MAKE LIFE SIMPLE

Make your life as simple as possible, but not simpler.

Andrew Gibson

'This book delivers on its title, providing clear and straightforward processes that work' *Tim Cook*

MAKE LIFE SIMPLE - EXTRACT

ISBN 978-1-913170-52-3

Published by:
Woven Word
An Imprint of Fisher King Publishing Ltd
The Studio
Arthington Lane
Pool in Wharfedale
LS21 1JZ
England
www.fisherkingpublishing.co.uk

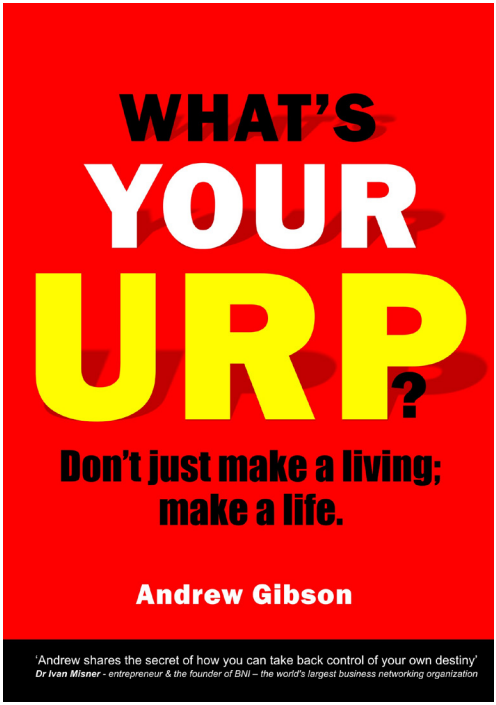
Dedication

To my wife, Natalie,
and my son, Alexander.

They are the loves of my life,
and long may that continue.

Also by Andrew Gibson

What's Your URP?



‘Everything should be made as simple
as possible, but not simpler.’

Albert Einstein

Foreword

'I'm so busy' is a phrase I hear so many people, including myself, utter regularly. But busy doing what? And for what?

We're always rushing around making sure we get things done. We like to have 'to do' lists and aspire to tick off the items. At the end of the day, when we've hopefully completed everything on the list, has our life improved? Well sometimes the answer is yes, but often you can feel like you're on a hamster wheel, running really fast but getting nowhere. Once one item is completed it is quickly replaced by the next thing vying for our attention.

On other days, you can find yourself in a state of paralysis by analysis, where big decisions seem impossible because they appear so complex.

Andrew's book brilliantly explains both of these phenomena and what we can do to overcome these frustrations through a really simple process. Instead of focusing on what needs to be done and doing it, focus on how we really want to feel afterwards.

I particularly love how the book relates to both business life and to personal life. I was reading the manuscript on a beautiful sunny

‘Instead of focusing on what needs to be done and doing it, focus on how we really want to feel afterwards.’

Saturday afternoon, with my children playing happily in the garden and the sound of running water in the background. I was revisiting the section of the book about what do you really want more of, the senses and feelings around that and then planning actions so you can get more of them.

Just as I was thinking how I wanted more afternoons like this, the kids started bickering. I got ready to lecture them about how this is the kind of behaviour I didn't want from them. Then, just like that, I remembered what Andrew had written: if I wanted more afternoons like this, I needed to reinforce the positive behavior from 5 minutes previously rather than haranguing them for their one slip up!

There is already plenty of complexity in the world. Often, books that purport to provide solutions merely add to that complexity through intricate methods of navigation that can leave us no better off.

This book delivers on its title, providing clear and straightforward processes that can help you, as they've helped me, to make life as simple as possible, but not simpler.

Tim Cook

National Director - BNI UK & Ireland

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to so many people who have helped to shape the thinking that I share here. In particular, to my many colleagues in the Solution Focused Practice community.

It is rare to be part of a community that is so overwhelmingly giving in its nature. We are still learning, understanding, and finding new applications. I have had support, guidance, training, and help from many people in SFP and it would be impossible for me to name them all here. Some have had a great influence on my thinking, and none more so than the late Dr Luc Isebaert, and my friend, the late Greg Vinnicombe. Both were massively influential on my journey and in the content of this book. My training with Chris Iveson at Brief in London was instrumental and he helped me see one of the fundamentals of SFP and transformed my practice. Thank you, Chris. Also, I remember very useful conversations with John Brooker, Hannelore Volckaert, Dave and Debbie Hogan, Monika Jacobi,

Kirsten Dierolf, Jan Muller, Sussan Öster, Geert Lefevre, Sebastian Verniuwe, Paut Kromkamp, Lisa Willems, Dr Klaus Schenk, Ella de Jong, Owen Charnley, Steve Flatt, Suzi Curtis, Jim Bird-Waddington, Tim Newton, Paul Z Jackson, Guy Shennan, Dr Mark McKergow, Roy Marriott, Petra Muller-Demary, Annette Gray, Nalayini Thambar, Fraser Smillie, Anton Stellamans, Liselotte Baeijeart, Dr A. Biba Rebolj, Wendy van den Bulck, David Shaked, Rayya Ghul, Dr Peter Lehmann, and so many more.

I am grateful to my publisher, Rick Armstrong, and to Sam and Rachel, the team at Woven Word. Rick has been a friend and mentor to me for many years now. With his encouragement, I share here what I hope are useful tools to prompt more useful conversations.

I am grateful to my colleagues in BNI. The members of Apex in Leeds have given me tremendous support and great stories. My friends Gareth James, Maria Hatton, Rick Armstrong, Niri Patel, Neil Giller, Louise Eccles-Cookson, Nick Forgham, Andy Gorman, Tim Cook and Charlie Lawson have offered great input and encouragement. I must also acknowledge Dr Ivan Misner, founder and Chief Visionary Officer of this amazing organisation for his help and support with so

much of my personal and professional development. The core values of BNI are an essential part of the methods I share here. Central to BNI is the value of Givers Gain. It should be human nature to help others and to give without expectation of a direct gain. I salute all involved in BNI for making this the principal core value of the organisation.

I am grateful to one particular colleague in BNI. Paul Furlong is an expert storyteller with his company Opus Media. It was his talk at the UK BNI Director Conference in 2019 that opened my eyes to the concept of story context within an audience. I am grateful to him for all the subsequent conversations and support as I have developed my thinking in writing this book. I recommend his excellent podcast, Rule the World, the Art, and Power of Storytelling, at every opportunity.

My friends Kieran and Lyz Igwe transformed my health by 'fixing my back problem'. The opportunity to play with my son, Alex, when he was a toddler was a result of their diligent support and I still train at Kieran's fit20 gym every week now. My back problem is not fixed, but their approach gave me what I wanted, and my back problems have simply gone away.

I am grateful to all the clients whose stories appear in this book, sometimes anonymised. To my friends as well who have patiently listened to me jump on my soapbox at every opportunity to share these views. I am specifically grateful to the friends who reviewed this book and helped me shape it before publication. As with my first book, Anthea Kilminster has been instrumental in shaping this. Thank you for your amazing support. I am also deeply grateful to Ian Bennett, Owen Charnley, Karen Hague, Karen Cruise, Sharon Milner, Brett Riley-Tomlinson, James Lawther, Seema Bye, Ella de Jong, Mike Massen, Gareth Bottomley, Marianne Smith, Andy Bounds, Emma Thomas, Ramu Iyer, Louise Eccles-Cookson, Aniela Tallentire, David Burnard, and Gerry Andrews. Thank you all for your help.

In addition to those who helped with early drafts, I am grateful to the many friends who have shared useful conversations with me. These include Robert Campbell, Jim and Ceri Laird, James and Chris Lawther, Alan and Sophie Matthews, and many more too numerous to list.

I am grateful to my wife's family in Australia for their kindness and for welcoming me so warmly for so many years. To my parents-in-law

Tom King and Stasia King, to Stasia's partner Zed, and my sister-in-law Nudge, brother-in-law Chris, and their children Finlay and Katelynn. I particularly want to thank my wife's uncle, Barry King, for his excellent golf coaching which features later in this book, and his daughter Sonia King for her support and encouragement.

I am eternally grateful to my parents, my sister and her family. Mike and Margaret Gibson brought me up with a focus on helping others. Jenny has put up with me the longest of anyone as her big brother and has a great talent for supplying a healthy dose of common sense. And her husband Paul and my nephews Jordan, Mikey and Adam are a joy to be with and a source of constant support.

And finally, to my beautiful wife and son, Natalie and Alexander. For listening to more of my rants than anyone should need to suffer, and for being partners in conversation over the dinner table. I could not have written this without your encouragement and support. Thank you, with all my love.

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Introduction

Four of my friends met for lunch and the conversation turned to 'who do we think is the happiest?'. One of my friends later told me that they all agreed that it was me, yet on every common measure, they were all better off than me. I earned the least amount of money, drove the oldest car, went camping for my holidays. The reason given was that they had all noticed I was happy in myself. I was happy in my work, happy at home, and happy with life. This got me thinking.

In our daily lives, most of what we want is happening most of the time. We are surrounded by good news stories if we look for them. If we make a conscious effort to look for what we want, we will maintain our health and wellbeing. We can take a life that appears complex and most of the time we can keep it simple.

Within our families we all get along most of the time. Occasionally parents and teachers will need to have words with a child who is

ignoring them or to correct their behaviour. If those conversations took 15 minutes in a day, for the 23 hours and 45 minutes of the rest of the day, everything is ok. Is it fair to label a child 'badly behaved' if you spend 15 minutes a day having strong words with them? If we are clear about the behaviours we want and compliment them when we notice them doing them, wouldn't that work better?

At work, the most successful teams notice that most of their operation is working well most of the time, and recognising what is going well is vital to maintain perspective and morale. If every meeting starts with the problems and issues, the mood is set low. If we look for people to blame when things go wrong, we add stress and anxiety to a situation that is already tense. If we look for what we want instead, we can strive for more of that. Problems and issues are reduced by a sense of perspective.

Albert Einstein said:

'Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler'

His idea was that we should keep even the most complex things as simple as possible, without losing their essence, and that some things

could only be simplified so far without losing something essential. In our modern world, we have moved away from this principle. As a society, we have embraced complexity and seem to take pride in finding complex solutions to complex problems.

The need to act or be seen to be acting has made life complex and expensive. We take action and then review the outcome, and if we don't get what we want, we take another action. This approach runs our lives from small, daily decisions to major changes. We look to 'do something about it!' first. Big data projects are in progress around the world seeking to mine the information we share on-line every moment of the day. The tech companies have a dream that by analysing all the data available, they will somehow unlock human potential, and use this information to boost everything from productivity to politics. Fortunes are made through the perceived value of this activity. Yet every extra piece of data adds complexity, and while we drown in information, we thirst for knowledge.

What if we could work out the outcomes we wanted first, and only then do something about it? Would that make life simpler?

If we could do that, we would do less and spend less, and yet enjoy more of what we want. We would save time and money and benefit more. The methods I share in this book will help you develop this as an approach. If you apply it consistently, it may even become your thinking style.

When we face a challenge, we often look inwards for the answers. We seek an understanding of our nature. We look for tools that help us with our thoughts and personality and a whole industry has built up in the area of self-improvement. We look to improve ourselves by filling ourselves with knowledge about how we work and hope that will make a difference. I propose a simpler way.

Though it might be attractive for some, we are not isolated on a desert island. We live in a complex network of interactions with others. Instead of looking inwards, seeking change, and expecting this to make a difference, let's look outwards for useful interactions. The resources we need are within our networks, and useful interactions are all around us every day if we look for them and notice them. These interactions make a difference every day. To make a change, look outwards first. Change is out there waiting for you if you notice it.

Our society has created and rewarded complexity. Many people have built careers that benefit from this complexity to earn high incomes. These people are considered successful, yet is this what we want for society?

We value complexity and pay dearly for the brilliance of others when we need their input. If their input takes a long time and is very complex, we pay more for it. Shouldn't the simple solution that gets us what we want more quickly be worth more to us?

We equate happiness with 'success', and success is often measured by our label, or by the amount of money we earn. We are conditioned to pursue the most important sounding and highest-earning career. We all want others to see that we are successful, so we give ourselves a fancy job title, or spend the money we earn on things that give external signals of our success. We think that other people care about the car we drive, the clothes we wear, the holidays we take, and we buy expensive items to meet this need. Whole industries have been built around this psychological need.

Is money the true measure of happiness? If so, how much do we need

to be happy?

Often the happiest people are not the highest earners. Instead of worrying about money, and what others think of us, we can notice when we make a difference and be happy that we have done so. Our reputation and our legacy are the difference we make, and if we start noticing when we make a difference, we can draw satisfaction from this. We build a legacy through this process of helping others and making a difference. Simply earning more money is not enough on its own for happiness, hence why the richest people in the world are also many of the greatest philanthropists. It is human nature to want to make a difference, and the difference noticed by others we interact with is how we will be remembered.

We worry too much about how things might be, and about events that are outside of our control. It is interesting to look at long term aims; however, you are only in control of your next step. Change is happening everywhere all the time. Trying to keep up with everyone's change as well as manage your own leads to stress and anxiety.

This book will give you simple tools that you can apply to improve

your immediate situation. Make the next step, even if it is only small.

We will explore the subtleties of looking for differences that we want before we take action to get them. We will explore stories as your narrative and their power in your network. We will all thrive in a world where we make a difference for others, and where the difference we make is noticed. You don't need to be a billionaire to make a difference.

When we need to get things done, we will go on a journey that will take us to the future, then the here and now (or the recent past), and then we will take one small step forwards to where we want to be.

We will experience an approach that will make your life as simple as possible, but not simpler.

This book is pocket-sized, highlighting the method of concise simplicity. If you think this book feels thin, that is a good thing. Do you want a complex book that is hard to understand, takes a long time to read, and is hard to put into effect?

What do you want instead?

Make Life Simple

I offer this book as a simple method of making progress that does not involve analysing and understanding the problem. This book will help you make progress towards what you want instead.

My proposal is simple: let's put the desired outcomes before the actions.

Let's ask, 'what do we want?' and explore that first. This sounds simple, but in practice, it isn't easy as the desire to do something is very strong. I propose we slow down and think about the differences we want before we act. This book will give you a structure to help you think first, act with confidence, and get more of what you want more of the time.

When you have mastered this, my best hope is you will save time, save money, and get more of what you want.

The method applies immediately when we have a problem, a goal, or a challenge; when we need something to change. Before we take action, we need to know the noticeable differences we want after we have done something about it. You will be able to consider the outcomes you want first and then take confident steps towards them.

This sounds like a sensible way to live, and I guess you might be thinking you do this already. My observations are different as in all walks of life, I see people putting the action first. We always feel the need to 'do something' about the situation.

To illustrate this, consider the movie, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

The movie is set in 1936. The Nazis are seeking the Ark of the Covenant as they think this will make them invincible. They have equated invincibility with global domination so this would help them with their quest.

A professor of archaeology, Henry 'Indiana' Jones Jr. is set the challenge of stopping them.

The film follows a pattern. There is a challenge, action is taken, and

the plot develops. After each action there is a review. The situation is usually getting progressively worse for our heroes (Indiana Jones and his team), while the bad guys (the Nazis) seem to be winning. When the team is in trouble, they turn to Indiana.

One of the team will ask him, 'What do we do?'.

Indiana will propose a solution in the form of an action to take.

Having taken this action, the team find themselves in a more perilous situation.

Once again, the question is asked, 'What do we do?'.

Again, Indiana issues an instruction, proposes a 'solution' and action is taken.

As the movie develops, so Indiana is placed under increasing levels of stress. Yet still he is asked, 'What do we do?'.

While Indiana and his team are busy trying to interrupt them, the Nazis are making progress towards their quest.

Often, when the team is in serious trouble (usually involving his fear of snakes), Indiana is not capable of proposing an action. Someone else such as Marion, the very capable woman in the team, is asked instead. She proposes an action, and so progress is made.

Despite Indiana and Marion's best efforts, the Nazis reach the Ark of the Covenant. I hope this doesn't spoil the film if you haven't seen it, but when they open the Ark, they do not get the invincibility they sought. Quite the opposite!

This makes great movies – but is it the way we should live our lives?

Raiders of the Lost Ark is a great work of fiction, so we can look at it as a metaphor.

The original quest was set by the Nazis, the bad guys in the film. Their logic was that they were seeking world power and global domination, so if they were invincible, they would certainly win any conflict. Someone in Nazi Head Office suggested that the Ark of the Covenant would enable them to become invincible. A project was developed to obtain the Ark, and unlimited resources were committed to this goal with the expected outcome being 'Invincibility'.

While Indiana and his team did their best to disrupt them, the fictional Nazi project continued on plan. They found the Ark of the Covenant, but when they opened it up, the outcome was not what they expected.

Unfortunately, they only worked this out at the end of the movie, after spending all the time and money on their quest. Their goal was achieved – they found the Ark – but doing so certainly did not bring them invincibility!

Action movies are great fun for many of us, but do they tell us something about how we live our lives? Have you ever done something to fix a problem and then discovered that the outcome wasn't what you wanted?

For example, do you recognise any of the following?

- The person who changes job to earn more money, but is still unhappy at their new place of work;
- The family who moves to a bigger house, then miss their friends and neighbours;
- The couple who separate or divorce, then get back together a few years' later;

- The expensive purchase made, used once, and then left gathering dust at the back of the cupboard.

If you are seeking help, do your friends advise you about what to do? How do you choose the best suggestion? What do you do if the action taken doesn't work?

We often take a similar, action-oriented approach to help others in need. For example, when a friend has a problem and shares their story with you, have you ever suggested what they should do about it? How do you know it's a good thing for your friend to do? Do you base this on your own experience?

When you go to your line manager with a challenge you face do you ask them what you should do? Do they tell you what to do? Does that always fit with your own idea?

If you are the line manager, do you find yourself having to come up with solutions and instructions? How do you evaluate all the available options and propose a course of action that all present can follow? If you are told what to do by your manager and you think there are better options, how can you respectfully challenge an instruction from

your boss without losing your job?

In politics, professional politicians are determined to be 'doing something about' the problem. They challenge their rivals with, 'what are you doing about this?' Journalists will ask the same questions about 'what are you doing about this?', and they will report a 'failure to act' or seek to 'hold people accountable for their actions'. Should our politicians always have to 'do' something to 'fix' things?

In many cultures, changing your actions part way through is seen as 'changing your mind'. It is as if you haven't thought it through properly. You are 'admitting defeat', or you risk 'losing face'. Because of these labels, many people stick with their decisions even though the evidence suggests it would be better to change course.

As John Maynard Keynes famously said, 'When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?'. We should be allowed to change our minds and do something else. If we pause before we act and think of the differences we want first, we give ourselves the chance to change our minds about how we get these later.

The problem starts with the desire to 'solve the problem'. It is widely

accepted that if you analyse the problem and then take action to solve it, you will get what you want. This applies equally to challenges, goals, and any burning desire for change.

The flaw is that the 'solution' to the 'problem' is equated with the 'action taken'. A typical approach would be, 'What are we going to do to solve the problem?'. Only after we have 'done something' do we review to see that the outcome is 'what we want'. To see how that usually works out, please go back and watch, Raiders of the Lost Ark!

This approach constrains us to what we can do, and our ability to do it. We try to change ourselves, or we tell people what we are going to do about it. When we ask for someone's help with a problem, we seek out and commission someone by asking them 'what we should do', or if we are being asked, we advise them to 'do something'. We specify how we want them to do it like experts in their world. When we don't get what we want, we are told that we got what we asked for!

I suggest we change the order to the one that works. Let's look for what we want first, and consider it separately from taking action to get it.

We will learn techniques to identify what we want, describe it in observable ways, and then look for the useful interactions that will help us get what we want. We will work out the action steps afterwards. When we take them, we will know that they are working quickly. We will be able to change our minds and our actions while keeping sight of the differences we want.

Working this way will help us grow in confidence, notice our resilience, and will help us make a difference for others as well as ourselves.

Over time, our stories will develop in our networks. We will see the benefits of having this as a resource we can invest in and draw on in times of need. We will live a life that is as simple as possible, and not simpler.

Here are the elements we will explore in detail in this book.

1. Three Questions for a Good Life

Dr Luc Isebaert was a highly regarded neuro-psychotherapist and world authority for brief therapy. One of the therapy tools he developed was, 'Three Questions for a Good Life'.

Dr Isebaert's advice to his patients was to ask these three questions once a day for two weeks.

1. What have I done today that I am happy with?
2. What has someone else done that I am grateful for? (And did I react in a way likely to encourage them to do something similar again?)
3. Using all my senses, what do I notice around me that I am grateful for? What can I see, hear, feel, smell, touch, taste that I am grateful for?

The idea of these questions was to help the patient focus on the things they wanted which broke the cycles of negative thinking that had brought them to his consulting room.

This simple tool can be applied in many ways and on many occasions.

If you are feeling stressed or anxious, you can ask these questions of yourself. Do this for two weeks. You should notice an improvement in your mood and a reduction in stress and anxiety.

You can ask these questions of your family. If you take time to sit

together for a meal at least once a day, these are great questions to ask everyone. I especially recommend asking these questions of young children. Some time spent in their world will enhance the mood of most disheartened adults!

If you are involved in a team, ask your colleagues these questions when you get together. In meetings, these questions are a great way to raise the mood before discussing the challenges of the day.

It is especially important to ask these questions in times of challenge or hardship. Too often, we are drawn into negative thoughts where we think everything is going wrong. Ask these questions of yourself and others. You will see that most of the time, most of your world is pretty much as you would want it to be.

2. What do you want?

When you feel hungry, do you ask yourself what you don't want for lunch? If you are with friends in a café, do you ask them what they don't want to drink? You would need to ask a lot of questions before you placed your order! For simple day-to-day items like a choice of

hot drink, we know precisely what drink we want and how we want it.

And yet in major parts of our lives, many of us have still to work this out. By not knowing what we want, we fall into things that tide us over while we work it out. The longer we spend in situations that we don't want, the greater our risk of stress and anxiety. The greater the negative impact on our long-term health.

We live in a world of rolling news, most of which is presented as bad, and this feeds our stress and our anxiety. For example, the news will report 'unemployment' figures when they are high and will make a big news story, yet they seldom make the same noise when 'employment' is as high as it has ever been.

The recent Covid-19 Coronavirus pandemic was the greatest disruption to our society. This was relentlessly covered by all media and social media channels. To listen to the news was to hear of ever-increasing diagnoses and deaths in countries around the world. None of this was what anyone wanted. Work continues to try and understand the disease and its infection and transmission characteristics so that medical cures can be proscribed. While in the middle of the crisis,

politicians and many others are busy trying to tackle the outbreak and be seen to be in control of events. This is an almost impossible task, and I sympathise with all who are trying to keep us safe and healthy. While those in charge are wrestling with the problem, there is a simple word that we all can use when we are immersed in things we don't want:

Instead

If someone you know is presenting with things they don't want, ask them what they want instead. For example, if you don't want to catch Covid-19, that is perfectly reasonable. Focusing on what you don't want, you might take the following steps:

- Lock yourself away and not go out;
- Seek comfort by eating sweets and chocolate, or drinking alcohol;
- Avoid other people so as not to catch Covid-19 from them;
- Listen to the news so you can keep up to date with latest developments.

These will all help you avoid what you don't want. But what happens

if we ask what we want instead? A good answer would be 'to remain healthy'. When we think about being healthy, we might take the following steps:

- Be sure to take exercise, and if possible, fresh air;
- Drink lots of water and eat well so we maintain our fitness;
- Give other people space when we see them in case we are infectious;
- Look for the good news stories and focus on all the amazing things others are doing to help people through this crisis.

What you want is within your control, while what you don't want is not in your control. Seeking it creates stress and anxiety as these commonly arise when elements of your life are outside of your control. To live a simple life, let's work out what you want.

3. Change is Out There

When presented with a challenge, we often look inwards to make a change. We decide that to improve we need to look at ourselves, do something, do something different. If we change something about

ourselves then all will be right.

This approach is hard and leads to us taking big actions. The natural thought process is that if the problem is serious, we need a serious solution that is hard to implement, but that complexity will make it worth doing. This results in people moving to a new house, changing job, or leaving their partner and their children to fix a problem. Sometimes it works, but it would be great to know we were making a good decision before we acted.

Gregory Bateson was a social anthropologist who worked in the mid-20th century who died in 1980. One of his great contributions was to observe people and their interactions with others. He spent time with different groups of people and simply noticed the useful interactions in their society. He didn't try to create them or change behaviours, and he proposed the following:

> *Change is happening around us all the time. If we notice the change that is useful and amplify it, we will make progress towards realising more of what we want.*

As a Western scientist, Bateson worked in a period where indigenous

people were being 'discovered' and 'studied'. Experiments were designed to understand human civilisation, and the traditional scientific method applied. Develop a theory, design an experiment to test the theory, then experiment. Finally, compare the results with the original theory. Experiments involving indigenous people conducted this way would inevitably change the behaviours of those who were being studied.

Bateson took a different approach which was considered radical at the time.

He spent time with local peoples in New Guinea and Bali where he observed their interactions. He noticed those that contributed to society and as much as possible, he consciously minimised the impact of his presence as an outsider.

His central theme was that society depended on useful interactions. People interacted differently with different people and in different circumstances. There were no innate 'behaviours' that lead to people acting the same way in all interactions. From this, he developed a simple principle: 'Notice useful change and amplify it'.

This has developed into the next step in this process. When you know what you want, you can notice times when you get it, even just a little. You can notice what is happening at these times and then do more of it. This works if you look for the helpful and useful interactions that surround you. Useful interactions are reduced by social isolation due to retirement or illness. It is important to recreate new versions of the useful interactions that helped you in the recent past. Creating new connections with people you can interact with is a great way of maintaining your health and wellbeing.

4. Differences Before Actions

We often set ourselves a goal, or we are regularly given them at work. They are nearly always in the form of an 'action'; a desire to do something or to achieve something. Have you ever achieved your goal, and then thought to yourself that this wasn't what you really wanted?

We need to separate 'what we want' from the 'goal'. The goal is not the action we take to reach the outcomes. To do this, we should express what we want in the form of noticeable differences.

I was taught Solution Focused Practice by my late friend Greg Vinnicombe. He taught that a difference was noticeable if it had the following characteristics:

- Specific
- Observable
- Measurable
- Interactional
- Time-related

Here is a simple example. If a friend says they want 'to be happy', how can we help them? Chances are, their happy and our happy will be different. Instead of offering suggestions based on our own experience, we can ask them to tell us theirs. 'If you were happy tomorrow morning, what would you notice?'. Then ask, 'What else?'. We can ask this many times so our friend builds a list. This creates a detailed picture of what they would notice if they were happy. Asking them to think about a time in the future helps them to think about a time when things are different from now. This makes it easier to consider and to describe as it takes our friend out of their current situation. We can help them describe their desired future, and then

help them take steps towards it.

One of the answers might be that they would be smiling. We can ask what others would notice too, and perhaps they would notice your friend smiling. Our friend would notice them smiling, and it is possible to see this in the moment it happens. If they wanted to, they could keep track of how many times they noticed people smiling in a given period. 'Being Happy' is a Goal. 'Noticing people smiling in a day' is a SOMIT difference. We separate the two and life becomes a lot easier.

5. Time

Change is happening all the time. Change has happened in the conversation just completed. Change will happen in the period between now and the next conversation. This awareness can help a parent expecting a child to instantly respond to their guidance or correction. Give them a little time to adapt and change so you can notice the change you want.

We need to realise that change happens in between conversations. Change is happening out there, and all the time. Notice the change

you want and amplify it. You will need fewer meetings. You will have fewer conversations to 'emphasise the point'. You will have less disciplinary conversations with your children (though I can't promise you won't repeat yourself a few times!).

If you allow for the passage of time in between conversations, you will build capability in those you help. A great sign of this would be to notice that they don't come back with the same questions, challenges or problems.

6. Social Capital

Humans are storytellers. Anthropologists estimate that we developed language skills around 700,000 years ago. The earliest form of writing found is Cuneiform, found on Samarian tablets, and estimated to be 7,000 years' old. For most of our time on Earth, we have been telling stories. Storytellers were instrumental to the survival of every tribe, and stories would be passed from village to village, from generation to generation. Useful stories helped people learn from others, and to build reputations. Stories about you and your reputation in your network is known as Social Capital.

When we are aware of Social Capital, we notice how our narrative develops in our network. We can influence how we are observed through the actions we take. We can notice when we make a difference. More usefully we can notice when others make a difference.

We can create and nurture our story and others' stories. Being a useful person in your network pays dividends that are more than just financial. Building the Social Capital of those around you is a great way of making a difference in your world.

In this book, I will help you develop and apply this for yourself, your loved ones, and your network. I hope this will help you make life simple.

Three Questions for a Good Life

Solution Focused Practice

The principles I include here are from 'Solution Focused Practice' (SFP). There are many books and training courses on SFP if you wish to find out more, so this book is not intended as a training manual. I wish to apply the fundamental principles in ways that are simple to adopt.

In my opinion, Solution Focused Practice differs from other conversational approaches in two very specific ways.

- Looking for noticeable differences we want first;
- Looking for useful interactions with others.

These are extra steps before we take action, and when applied to everyday thinking, they are transformational. The fundamental change is that the solution is the difference you want. It is not the

action proposed or taken to get that difference.

Imagine the scene in the Indiana Jones movie. We have a problem. The question normally asked is, 'What are we going to do about this?'. The emphasis is on the 'to do'. Sometimes the action will be instinctive as fight or flight responses kick in. That is normal and our survival has depended on this response for millennia, but we are rarely faced with a temple full of snakes, or a perfectly spherical rock rolling after us!

When we make decisions in daily life, we are programmed to act, to ask about 'the to do', and then to take action. We do this, then we review. Have you ever found yourself regretting the action you have just taken as it didn't get you what you wanted? This is where SFP offers an alternative approach.

Noticeable Differences

When people train animals, the focus is on rewarding the behaviour they want. If you teach your dog to sit, and it sits on command, you give it a treat, say, 'good dog', and pat it. The dog learns that sitting on command will result in reward and so learns to do it next time, and the time after that. We probably think we do this all the time

ourselves, yet, we spend a lot of time worrying about what we don't want.

So, if our child is misbehaving, we can take action to 'stop the child misbehaving'. Most people do this by talking to their child in the moment, maybe telling the child, 'not to do that'. If they don't respond appropriately, we will tell them again, perhaps more loudly. If raising the voice does not work, we use next steps sanctions such as removing privileges. This escalation continues until eventually the child's behaviour changes. To change the child's behaviour, we have a row, and now they (or we) have changed behaviour. The atmosphere is usually worse afterwards. Now we need to think of ways to keep them amused having denied them the privileges that would have helped us. This is a simple example whereby starting with 'what we don't want', we end up with a result that is not what we want.

When a child is carrying a full cup, how often do we hear someone say, 'mind you don't spill'? This places the idea of spilling in the mind of the child, increasing the risk of spillage. Better to say, 'you're carrying that nicely – well done!' and hope the child continues to carry successfully to the table.

If we revisit the misbehaving child and ask ourselves, 'what do we want?', let's say we want the child to be calm. What would we notice if the child was calm? When did we last notice these things happening? Or in other words, when was the child calm recently? What contributed to this occasion of the child being calm? Perhaps this was noticed after the child was fed, or went to the toilet, or had a sleep or a rest. Maybe now is the time for a snack, a trip to the toilet, or a rest. Parents carry toys and activities with them to provide a stimulating distraction. The child might not know what they want, but the parent can give them something that will attract their focus, even just a little. If we establish calm again, we can then explore the behaviour we want, increasing the chances the child will respond.

So the first activity to develop is to always look for the noticeable differences we want.

Professional coaches and therapists can help clients and patients work out the differences they want as a first step towards helping them. We can help them paint this picture in conversation, then look to notice these differences happening now or in the recent past. When we find them, even just a little, we can build on them. We can then look to

move a little closer to what we want. That produces some simple next steps that will help us get more of what we want.

Interactions

The second resource we look for is useful interactions. We focus between the noses, not between the ears. This is key to making progress and also makes progress simple.

As with 'what we don't want', as a society, we spend a high proportion of time looking inwards. We identify people by characteristics seen to be within them, and this often leads to the application of labels.

We apply labels to people from an early age, and we use them to describe behaviours or identify personalities. For example, children can be described as badly behaved, or they can be good as gold. If a child is introduced to a new situation and labelled as one of these, the chances are the adults in the room will modify their behaviour according to the label, rather than to what they notice in the moment. With the first child, they will watch out for bad behaviour and intervene promptly to admonish. They will be on guard to prevent the behaviour they don't want. With the other child, they will notice

good behaviour and praise immediately. The label conditions them to notice the behaviours that fit their preconception. The label changes our interactions and can change the outcomes.

Labels can be interesting, they are a useful mental shortcut, and a well-designed questionnaire can be helpful. The challenge comes when the label is seen by others as if it was a problem behaviour. As a simple example, what do you think of when someone is labelled, 'Accountant'? It's a standard reaction to see accountants as boring. Is that true of all of them? Of course not.

For a more serious example, consider our approach to ex-prisoners or ex-offenders. The stated aim of the justice system is to help people rehabilitate. If someone has committed a crime and served time in prison, they are labelled as an ex-prisoner or ex-offender by society. The label includes the time spent in prison or describes the offence committed and doesn't make allowance for the changes the person has made since their crime was committed, or since leaving prison. Many organisations run checks on an applicant's criminal record before hiring them and ex-offenders and ex-prisoners often struggle to find employment. Their prospects are held back throughout their lives.

We make no allowance for the circumstances which surrounded them when they offended. We don't look at the interactions that may have influenced them at the time. We make no allowance for the progress they might make as a result of rehabilitation support. We don't account for the changes in interactions that have happened as time has passed, and meanwhile, the label damages their prospects due to others' perceptions. If we think criminality is hard-wired, what chance do we offer someone to rehabilitate? If we deny someone work, they are more likely to break the law again to make money so they can live. By labelling them 'criminal', we encourage them to behave this way.

I have seen people use Myers-Briggs and Belbin team roles to manage their teams. Recruitment processes use 'psychometric testing' to assess candidates. Large companies are trying to analyse and harvest data in an attempt to develop the ultimate personal profiles of everyone on their systems. All of these are designed to apply labels to people, and we should be aware that these are not always helpful. Whole industries have been created based on the belief that our characteristics and behaviours are internal to ourselves and can be labelled. The reason this often doesn't work is that the label influences the interactions.

We think that a defined personality type will behave in a certain way in all circumstances. This is simply not true. If a child is labelled 'clumsy', adults will take extra care to help them not drop or break things. If a child is labelled 'polite', they will be credited every time they say please or thank-you.

Some labels are genuinely useful and applicable, though they still change our interactions. Let's look at a label that identifies people who are genuinely individual in the way they think: Autism.

There are many identifiable differences within autism where people do think and act in a certain way. 'autism' covers a vast range of differences and there is no single characteristic that is common to all people with autism. For many years, autism was described as 'autism spectrum disorder' or ASD. Thankfully, this label has been changed and is no longer used in mental health practice. The conversation has moved on to discuss neurodiversity instead, where people with autism are simply seen as different from those without who are known as neurotypical. Considering autism as a disorder made neurotypical people think differently and the label sometimes influenced their behaviour. Changing the label from a 'disorder' to a 'diversity' will

help us make positive changes to the way we live and work together.

For example, for some neurodiverse people, there are advantages. Some people with autism have a huge capability to concentrate for long periods. Some can take complex problems and solve them simply. Some can interact comfortably with animals. Some can proof-read lengthy manuscripts or software code with absolute accuracy. Stephen Wiltshire PhD was diagnosed with autism aged three. He has a talent for drawing detailed, accurate representations of cities and he does so after observing them only briefly. He is a successful artist and was awarded an MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire) in 2006. He has talents considered unique and is in demand all over the world for commissioned work.

When a neurotypical person considers autism, it is hard to understand. It is hard to see how a person with autism could fit in with a 'normal' (another label) work environment. As a result, neurotypical people might look to employ people who do not have autism, and hence the label has changed their behaviour.

Those who are employed in a salaried position see self-employment

as very hard, or a means of paying low taxes, or sometimes both! Talk to a neurotypical person about helping neurodiverse people become self-employed and this will be placed in the 'too difficult' pile. There is a simple reason for this. The neurotypical response is to think, 'How can I possibly help someone with autism become self-employed?'. We think we need 'to do something' that will help. We then think of difficult labels ('autism' and 'self-employed') that we don't understand. It is impossible for us 'to do something' so we advise that they should do something else that we understand better. The desire to do something to help that is within our understanding creates a barrier to helping. Once again, the labels have changed our interactions.

This label-focused approach reduces the economic opportunity for neurodiverse people. If you look for successful people in every profession, at the top of the tree you will find people with autism. Albert Einstein himself displayed many of the characteristics associated with autism. Many neurodiverse scientists, economists, entrepreneurs, artists, actors and sportspeople reach the top of their professions. They are the way they are. There is no question of them choosing their neurodiversity as a way to behave.

One of my favourite recent projects was to help people with autism explore self-employment. In this project, I worked with the team at Specialist Autism Services in Bradford, UK. In a 12-month project, we helped 33 people, and of these 28 moved on to a 'next step' that was considered progress. Some found employment and some made other beneficial next steps.

With this project, we looked for the times when our clients did something they loved doing. We asked them what they noticed about themselves when they did this. We then looked for when they did this with someone else who benefited. This allowed us to explore useful interactions that were working for our clients. We helped artists, photographers, product designers, charity fundraisers, digital gamers, and many more. When someone else benefited, perhaps there was a value to this? If we could identify the value, there is a possibility of a transaction. During our project, five people concluded this process. Five people with autism were paid for their product or service and took the first step towards self-employment.

No two people are alike, and every interaction is different. We can spend ages trying to analyse the person to improve their 'behaviour'

(and as a society we do!), or we can look for useful interactions and try to build on these. This second approach removes the label as it is redundant.

For example, a child is playing with friends and falls over. The child will often pick themselves up and carry on playing. Their friends will encourage them to do so because they all want the game to continue, but before they do, they might glance over to mum or dad. If mum or dad is watching them, and they exchange a sympathetic glance of concern, the child might start to cry and come over for a reassuring cuddle. In my experience, parents learn to look away so their child carries on playing! One child, one fall. The outcome depends on the available interactions.

Think about the number of times you smiled today. Can you tell me precisely the number? It is hard to catch yourself smiling, and even if I asked you to count them and tell me tomorrow, it would be difficult to keep track.

Now think of the number of times you have seen others smile. If I asked you, it would be easier for you to notice others smiling and keep

track of that.

And what happens when someone else smiles at you? You smile back as it is infectious, or you notice that it was your smile in the first place that caused the smiles in others.

Three Questions for a Good Life

As an eminent psychotherapist, Dr Luc Isebaert was one of the early exponents of Brief Therapy. A fundamental principle of this is that the intervention with the patient should be as brief as possible. This is stated as 'no more sessions than are necessary', or to put it another way, as simple as possible but not simpler.

As well as developing and training people, he worked as a psychotherapist with a caseload of patients. He used a very simple set of questions and asked his patients to ask these of themselves every day for two weeks and to keep a journal. These are the questions:

1. What have you done today that you are happy with?
2. What has someone else done that you are grateful for? And did you react in such a way that they might do something similar again?

3. Using all your senses, what do you notice that you are grateful for? What do you see, feel, hear, touch, taste, smell that you are grateful for?

The third question will be familiar to those who practice mindfulness which often starts with noticing your breathing. Consciously noticing your inwards breath, the air circulating within your body, and then the conscious exhalation of the breath is used in therapies to help people ground themselves in the present.

My friend Nick Forgham is a Black Belt in Karate. In his book, 'Black Belt Thinking', he explains that Zanshin is central to martial arts. It means awareness, or literally, remaining mind. He lists Mokuso as a technique to increase awareness and it is a breathing meditation process. Here is how he describes it:

Get yourself comfortable, somewhere you can relax.

Breathe in through your nose and imagine the air you have breathed is a solid object about the size of your thumb. As you breathe in, the breath goes up your nose, up to your forehead, then down the back of your head. It then goes down the spine and tucks under the bottom of

the torso, then comes up into your stomach. It then goes up through your chest and comes out through your mouth.

This whole process takes about ten seconds. Then breathe in and start again.

The out-breath is as important as the in-breath, and the technique works best if you close your eyes. If you find just two minutes to do this, you will be refreshed and relaxed. You will have taken time to notice the simplest reflex action and the difference it makes for you.

Dr Isebaert was very happy that people would take these questions in their own way and adapt them. For example, whenever I meet a client or run a workshop, I ask, 'what has pleased you in the last seven days?'. We explore this first and I always like to start a conversation by noticing what is working well before we start looking for the next steps.

1. I take time to notice something that I am happy with today. I can give myself some credit and take comfort in what is going well in my world;
2. I look at useful interactions with others. I can notice that I have

support from my network, even just a little. I consider my own interaction. I can ensure that I give appreciation for the useful interactions. This in itself is something I can be happy with;

3. I look around me and notice what I am grateful for. I realise that while I am coping with my own challenges, there are resources in my immediate environment. I can draw on these for support.

The three questions capture the description of noticeable differences and the useful interactions.

Dr Isebaert's advice to his patients was to ask these questions every day for two weeks. My advice is that you can do the same, more than once per day if you wish, and for longer than two weeks if that is helpful. You can do this with your partner and your family whenever you are together, or with a friend or colleague. These are great questions to stimulate a useful conversation.

You can do this with your team, especially if you are running a team meeting or a workshop.

You can apply these just when you are by yourself and take comfort from noticing what is working in your world.

We will look at the applications of these in the rest of this book, and I will share some other techniques too. While you are reading this book, use these questions and see if you notice a difference.

Now let's help you find more of what you want.

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ISBN 978-1-911317-52-3

9 781913 170523

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An Imprint of Fisher King Publishing

Cover photography by Samantha Toolsie
toolsiephotography.co.uk