

PODCAST MINISERIES BY: RTC AND TDR GLOBAL LAC

Mentoring as a Tool for Professional Development and Strengthening Health Research Networks

EPISODE 3: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WITH A SOLUTIONS-FOCUS APPROACH

Karen Linares (KL): We are pleased to welcome you again to a new chapter in this podcast series, in which we seek to promote **mentoring** as an ideal tool that contributes significantly to career development in the complex field of research.

The material we share with you is based on the *Mentoring for Success* workshop, by expert coach Antoinette Ogblethorpe, who joins us as a guest throughout the series.

In the previous episode, we highlighted some of the issues that mentors and mentees should consider when starting a mentoring relationship, and the importance of a solutions-focused approach to addressing any challenges that may arise along the way. *[For more information on how to distinguish between a problem focus and a solution focus, see the end of this document.]*

This method was developed by Drs. Mark McKergow and Paul Z. Jackson to help people achieve their objectives, through goal-oriented techniques. It is described in the book *"The Solutions Focus, transforming change for coaches, leaders and consultants"*, which was published for the first time in 2002.

We also pointed out that solutions-focus seeks to create a change in mentality in the mentees, leading them to be active and dynamic in the search for solutions, that will allow them to move forward with greater confidence in their goals. Today, we will delve deeper into this approach and provide practical tools to facilitate its application in the context of career development.

It is important for mentees to be aware that the helm of their careers is always in their hands, not the mentor's, so they must be willing to change and look for alternatives that will get them closer to their goals.

But what does this have to do with Solutions-Focus? Think of the solutions-focused approach as an internal inventory of the resources we have and the skills we didn't know we had. Recognizing our strengths is necessary to build on them and achieve our goals, this enables us to move forward even in the face of the most difficult obstacles that may seem impossible to overcome, by EMPOWERING, and this is the essential question of the solutions approach: **how can we progress?**

One of the great benefits of this approach is that it leads us to develop the leadership skills necessary to take control of our professional growth. However, in a scenario as complex as career development where we find many variables to resolve, we can feel lost, or perhaps we are shy and insecure and prefer to wait for someone to tell us what to do. So, we asked Antoinette: How can we strengthen these leadership skills through mentoring?

Antoinette Oglethorpe (AO): Well, I think a skilled mentor can really get to know the person and see strengths that the individual might overlook themselves so within that shyness they will see that you are still a leader in your own right and you will also have recognized that we use a lot of solution focused approaches in our mentoring and part of a solutions focused approach to mentoring is about identifying what is already there, what already works and do more of it.

So, a skilled mentor might, for example, ask you, Karen, if you were their mentee, when do you organize people? When are you the person that people look to? So, it may be that in your social circle you actually demonstrate a lot of leadership, you're the social butterfly, or you're the organizer, or you're the person that people look to for council when they're upset, and those are all demonstrations of leadership and the role a mentor can play in that is to actually help you identify that you already have these skills. It's actually about bringing those to a new context and how you can do that in a way that is authentic for you, because leadership has to be authentic.

So, leadership is one of those big scary words that everybody thinks is something impossible and something you have to go on lots of big training courses for, and leadership is actually about having a clear vision of what it is that you want to achieve and then getting people to support you in achieving that vision. Now, whether that be organizing a family party, or whether that be delivering a community strategy it's the same concept, so, I think one of the things the mentor can do is help people develop their self-awareness, their self-insight and their appreciation of their own strengths and then help them apply those in new contexts.

KL: So, how do you apply a solutions-focus approach to professional development and foster leadership? In the *Mentoring for Success* workshop, Antoinette recommends four tools we can rely on to do this: **Career Platform, Future Success, Career Kitbag, and Small Steps.** Here's a brief description of each:

Career Platform asks us to make an overall assessment of where we are in our career journey. This allows us to have clarity about what is going well, what we want to keep, and what we want to be different. Some guiding questions for this evaluation are

- What is going well in your current role?
- What would you not want to change?
- What would you like to be different (that you are prepared to take action to improve)?
- What would be the benefit of that?
- Who else would that affect?

The second tool "**Future Success**" suggests that you look beyond your goals to imagine what your professional life will be like once you have achieved them. You can do this by imagining that you have a magic wand and by waving it you can create the career you want. Now that you have achieved the success you always wanted, ask yourself:

- What would you be doing day to day?
- Where would you be working?
- What kind of people would you be working with and for?
- What would you be delivering or producing and who for?
- Why is that important to you?

We continue with "**Career Kitbag**". We all have skills, qualities, experiences and knowledge that we can use to advance our careers, but we often do not recognize all the capabilities that are within us. Identify and focus on the resources that will help you advance. You can ask yourself:

- What resources do you have?
- What useful experiences have helped you get to where you are today?
- What valuable skills have you developed?
- What positive qualities and talents will help you progress?
- What contributions do you make to your work team, organization or institution that set you apart from others?

Finally, it is very important to remember that "**Small Steps**" can lead to great progress. Commit to doable actions that will help you move forward, no matter how small they are. At this point, you can evaluate:

- What actions will you take in the next three months to progress towards your short-term milestones?
- What are the first small steps towards that?
- What support do you need?
- Who can help you? and
- What else needs to happen?

If you want to strengthen your leadership skills, you need to think of yourself as an expert in your own life and career, because you really are. Look for the skills, strengths, talents, and experiences that will help you grow; evaluate the information and resources provided by the people around you; and make the most of them. **"Change happens all the time. Our job (as owners of our own careers) is to notice the USEFUL changes and amplify them".**

That concludes this episode. We hope that the tools we have provided today will be very useful to you in advancing your careers and promoting mentoring processes in your institutions. We thank Antoinette Oglethorpe, our guest expert, for kindly sharing this valuable knowledge with us. In the next episode, we will continue to explore more resources for strengthening and nurturing leadership and building strong mentoring relationships. Until next time!

Additional Information: Problem-focus vs. Solutions-focus

You may find it difficult to distinguish between problem focus and solution focus. Here is a parallel with examples to help you see the differences between the two approaches:

"Problem-focused" questions:	"Solutions-focused" questions
→ What is the problem? → How long has it been a problem? → When was the problem at its worst? → What are the main causes of the problem? → Whose fault is it? → What are the impediments to success? → How do you plan to solve the problem?	→ What do you want to accomplish? → What would happen if things were perfect? → What do you already do well? → What is the best thing you have ever done? And What went well that time? → What small step could you take to build on this success? → How would others know things were getting better?