What are the specific concerns about using SFBT within [this agency], i.e. political realities, etc? How could SFBT be modified to address these concerns?

"Do not use the word 'miracle.' This word may create a bias with senior leaders. Use instead (a) if you were Director for a day, (b) what is the end state, (c) if you were Sec. of Defense."

According to the participants, what makes SFBT useful in planning activities?

"Future states of where you want to be (envisioning) and how to get there. 'Dream your castles in the air and then build your foundation.'"

Will having new SFBT techniques in their repertoire lead to better strategic plans? Why/why not?

"One person said that they did not know for sure if SFBT would make for better strategic planning, but SFBT does get people involved in the process.

"Criticism of the GPRA process; however, SFBT does allow you to think about where you are in the strategic planning process and what you have to do to get to your end state while involving people in the process.

"Strategic intervention allows you to focus on the future and recognize a need for change.

"SFBT does not help you resolve conflict about the strategic directions (i.e., [this agency] is a commercial enterprise or a military establishment). Need to delineate the differences when it comes to conflict in the strategic direction.

"SFBT intended for an individual, but when dealing with an organization there are unique issues and conflict…why not explore which SFBT techniques would help you deal with these conflict situations."

<u>Summary</u>

In general, the respondents participated fully in the two questionnaires which were implemented as well as the training session itself. The feedback was useful and addressed the research interests of the study. The small group session conducted a week later was not nearly as well attended though the feedback was useful for clarifying some of the points raised in the open-ended section of the post-training follow-up survey.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the potential value of solution-focused brief therapy for improving the strategic planning process as mandated by the Government Performance and Results Act. The General Accounting Office noted that the strategic plans submitted by federal agencies fell short of the mark, specifically in the linkages the plans make between missions, goals, and action plans (GAO, 1997). As the literature has noted (Roberts, 2000), empowering facilitators of the federal planning process is a potential key in improving compliance with GPRA. Due to the parallels between strategic planning as outlined by GPRA and the solution-focused brief therapy, it was hypothesized that SFBT could be an enabling methodology for federal facilitators.

To determine SFBT's potential, a pilot project was designed to elicit feedback from strategic planning facilitators in the federal government. As part of the study, a training session was developed to briefly familiarize a group of experienced federal facilitators with solution-focused principles and techniques. The participants of this training were administered questionnaires before and after the training to gather information on their facilitation experience and styles, as well as their assessment of SFBT as a facilitation methodology for strategic planning in the federal government. Training participants were also given the opportunity to provide additional feedback in a small group session conducted one week after the training. This study is intended to provide initial information on the potential that the SFBT model might offer to facilitators when leading government planning sessions.

Discussion of Results

Quantitative Results

The quantitative results lead to several interesting findings. As identified earlier, this is a very experienced group with a high level of confidence in their own facilitation skills. This combination of characteristics made this group well-qualified for evaluating a new facilitation methodology for strategic planning.

Van Maurik's Model

The participants' existing facilitation approaches indicated they were somewhat comfortable in a number of different roles, with the greatest level of comfort in the Creative Group Catalyst role. Of van Maurik's four approaches (1994), this one is most similar to an SFBT framework. Like a solution-focused therapist's stance towards the "client as expert," a facilitator filling a GC role would take a back-seat to the expertise of the group, using "thought provoking questions" (van Maurik, 1994, p. 32) and generally motivating the group. This similarity between an SF practitioner and the Creative Group Catalyst may be one factor that accounts for the slight increase post-training in the GC score.

There also may have been some effect associated with the training, though it is unclear how much, if any. It is interesting to note that the approach with the greatest increase after the training was that of Intellectual Command. Though the Intellectual Command approach depends on leading through questioning, it also requires the facilitator to "display an authoritative understanding" (van Maurik, 1994, p. 31) of the pertinent issues – quite the opposite of SF's emphasis on the client's expertise.

Breaking the four overall approaches into specific roles, the large increases found in the roles of "Being chief explorer", "Driving the learning", and

"Leading from the front" indicate that the participants were more comfortable after the training with taking the lead position in a planning session. On first glance, the somewhat contradictory increase in the scores for "Leading from the rear" might actually be related to the other score increases, as may the big drop in the role of "Leading from the middle." This flight from the middle towards either end of the spectrum might indicate that the facilitators finished the training with a greater definition of their facilitation roles, and greater ease moving between positions. Yet, it is unclear why all of the four category scores increased. Perhaps it is due to a potential "Hawthorne Effect." Without a reliability measure for this scale, it will be difficult to discern the significance of the score changes. It would be interesting to do a further exploration of this increase in scores to attempt to more clearly identify the source.

<u>The Solution-Focused Model</u>

The second item on the follow-up survey was the clearest response in answer to the central research question – Would a solution-focused approach be useful in GPRA-based strategic planning? The responses indicated very strong support for the concept. The unanimous agreement of the respondents point towards every participant finding something useful in the process. All subsequent SFBT-related items on the survey instrument sought to clarify and develop a more nuanced picture of this support.

Interestingly, respondents indicated almost unanimously that they would try every SF technique that was presented in the training. There was specifically a strong preference for the use of the *Miracle Question*, with every respondent very likely to try implementing it. And at least half of the participants were very likely to also try *Coping Questions* and *Scaling Questions*.

There did appear to be a training effect with this question as well, in that two of the three highest rated techniques (*Miracle Questions* and *Coping Questions*) were also two of the three techniques practiced in the training. Though there was not a training exercise on the use of *Scaling Questions*, their high score may be indicative of their ease of use or the emphasis that GPRA places on outcome measures.

During the training, the suggestion was made that some techniques were more applicable at various stages than others. For the first two stages in the planning process, e.g. Developing a Mission Statement and Setting Strategic Goals and Objectives, the participants' responses matched the model suggested in the training, with *Miracle Questions* being used for the development of strategic level activities, such as mission statements. The drop in support for the use of *Miracle Questions* later in the planning process may be due to the *Miracle Question*'s focus on envisioning a specific future, but not necessarily on the steps for getting there.

Action Descriptions* proved to be an oft selected tool for the development of goals and objectives. However, an interesting divergence from the proposed model arose in regards to the continued emphasis on *Action Descriptions*. This technique was also selected for "Designing Action Plans" and "Defining Milestones." It had been expected that *Action Descriptions* would be a useful "bridging tool" for creating linkages between mission statements and action plans. The results would indicate that the participants saw utility beyond this specific application.

The enthusiasm for using *Action Descriptions* somewhat contradicts the results of Item 3, where *Action Descriptions* were not as likely to be used by the participants as several other techniques. The disconnect may be that the

facilitators saw value in using *Action Descriptions* but did not yet feel experienced enough to try it themselves. Also, there may have been a natural tendency to match *Action Descriptions* to Action Plans due to the shared use of the term "Action", yet an equal number of participants also selected the use of *Action Descriptions* for Defining Milestones.

Another surprise was the strong support for using *Scaling Questions* when "Setting Strategic Goals and Objectives" but not for "Defining Milestones" when having clear progress markers is very important. The respondents' choices generally fit the model suggested in the training; however, there was more emphasis on the use of *Exception-Finding Questions* and *Scaling Questions* than was expected.

The formula *First Session Task* was one of the least selected options in both Items 3 and 4. After further review of the training materials, it would appear this formula task was not taught clearly, nor covered in sufficient detail in the familiarization guide. This may account for the low scores in both items. Or participants simply may not have identified the *Task* as being useful in a planning context. Since the impact of the training has been noted here to be a potential factor, it is also important to note that the training did not seem to have the same clear effect on responses to this item as it might have on the responses to Item 3. As mentioned previously, the highest scoring techniques in Item 3 also tended to be the ones that were practiced in training exercises. The scores for Item 4 for did not reveal the same dynamic.

The GAO identified a lack of linkages between the various elements within the strategic plans. The two phases critical for creating those linkages, Goals & Objectives and Action Plans also had the most techniques selected for them. In addition, a majority of respondents selected using *Action Descriptions*

across three of the planning stages. The use of *Action Descriptions* through several stages of the planning bodes well for creating a continuous linkage from one phase to the next. In fact every planning phase shared at least one technique with a proximate planning phase. If facilitators use the SFBT techniques across phases as they indicated, there will be a natural connection between the mission statement, the goals, and the action plans to support those goals.

The only match not to receive a vote was the use of *Exception-Finding Questions* with Developing a Mission Statement. The specific focus of this technique versus the global nature of mission statements might make this an improbable match.

Qualitative Results

In reviewing the qualitative responses, the data were examined to identify common factors across participants and information-gathering activities. In addition to the open-ended items on the follow-up questionnaire and the small group session, limited notes were taken during the training to capture some of the comments and conversations of participants. Written responses to the open-ended items were compared with the conversations that occurred during the training for confirming and divergent data. The synthesis of this information then guided the creation of the questions for the small group session.

There tended to be significant cross-over in the responses to the open-ended questions. There was unambiguous support for using a solution-focused approach in a number of planning and team situations, including strategic planning. The common theme across the open-ended responses was the benefits of SFBT's focus on well-defined end-states and on developing the map

with clear actions for achieving the end-state. One of the participants found that the video exercise used in the training was especially helpful in developing clear action plans.

 According to the participants, the positive nature of a solution-focused approach would seem to bypass destructive emotional dynamics in team meetings. It was stated in both the survey instrument and in the small group session that using SFBT would be an effective method for bringing people into the planning process.

When the participants were asked how they would modify SFBT for use in their agency's planning activities, participants were unsure, though one participant thought the fit was perfect between SFBT and GRPA. The lack of suggested modifications may be in part a function of a lack of sufficient experience with SFBT. This experience deficit was stated by most of the participants.

A weakness that was mentioned in both the survey feedback and the group discussion was the terminology used. Participants were concerned that therapy terminology as well as terms such as "miracle" could be a potential hindrance when working with senior executives. Respondents suggested adapting the vocabulary to phrases and words used within the organization, such as "Director for a Day."

One of the participating facilitators commented that there was a dichotomy between executive strategic planning and the daily activities by the planning support staff. Mintzberg (1994) discussed this as the difference between strategic thinking that should be occurring at the executive level and the strategic programming that planning staff perform to develop action plans. The participant who noted the dichotomy did not believe that an SFBT approach

would be useful with the daily planning activities. However, another respondent stated that s/he used SFBT principles on a daily basis, at least as a leadership style. The author believes that this dichotomy in perspectives may be a result of how each participant viewed the SF approach. If an SF approach as a particular strategic planning process required the use of a facilitator and long brain-storming sessions every time it was used, then it would be a very cumbersome process for the daily activities that support strategic planning. If, however, an SF approach is viewed as a being a set of principles, then it may easily be adapted to frequent use. This dichotomy would make an interesting discussion point in future training sessions.

Another concern stated in both the survey and the small group discussion was the lack of a conflict-resolution model with the SFBT framework. These comments were also echoed in a conversation at the end of the training. The participant noted that her agency had conflicting mandates from Congress, the Cabinet department to which it reported, and its customers. Another participant also mentioned conflict between senior executives regarding the relative priority of the mandates and best ways to meet them. It was suggested that various SFBT techniques be explored for use in resolving such conflicts. Because these conflicts are a frequent impediment to strategic planning and resource allocation within federal agencies, it would be useful to identify an approach that could ameliorate some of the conflict.

The generally high personal-comfort level of the participants with using SFBT techniques in strategic planning at their agency, in spite of their desire for additional training, confirms the feedback given throughout the closed-ended items on the survey. As originally noted, the participants provided an average score of 4.5 out of 5 on the usefulness of incorporating solution-focused

techniques in the strategic planning process, with 5 being equivalent to very useful.

<u>Limitations</u>

This study was a pilot study on the potential use of SFBT in a federal strategic planning context. The sample was not randomly selected, and may not be representative of the federal facilitator population. The sample size was also very small. Due to these factors, the author recognizes that the results of the study are not generalizable nor statistically significant. The participants in the study provided feedback based on a very short familiarization training module. If the facilitators in the training received additional training and had a greater familiarity with the solution-focused model, it is possible that their feedback may have been different. A post-survey review of the training manual also indicates that one of the techniques – the *First Session Task* – could have been presented with greater clarity.

In addition to the specific short comings of this study, there was a lack of controlled studies available on facilitation models in the strategic planning field. The facilitation model that was referenced for some guidance in the study (van Maurik, 1994) had no published empirical evidence to support it.

A further limitation to this project was in the limited skill level and familiarity of the author with SFBT. The author had little practical experience using SFBT in clinical or organizational practice. Greater experience with solution-focused techniques may have had an impact on the design of the study, the quality of the training, or other important factors.

<u>Suggestions for Future Research</u>

Due to the apparent parallels between GPRA-based strategic planning and the solution-focused model of brief therapy, the author of this study chose to examine the topic though there has been almost no research published on use of SFBT in the business sector. The field is wide open for new and innovative research in this area. Further research would be interesting and helpful if it examined the actual effectiveness of using SFBT in large organizations as a facilitation methodology and as a strategy development philosophy.

If this study were to be repeated, it would useful to lengthen the training session. As senior level employees in a headquarters facility, the training participants had very limited time available for the training session. This proved to be an obstacle to presenting SFBT in depth. Only three of the six SFBT techniques had an associated practice activity. Future participants might find exercises for all of the techniques useful for providing a more informed opinion. It might also be useful to break the training into at least two separate sessions. This would allow the participants time to process the concepts learned in the first session and ask clarify questions during the second.

Future training sessions should ensure that each of the principles and techniques are presently as clearly as possible – such as the formula first session task. It would also have been helpful if answers to the open-ended questions could have been explored immediately at the conclusion of survey administration. This might have led to richer data and greater clarification of responses.

A formalized SFBT/strategic planning model that incorporates the suggestions made by this study's participants would be a useful next step. Such suggestions include eliminating the use of therapeutic terms and modifying the

Miracle Question to reflect organizational culture. Part of this formalization of an SF facilitation methodology would include manualizing the process.

Future studies might provide a more in-depth training experience for facilitators and then obtain their feedback after they have implemented the model in actual planning sessions. It would also be useful to get feedback and evaluations from actual executives participating in planning sessions where a solution-focused facilitation model has been implemented.

The literature review for this study also noted the lack of facilitation methodologies proposed to accompany the strategic planning process, much less any empirical evidence supporting a specific method. Though there is a great depth of research on strategy development, the lack of research on effective methods for facilitating the development process may be obscuring an important variable in the success of strategic planning.

In this pilot study, a group of highly experienced federal facilitators found that the solution-focused approach would be very helpful in their planning activities. Further study is needed to develop clearer SFBT facilitation models for large organizations, to create efficacy measures for planning activities, and to test the SFBT facilitation models against these measures in application situations.

Practice Relevance

Often practice leads the research. This has certainly been the case in the application of SFBT in the therapy room. Theory guided practice. Practice led to anecdotal evidence. Case studies paved the wave for pilot studies, which in turn provided a foundation for empirical research. The same process is occurring now in the application of solution-focused principles and techniques in

a business context. This study is part of the initial wave of pilot studies into this sphere.

The study indicates that those people experienced with facilitation in large organizations, namely the facilitators themselves, believe that a solution-focused approach demonstrates sufficient utility that they are willing to try it themselves. Roberts (2000) made the point that the first step in effective implementation of GPRA was the arming of facilitators with the right tools. From the responses provided by the training participants, it seems likely that the SFBT model may hold some promise as a useful facilitation approach.

Much of the promise is found in the feedback provided by the study's participants. The participants liked the positive tone that a solution-focused approach creates. Because SF principles put the client as the expert, SF strategic planning facilitators are relieved of having to confront or disagree with executives in planning sessions – executives that may be in their chain of command. The participants also appreciated the tools that an SF approach provided for developing detailed visions and supporting action plans. Beyond telling facilitators to "think positive," the solution-focused approach provides methods for turning positive thinking into productive action. GPRA mandates that strategic plans meet certain criteria. It is up to the responsible executives to determine how those plans are created. Without clear facilitation methods, strategic planning facilitators are left to themselves to design a process that leads to successful strategic plans. SF techniques might be a useful tool set that strategic planning facilitators can add to their repertoire.

<u>Summary and Conclusion</u>

This study examined the potential use of solution-focused brief therapy principals and techniques in a GPRA-mandated strategic planning context. A training program was developed to familiarize a group on the solution-focused approach and its possible application in facilitating planning sessions. The group consisted of six participants with significant experience in federal strategic planning activities. All six participants were from the same federal agency.

Two surveys were used to collect the participants' insight. Both closed-ended and open-ended items were used. The surveys were followed-up with a small group session to clarify information collected from the questionnaires.

Results of the surveys and the small group session indicated that the training group found solution-focused techniques useful. The participants also indicated that they would be likely to use the techniques themselves when facilitating strategic planning sessions. They also indicated they were more likely to use *Miracle Questions* when facilitating. Survey results indicated that *Action Descriptions* had the greatest range of potential applications in strategic planning, an important result in that linkages between planning phases has been identified as an area of weakness in GPRA-mandated strategic plans.

The participants suggested that a solution-focused approach would be useful in a number of other work-related activities where a process needs to be developed, expectations laid out, and progress measured. Some participants expressed concerns about using SFBT, including the sensitivity of senior executives to the use of therapeutic terminology, the phrasing of some techniques, and the model's potential inability to address their organization's political realities.

    In general, this pilot study indicated that solution-focused principles and techniques may be a useful facilitation methodology in federal strategic planning; however, more research needs to be conducted before a definitive statement can be made.

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<u>Appendix A</u>

June 11, 2002

[Federal Agency]
[Government Installation]

Dear [Participant]:

Thank you for your willingness to participate in the program evaluation I am conducting as part of my masters thesis. The program consists of a few short activities to be conducted on post during the next six weeks. You will be part of a small cadre of up to seven participants who will provide insights on the utility of a new approach to facilitating strategic and program planning activities. Because the evaluation is based on the feedback of a small group, each person's participation will carry a great deal of weight.

My masters studies have been in systemic change issues. The focus of this thesis is to test the application of a particular change methodology, known as solution-focused brief therapy, in federal planning processes.

Your involvement in my research will include the following activities::
- A short questionnaire on current facilitation techniques;
- A three hour familiarization session on solution-focused brief therapy in a federal planning context – with a built-in training evaluation at the end; and,
- A one hour small group (brown bag) session that will follow the training by one to two weeks.

Your feedback will be provided in an <u>anonymous form</u> and your confidentiality will be maintained.

As an introduction to the study, I will shortly send a one page overview of the Government Performance and Results Act which forms the framework for the targeted training. The short questionnaire on facilitation techniques will be included with the overview.

I am looking forward to your input in this research. If you have any questions or concerns, please call me at 301-838-9688 or email me at jmortensen@eganetwork.org.

Warm regards,

Jim Mortensen
Masters Candidate
Virginia Tech

Appendix B

Overview of the Government Performance and Results Act

Government reform has been occurring since the late 1950s. The latest round of government performance reforms began after World War II when the Truman Administration made efforts to reduce the size of the government following the war years. Additional efforts included initiatives by Presidents Johnson, Nixon and Carter to create frameworks, objectives and budget linkages in the planning process. Those efforts culminated in the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993.

The GPRA Strategic Planning Model

The Government Performanc e and Results Act (GPRA) mandated a strategic planning process that the majority of federal agencies were to follow. Beginning in 1997, federal agencies were required to submit five-year plans projecting their activities and budget requirements. Each plan must contain a set of strategic goals, measure performance, and report on the degree to which goals were met.

The General Accounting Office (GAO) created   an executive guide for implementing GPRA. In the guide, the GAO laid out the basic requirements of the Results Act. First, the Act would require agencies to emphasize their missions and related goals, the process to achieving those goals, and how to reform their organizational design to better accomplish these goals. Second, the agencies needed to follow a strategic planning process to develop their missions and goals. Third, their performance needed to be measurable in light of their stated goals. And fourth, the performance measures needed to be sufficiently complete to give an accurate picture of the agency's progress.

Vision Statement

Though, GRPA does not mention   the creation of vision statements, they have become standard fare in strategic plans. The vision statement is the management's idealized version of itself. This visualization of the future sets the goal post from which the rest of the strategic plan flows. It serves as a point on the horizon that guides decision making, motivates employees and managers, and captures the values of the organization.

Mission Statement

The GPRA requir es that strategic plans contain   "a comprehensive mission statement covering the major functions and operations of the agency" (§ 306. (a) (1)). An organization's mission statement is a statement of purpose - what the organization sets out to accomplish through its operations. It answers the following questions: Why does the organization exist? What does it do? How does the organization do what it does?

The creation of clear mission statements would seem   to be a straightforward process. Yet useful mission statements that avoid ambiguous buzzwords are far more difficult to develop than would appear.

Strategic Goals and Objectives

The completion of the mission statement sets   the stage for planning. The Results Act requires that the first part of strategic planning address the following questions:

- Who are we?
- What do we do? and,
- Who do we want to be?

The second half of strategic planning focuses   on "How do we get there?" The *goals* and *objectives* are the bridges between strategy and action. The goals take the broad scope of the mission statement and divide it into specific areas of focus. The purpose of the plan's objectives is to take these areas of focus and make them more concrete and results-oriented. GPRA stipulates that these goals and objectives should be "objective, quantifiable, and measurable" (Sec. 4 (b)).

Action Plans and Identification of Milestones

The action plans and milestones are   (or should be) derived from the strategic goals and objectives. They are the final piece of the strategic plan before implementation. According to GPRA, these plans should be "a description of how the goals and objectives are to be achieved, including a description of the operational processes, skills and technology, and the human, capital, information, and other resources required to meet those goals and objectives" (§ 306. (a) (3)). The action plans and their milestones should clearly relate to the strategic goals and objectives. And they should include methodologies and indicators for measuring accomplishment of both the milestones and the over-arching goals.

Follow-up

The first submissions   for federal agencies were due in 1997. These strategic plans were to cover a five year period. The initial five years end this summer. As agencies update their plans and prepare to submit plans for the next five years, this is an opportune time to examine new opportunities and tools to improve the process. The training for this project will review the potential offered by a certain school of thought known as solution focused brief therapy. The role of the participants is to examine the principles and techniques offered in this model to determine what benefits it might offer to the strategic planning process.

Appendix C

Instructions

Following are a series of statements. To the right of each statement is a drop-down box with red text. To make your selection, place your cursor on the red text where it says [Click here] and click once. A series of responses will appear. Using your mouse, place the cursor directly on top of the response that most closely reflects your answer. Click once. The answer you selected will appear in the box. All items in this questionnaire follow the same format.

When you have completed the survey, please save it under the name "Thesis Survey" and send it to me as an attachment at [researcher]@earthlink.net.

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1. I believe I have strong skills as a facilitator. [Click here]

2. How many years have you facilitated planning sessions in the federal sector? [Click here] **YEARS**

3. *As a facilitator, you are called on to fill many roles. Please select the answer closest to your level of agreement with the following statement:*

I am comfortable in the following roles when facilitating a planning session or meeting:

Being chief explorer	[Click here]
Focusing the group	[Click here]
Driving the learning	[Click here]
Stimulating the group	[Click here]
Setting the agenda	[Click here]
Guiding action plans	[Click here]
Leading from the middle	[Click here]
Catching those in difficulty	[Click here]
Leading from the front	[Click here]
Listening and encouraging	[Click here]
Leading from the rear	[Click here]
Being overtly helpful	[Click here]
Giving a reason to learn	[Click here]
Setting and receiving challenges	[Click here]
Drawing out positive and negative emotions	[Click here]
Handling conflict	[Click here]
Stating an opinion	[Click here]

4. I am satisfied with the level of training in facilitation that I have received. [Click here]

End of survey. Please save and email completed survey to [researcher]@earthlink.net.

Appendix D

The following questionnaire, similar to the one you completed recently, asks for you to reflect on your experience with facilitation in the federal government. However, this survey is focused specifically on the training you completed today.

As before, the results of this survey will be kept confidential; therefore, please do not put any identifying information on the questionnaire.

Thank you.

Instructions

Following are a series of statements. For most of the statements, there is a range of choices from Strong Disagree to Strongly Agree, with "SD" = Strongly Disagree and "SA" = Strongly Agree. To make your selection, please circle the appropriate response.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree/ Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I believe I have strong skills as a facilitator.	SD	D	N	A	SA
A solution-focused approach would be useful in GPRA strategic planning.	SD	D	N	A	SA
Some SFBT techniques you learned may be more useful than other SFBT techniques you learned in the training. With this in mind, please respond to the following statement:					
I would be likely to try the following SFBT techniques when facilitating planning sessions and meetings:					
Coping questions	SD	D	N	A	SA
First Session Tasks	SD	D	N	A	SA
Miracle Questions	SD	D	N	A	SA
Action Descriptions	SD	D	N	A	SA
Exception Finding Questions	SD	D	N	A	SA
Scaling Questions	SD	D	N	A	SA

SFBT may be more effective in some stages of strategic planning than in others. With this in mind, please circle the technique(s) you think might fit each stage. If no technique would fit a specific stage feel free to not make a selection for that stage.

A solution-focused approach will be useful in the following stages of strategic planning:

Developing A Mission Statement	Coping Questions	First Session Tasks	Miracle Questions	Action Descriptions	Exception Finding Questions	Scaling Questions
Setting Strategic Goals And Objectives	Coping Questions	First Session Tasks	Miracle Questions	Action Descriptions	Exception Finding Questions	Scaling Questions
Designing Action Plans	Coping Questions	First Session Tasks	Miracle Questions	Action Descriptions	Exception Finding Questions	Scaling Questions
Defining Milestones	Coping Questions	First Session Tasks	Miracle Questions	Action Descriptions	Exception Finding Questions	Scaling Questions

As a facilitator, you are called on to fill many roles. Please circle the answer closest to your level of agreement with the following statement:

Having learned SFBT techniques, I will be comfortable in the following roles when facilitating a planning session or meeting:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree/ Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Being chief explorer	SD	D	N	A	SA
Focusing the group	SD	D	N	A	SA
Driving the learning	SD	D	N	A	SA
Stimulating the group	SD	D	N	A	SA
Setting the agenda	SD	D	N	A	SA
Guiding action plans	SD	D	N	A	SA
Leading from the middle	SD	D	N	A	SA
Catching those in difficulty	SD	D	N	A	SA
Leading from the front	SD	D	N	A	SA
Listening and encouraging	SD	D	N	A	SA
Leading from the rear	SD	D	N	A	SA
Being overtly helpful	SD	D	N	A	SA
Giving a reason to learn	SD	D	N	A	SA
Setting and receiving challenges	SD	D	N	A	SA
Drawing out positive and negative emotions	SD	D	N	A	SA
Handling conflict	SD	D	N	A	SA
Stating an opinion	SD	D	N	A	SA

Are there planning processes other than GPRA planning where SFBT techniques might also be useful, i.e. Balanced Scorecard, BSM? If so, please list these other planning processes.

What are the strengths and limitations of the solution-focused approach to federal planning?

In what ways could you modify the SFBT approach to be more useful in GPRA planning processes?

How comfortable would you feel using solution-focused techniques in a planning session in your agency (On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 = Very Uncomfortable)? Why or why not?

Appendix E

Small Group Session Questions

SFBT Evaluation

1. Any additional thoughts since the training about SFBT…usefulness…things you liked…things you did not like.

2. **What is it about Solution Focused Brief Therapy techniques that help to make the linkages between mission statements and action plans?**

3. **What are the specific concerns about using SFBT within DLA, i.e. political realities, etc? How could SFBT be modified to address these concerns?**

4. **According to the participants, what makes SFBT useful in planning activities?**

5. **Will having new SFBT techniques in their repertoire lead to better strategic plans? Why/why not?**