



BRIEF - COACHING

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The Preferred Future

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The Wondrous Power of the “Preferred Future”

The preferred future is the very heart of the solution-focused approach. Often, people come to us so preoccupied with their challenges or problems that these appear like a mountain blocking their view of the future they wish for. When, in a coaching conversation, we invite them to take a leap over that mountain and imagine how their world might look at its best — if all these difficulties were resolved (a hypothetical question) — something quite remarkable can happen: Hopelessness can turn into confidence and longing; despair can transform into courage to make things better. A sense of trust in one's own abilities begins to grow — along with the belief that one can actively shape one's own life. The preferred future is not the same as a goal. Goals are often fixed on a single point. Here, instead, we open up a whole landscape of possibilities — a future scenario rich in colour and detail.

Here a little example.

A Butterfly Doesn't Need to Struggle – Emergency Coaching in the Evening

On my phone's voicemail, I found a message from Beatrice M. I had met Beatrice a few months earlier in one of my team workshops. She works as the head of a service department in a large bank. In the message, her voice sounded quite desperate: she asked me to call her back that evening — no matter how late — saying she would wait for my call because she needed an emergency coaching session. She said she had to save her job.

Around 9 p.m., after finishing my seminar, I called her back. She told me she no longer knew what to do. That afternoon, her new boss's assistant had sent her a PowerPoint presentation by email showing the new organisational structure. In that structure, neither she nor her department appeared anymore. Simply gone.

Beatrice said that, after seeing this, she had first hidden in her office and then tried twice to reach her boss by phone — without success. I could hear how close she was to tears as she described how hurt and unfair it all felt to her, and how deeply she struggled with this kind of corporate culture.

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She told me about her former boss, who had valued her work and given her a great deal of freedom. But now ... things were very different.

I asked Beatrice how I could best support her in this moment. She said she hoped we could plan her next steps together — how to deal with the situation. Right now, she said, she simply didn't know what to do.

Beatrice: "And by tomorrow morning – no, actually by tonight – I need to know what I'll do. It has to be quick, otherwise I'll really be finished! I won't let them just push me out like this."

Coach: "When I hear you speak like that, I'm wondering: what similarly difficult situations have you faced before that you managed to handle successfully?"

This question brought two situations to Beatrice's mind — moments when she had fought like a lioness for her team and her projects, and had succeeded. But she kept mentioning that, back then, she had fought with passion – whereas now, she only felt anger. And now, she said, she was simply too tired to act out of that anger.

Coach: "Based on what you've just discovered and said — what would you like instead of this anger?"

There was a moment of quiet on the other end of the line.

Beatrice: "I want to be able to do my work calmly and with ease — to receive appreciation for it and to pass that appreciation on to others. Light and calm... working like a butterfly!"

Coach: "When I hear you say that, what exactly is your goal? What does the flower look like that the butterfly would like to land on?"

Another pause followed.

Beatrice: "A butterfly doesn't need to struggle to do its work! I've just realised that I don't want to fight anymore. I'm tired of constantly having to prove that I'm capable. Tomorrow, in my conversation with my boss, I'll try to ensure that my eight team members find good positions in the new organisation — but I don't really want to stay there myself. Ideally, I'd allow myself the luxury of taking two or three months off to find out what kind of new job would truly fit me."

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In the final minutes of our coaching conversation, we looked at her decision to resign from several different angles. This strengthened her confidence to take that step. What had begun as despair gradually turned into cautious hope — and then into genuine confidence about the future. Just under three weeks later, Beatrice sent me a short email. She happily reported that she had been able to find new positions for seven of her eight team members, and the eighth would apply internally. Her boss had tried to keep her on for a strategic project and offered her new leadership responsibilities — but Beatrice stayed with her decision to leave. She wrote:

"I'm now looking forward to my butterfly time."



Short Reflection

Beatrice was in despair. All she could see was the outrageous behaviour of her superior, who had simply erased her and her department without any discussion or preparation. Within herself, she could sense nothing but disappointment and anger.

Through the coach's simple and seemingly modest question — "What would you like instead of the anger?" — she was invited to reflect on her preferred future, allowing her to shift and widen her perspective. The self-created image of the butterfly brought forth hope and confidence — and a renewed trust in her own abilities. When such a vivid landscape of possibilities takes shape, the next steps often follow quite naturally.

Practical Ideas

Invite the person you're talking with to explore the landscape of their preferred future through simple questions such as: "If this situation were really well resolved, what difference would that make for you?" Spend enough time within this future scenario, and ask about differences and effects in actions and interactions — especially those that would be noticeable to others.

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