

Hans-Peter Korn

Staging of Strategic Solutions for the Future Business

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Summary

Finding solutions by talking about them is the usual setting to work with individuals and teams. Such "talking about" is often done in workshops, for example in sales and marketing to create ideas for new strategic products or services. But: How is it possible to "test" these strategies? And how is it possible in such workshops to slip much more into the shoes of the future customers to create the ideas from their point of view?

How would it be to have, in addition to "talking about", something like a "staging room" to try out possible future products and services in a realistic simulation of the future world of customers and competitors?

The "SolutionStage"¹ offers such a "space and time for adventures and solutions". It is a "staging room" to install and try out different versions of "realistic models" for working environments in organisations in a Solution-Focused way. Such "productions on stage" could be test environments for how different versions of strategic products or services will be seen and accepted by clients in future. Such "productions on stage" also could serve to create and test different typical settings of communications (with customers, managers with subordinates, within project teams) or different versions for work processes.

The core entities of these productions are the persons working in the company (not professional actors) acting as different "figures" (i.e. as clients). The figures and stories are not predefined (as it is done in most "role trainings") but are created by the acting persons. During the improvised performance they are supported by a coach as a "stage director". This coaching director is not the "author". He is only responsible for the "performance to go on". The acting persons are, in a Solution-Focused sense, the experts, owners and inventors of the performance and the "libretto".

In this paper I will start with a short description of a possible SolutionStage-application in the area of consultancy to give a first impression how the SolutionStage works.

¹ "SolutionStage" is a registered trade mark

After this I will discuss the principles behind SolutionStage, which are a merger of Moreno's "psychodrama" and "sociodrama" with the principles of Solution Focus.

Then I will describe and comment on a real business case done within an IT service provider with about 2000 employees, how this kind of Solution-Focused scenic work was used to invent and to test out ideas, how future services might fit future customers. And how these steps have been integrated into a workshop for defining and estimating strategic products/services for the future.

A SolutionStage "live experience" for Consultants and Trainer

Imagine you are attending a workshop or training together with other consultants and trainers. And imagine, all these participants are very interested to do a "Staging of Future Service-Solutions" focusing on their own business as consultants and trainers. And I am offering to act as "coaching director" for that. How will this work?

Well, due to the principle: "The acting persons are the experts, owners and inventors of the performance and the libretto" here I can only describe the rough plot offered as a "framework" for the improvised performance:

At the beginning I will offer the following:

I give you the chance to invent and try out some ideas of future service solutions for your own business as consultant, coach or trainer. And I propose to do that with methods releasing your potential for spontaneity and creativity. I will support you as a coach giving you space and time and a few "techniques" to do that. What are you thinking about this offer?

This "contracting" is done to clarify the goal and the over-all method. Sometimes in this "contracting" the goal changes and additional requests get agreed.

After this I will start with the process:

In our imagination the workshop-room now turns into a floor of a "Fare for Modern Management Methods 2010"... there will be a lot of visitors looking for new methods and services and a lot of salesman offering - of course Solution-Focused - methods and services for different kinds of management-work. And, maybe, there will be some reporters from TV or radio stations interviewing some participants of that fare.....

All participants are now invited to "build the scene": How does the room - as part of the "Fare for Modern Management Methods 2010" looks like? Are there different stalls or something else?? Where? Is there a "meeting and refreshment zone"? After these few suggestions all participants are free to create together the scenery.

This first phase is a "warm up" to activate the individual spontaneity and the group cohesion to enable a positive response between all group members. This phase is a smooth way to enter the "wonderland", which is the space and time of the "future perfect", where new ideas and solutions can be found, leaving the limitations and concerns of the "present" behind.

In the next step the different figures and their intentions get staged:

Now I invite each of you to create your "figure" in this "Fare for Modern Management Methods 2010": Maybe you want to be a seller of your services ... or a competitor of a specific seller in the same service area or a visitor ... or a very engaged buyer ... or a reporter...

Please find your place in the room of the fare ... imagine what's around you ... maybe specific equipments for presentations ... or some furniture ... help yourself with the chairs, tables, flipcharts, pinboards to simulate your place ...

I will give you a few minutes to prepare your place in a first version and then I will do very short interviews with each of you to learn more about your "figure".

This step serves to let emerge the different protagonists (sellers) and their antagonists (competitors, buyers, reporters). Doing it also "physically", by building the scene with real objects, makes it much easier to get into the mood of "wonderland" than just to talk about it. And the short interviews are helpful to create the own figure ("enrolment") and to give some inspirations to the other actors.

Now the free improvised "acting on stage" starts and takes about 15 to 20 minutes:

Please, act now in a free improvised way on this "Fare for Modern Management Methods 2010". Depending on the "flow" of the process maybe I will offer some specific "scenic techniques" to support the flow. We will see....

This phase of acting will be full of surprises.... and it cannot be predicted what will happen...

After that "staging of some ideas of future service solutions" all will "jump back to the present" and will share and reflect the offered management methods and services: What are the benefits and chances of the offered methods and services?

If this "staging" would be part of a workshop to create ideas for new methods and services, at this point a longer phase to select the ideas with the best chances and to work them out on a more detailed level would follow.

What's behind that "staging"?

The Backstage of the "SolutionStage"

The "knots" of the organisational "net" in companies are acting persons. Persons with visions, intellectual capabilities, concerns, hopes, emotions, creativity, spontaneity and more or less useful (mis)understandings of others and their context.

How can these persons "act out" their creativity and spontaneity? How can they do that, not only "talking about it", but "live it" in a holistic way? How can they empower their ability to explore so far unthought-of solutions to transform organisations into "learning organisations" in the sense of "rooms for adventures" offering the pos-

sibility to try out how to create and change their individual realities and share them with other persons? (Senge 2001, 22) A "stage for business solutions" might be an answer.

The stage as test-lab

No serious engineer would start running a new manufacturing plant without having sufficiently tested it in a laboratory.

But how do we explore and test alternative ideas for solutions in difficult negotiations or conflicts? How do we design new process flows? Or new services? Do we only think about it in our minds and on the paper or do we explore and test our ideas also in a laboratory-like setting?

The "SolutionStage" is like a lab to exemplary develop and test things like:

- Visions and mission statements
- New ideas for products and services
- Conflict resolutions between individuals or groups
- Communication and presentation e.g. in the selling process
- Ideas for organizational changes

This "SolutionStage" also supports the perception of the organisational and social structure in which we act to liberate ourselves from the before unrecognized limitations and finally get the ability to work productively with these structures and to change them. (Senge 2001, 118)

The stage as a place for reflection

The productions on the "SolutionStage" are more than just funny games, they are and offer space for reflection. This is the intention of "theatre" in terms of Konstantin Stanislavsky (Stanislavsky 1950: p.92):

"If meaning of theatre was only the entertaining sight, perhaps it would not be worth putting so much work into it. But theatre is the art of reflecting life."

To explore the inner reality of the organisation in the context of in its acting individuals, "SolutionStage" can be seen as free space and a kind of laboratory. For example a project leader can experimentally take another position. And in the role play the realities and reciprocal actions of subjective worlds can be experienced and get explored. No one of us can know how another perceives a chair, how it is for someone else to feel anguish. And nobody can know someone's interpretation of the seating arrangements of participants in a negotiation. The only thing we can do, is making these worlds an experience for all involved and to communicate about our perceptions, feelings and presumptions, hoping to expand the "consensual domain" (Maturana

1990: p.22). In order to work on common visions, individuals in organisations need space for interaction and communication to build this consensual domain.

SolutionStage – space for interaction and communication – don't act as a wailing wall or an arena for power games, but has a significant strategic purpose: to explore creative solutions in order to realize the common vision. And it's not about – unlike certain approaches in the therapeutic theatre – the reconstruction and the analytical descent into problems and their causes, but about the direct construction of solutions through future oriented prototypical action.

The roots of "SolutionStage"

SolutionStage as a method has two primary roots: On the one hand Jacob Levy Moreno's ¹ Psychodrama and sociodrama, on the other hand the Solution-Focused approach by Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer ².

Jacob Levy Moreno, founder of psychodrama, sociometrics and group psychotherapy, was born 1889 in Romainia and died in 1974 in Beacon, N.Y. In the early 1920ies in Vienna he developed the "Theatre of Spontaneity" ³ - the root of "psychodrama" and "soziodrama".

In psychodrama *one* protagonist with his or her interpersonal relationships stands in the foreground. In sociodrama, group phenomena, collective relationships and social concerns like "globalisation“, “dealing with workplace bullying“, "reorganisation“, “unemployment“, “racism“, “violence in school” don't get investigated for a single person, but for whole groups of individuals (Schaller 2001: p.107 and Moreno 2001: p.51). With his work about the sociometrics, started during the First World War, Moreno created one of the most important basic principle for the systemic constellations (Moreno 1987: p.20 ff).

Spontaneity and creativity

The most important and closely related terms in Moreno's approach are *spontaneity* and *creativity*. According to Moreno, spontaneity is the appropriate answer to a new situation or the new answer to an old situation (Moreno 1934: p.336). He sees spontaneity as the probably oldest, universal existent, yet least developed force of a human being, often inhibited and discouraged through the socialisation process.

For Moreno, spontaneity and creativity are the driving forces for human progress.

This is his first hypothesis (Moreno 1934).

¹ <http://www.korn.ch/solutionstage/moreno-biographie/index.htm>

² <http://www.brief-therapy.org/people.htm>

³ http://www.vbkoe.org/jakob_levy_moreno__ueberblick.html

His second hypothesis is:

"I trust in people's intentions, in the love and mutual sympathy as powerful, indispensable principles of living within groups."

Thirdly, he proposed the hypothesis of an "extremely dynamic community, basing on these principles". (Moreno 2001, 29)

Psychodrama, in terms of Moreno, is much more than a method of role play. Psychodrama is a holistic system of methods for a scenic design and reflection of personal and social themes in the context of consulting / coaching, training / pedagogy and psychotherapy. It is characterised by a humanistic, resource oriented, trustful and optimistic attitude.

Based on this attitude Moreno has developed his approach. The dimensions of his methods are:

- The philosophical system of time, space, reality and cosmos
- The instruments: Stage, protagonist, director, actors and spectators
- Process structure: Warming up, selecting the protagonist, commission's clarification, setting the scene, acting phase, final phase, sharing, role feedback and process analysis
- His concept of action
- His concept of roles
- The underlying techniques: assumption of roles, statues, constellations, role reversal, duplicating, mirroring

Hunger for action - and the discrepancy between talking and acting

In this article I'd like to highlight the dimension "concept of action", because it discusses the difference between the "visible action" and the – for the setting in the consulting context usual – "talking about action".

Moreno uses the term "action" consciously to mark off from the behaviouristic "behaviour" as an entity of physical, psychical and mental functions in order to deal with life situations. Moreno was especially interested in the capacity of people for goal adequate and creative actions, which he lists in the concepts "spontaneity" and "creativity". According to Moreno, *beings hunger for expression and this "hunger for expression is foremost hunger for action, long before hunger for words"* (Zeintlinger 1996: p.147).

The base for creative performance are according to Moreno "cultural conserves". With that he means what Popper (1998: p.64) defines as "third world of meaning or products of the human mind like myths, theories or inventions" (Zeintlinger 1996: p.170). We all have our subjective constructed ideas regarding these "cultural conserves" in the sense of "mental models" (Senge 2001: p.214). According to Senge, *our mental models not only provoke how we interpret the world, but also how we act*. In our action – and particularly in our action – our mental models, i.e. our personal perspective of the "cultural conserves", become visible for others:

"Even if people not (always) act in accordance with their pronounced theories, nevertheless they act in accordance with their practiced theories"

quotes Senge (2001: p.214) Chris Argyris (1982).

Exactly on this "*discrepancy between verbalized behaviour (like in interviews, free associativity tests, answers to questionnaires and so on) and the behaviour in real life situations, in which verbalized behaviour only plays a secondary role*" Moreno already points at in the year 1941 (Moreno 2001: p.153).

The SolutionStage gives the chance to act authentically instead of publishing the subjective and implicit constructions of the (organisational)-cultural conserves. This supports a common goal oriented action, by talking AND acting coherently.

Catharsis for solutions

Scenic action is closely related to the term "*Catharsis*".

Stefan Meisiek says:

"Until the 4th century BC (in ancient Greece) catharsis was exclusively connected with medicine, and more precisely with ritual acts and feasts...The body was released from sicknesses through the ecstatic forms of ritual dances and feasts. Aristotle (384–322 BC) adopted the notion of catharsis and introduced it into classical theatre theory ... This transfer of the cathartic concept from ritual to drama started a continuing debate on the function of catharsis in theatre." (Meisiek 2004)

And - again following Stefan Meisiek - there are three catharsis-related concepts which are useful to explain the effects of theatre in the context of consultancy and training:

First, according to Aristotle, theatre leads to release from negative affect:

The eliciting of emotions is seen as a means of purifying related bad memories. Theatre is supposed to arouse feelings connected with recognized problems

...thus allowing the audience to relive them passively and, because of their non-real presentation as drama, also to resolve them.

The second concept is Moreno's idea of a creativity-generating catharsis:

By drawing on negative experiences and actively reliving them on stage, participants can develop the creativity needed to find new solutions.

Third, Boal assumes that when an audience actively engages in the play by proposing solutions after an introductory scene has been performed, this serves as a test run for solving problems that are encountered in real life. The test in the play provides the audience with the necessary action motivation to overcome such problems.

Moreno's concept of catharsis bases on this belief:

If a person stages his or her problem, he or she can develop the creativity to find a solution for the problem.

Solution Focus in Moreno's psycho- and sociodrama

Going through the sorrowful problem once again on Moreno's stage doesn't serve the analytical delving into the problem and its possible roots, but it is the starting point for discovering solutions. The technique of the psychodrama (assumption of roles, mirroring, doubling, choir) in connection with other methods like "Forumtheater" by Augusto Boal (1999) and "Playback Theater" by Jonathan Fox (1996), support the solution finding.

Even if the visible action in Moreno's psychodrama originates in the scenic design of the problem, it is Solution-Focused and not analytical. For me, the staging of the problem as the first scene is more an empathic recognition of the problem than a burden. The empathy for the protagonist's problem gives him or her the force to overcome the problem.

For me Moreno is one of the forerunners of the Solution-Focused attitude. Addressed to Sigmund Freud (who he met while he studied medicine in Vienna) he writes:

"Well Dr Freud, I start where you leave off. You meet people in the artificial setting of your office, I meet them on the street and in their home, in their natural surroundings. You analyze their dreams. I try to give them the courage to dream again. I teach the people how to play God." (Moreno 1946: p.5-6 in Blatner 1988: p.19)

The psychodrama's practical application – especially as a therapy method and not in the pedagogical context – sometimes disconnects with Moreno's original claim and got affected by the different "schools". Most of them make the same assumption: "Problems are caused and this cause can be found." Steve de Shazer with his Solution-Focused brief therapy starts with a different question: "How do we construct solutions?" The past only gets focused on, when ideas for solutions – within the imagination of the "day after the miracle" – got developed. In the past we search for "fore-runners of the solution" – de Shazer calls them "exceptions". It's about finding resources in the past to reinforce them and give confidence to achieve the "miracle solution" step by step.

Moreno already wrote in 1939 about this Solution-Focused reflection of the past:

"Working with a psychotic patient one of the first steps is to find out how far he or she was able to create an imaginary reality."

(Moreno 2001: p.118)

In 1940 Moreno wrote:

"In the center of the treatment is the patient, always, and the task of developing the psychodramatic process is, as much as possible, in his hands. The psychiatric director and the staff of auxiliary egos, act as prompters and foil for the patient as he acts out the various roles of his psychosis."

(Moreno 1987: p.69)

"The director must take great care to make no suggestion as to what course of action might be preferable. The therapeutic theatre is not a court, the auxiliary egos who may be present are not jury, and the director is not a judge. Moreover, the therapeutic theatre is not a hospital where the subjects come to show their wounds and have them healed by skilled professionals.

The initiative, the spontaneity, the decision must all arise within the subjects themselves."

(Moreno 1987: p.83)

According to these sentences, the use of the psycho- and sociodrama in a consequent Solution-Focused way is a continuation of his 60 years ago formulated attitude.

Strengthening solutions on emotional and physical level

The consequent Solution-Focused use of the psycho- and sociodrama creates a "SolutionStage" for scenic developments of solutions in personal, factual and relationship questions within the corporate and private setting. This scenic work has a different quality than just pure verbal conversations. In the collection of different methods of the University of Cologne (Reich, Methodenpool), the impact is described with the following (translated by the author):

"In addition to the cognitive level there is the emotional and physical one. In psychodrama perspectives and possibilities for different actions can be emphasised by playing new roles. Spontaneity and creativity get trained. Through the group work the contact with others can be experienced intensely. Trying to involve everyone as much as possible increases the perception of the own person and the own needs... worth mentioning are especially the successes within the social learning. The personality development fosters through training and increment in empathy, role flexibility and distance, the psychological flexibility, liveliness, creativity, the spontaneity and communicative ability.

Mathias Varga von Kibéd described the totality of cognitive, emotional and physiological effects as *Semantic Reactions* in the sense of *Korzybski's* general semantics. And he created the term "*Transverbality* ": Scenic methods are primary fields of application for the concept of transverbality. And also many everyday aspects of human behaviour in groups and communities can in a useful way be regarded as generalised linguistic processes, going *beyond verbal and nonverbal expression*. (von Kibéd 2006, chapter 1)

Business Case: Using "SolutionStage" for developing a strategy in a big IT company

In this case I will show, how some elements of the "SolutionStage" (and not the whole process as I described it in the beginning) can be merged with a typical (given) process for strategic marketing.

Starting point:

A department specialised on data warehousing with 40 people working there, of an IT service provider with over 2000 employees had to define the future service strategy. In this department worked especially IT developers with good knowledge of the market situation (customer needs and competitors). Therefore the service strategy should have developed in a three day workshop with as many employees of this department as possible. This strategy process was part of a whole process of the superior organisational unit.

The department manager expected that the most promising competence areas with the best chances and their customer groups became clear after the workshop. He was conscious that it was crucial for his department to develop a broadly supported strategy for the future services. Together we first developed the approximate frame of the workshop. One presetting was to start with his personal perspective of the division strategy. In this discussion about the workshop design he realised that he has no direct impact on how much of what he says will be understood by his employees. He even wanted to focus on this difference between what he says and what will be understood. This was the icebreaker for his agreement to involve different reflecting and scenic teamwork methods.

Workshop structure:

- *hearing and process of the department manager's input*
- *to map the department's vision*
- to gather the actual service areas
- *to evaluate the actual services from a client perspective*
- to define service areas and client groups
- using this defining the strategic business fields
- define criteria for the strategic positioning of the services for the dimensions "market attractiveness" and "competitiveness"
- to position with these criteria the different services (for today and the expected future)

For the italic printed phases we used scenic tools of the "SolutionStage". Here are the details of these three workshop-phases:

Listen to and process the department manager's input:

The department manager gave his speech in the usual manner about the theme "our vision" (around 20 minutes).

After that everyone (also the department manager) went to the break room next-door. In one corner there was a bar table and a row of chairs in front of it, so that the bar was kind of a stage. Everyone took a seat on those chairs. Then I introduced them to the following imagined situation:

"At this bar – the break room of the office – there are three employees, who haven't been to the department manager's speech. They have a "office-small talk". Another three employees, who have been to the speech join them and get catechised by the others, in order to get every single information the department manager said. And they also give their straightforward comments".

Mapping the department's vision

Then certain things got clarified with the department manager:

- What corresponds to what he wanted to bring across in his speech?
- What is missing / what came across differently? (post-its got amended / corrected)
- What appears in the three, even if he didn't mention it – and is a further important aspect?

Result of it was a "cleaned image of our vision" as tree-metaphor with jointly corrected post-its.

{{The task, to write the heard on post-its in order to create then a tree-image of the vision and the production transformed the silent observers into acting observers. The reflection about it happens while standing and moving (relocate and amende post-its) in front of a big schematic tree, with post-its on it. The whole room became an action stage, and the observers in terms of Boal, "spect-actors" (Boal 1999, p.24) }}

Evaluate today's services from a client perspective

Preceding this phase the departments' today's services got collected and structured with a brainstorming and the results (six flipchart sheets) presented as a display on the walls.

{{The brainstorming wasn't done on the pinboards, but with sheets, which were laid-out on the floor and got pinned on the wall after structuring them. This was kind of a continuation of the "tree-picture"-creation.}}

This phase took place before the lunch, in order to have enough distance for the phase "evaluate today's services from a clients perspective".

After lunch the employees entered the workshop room with those pictures on the wall in the role of different interested customers and beneficiaries of these services. They got into their self defined roles and discussed the offers quite critical. They noted things they liked on green sheets above the flipcharts.

{{This phase corresponded to what has been mentioned in the first section: "A Solution-Stage 'live experience' for Consultants and Trainer".}}

The following working phases

This was the base for the following "conventional" built working phases:

- to define service areas and client groups
- using this defining the strategic business fields
- define criteria for the strategic positioning of the services for the dimensions "market attractiveness" and "competitiveness"
- to position with these criteria the different services (for today and the expected future)

Thanks to this scenic beginning phase there was enough energy and motivation there to deal with the quite top-heavy phases. And everyone was clear that it's about customers, whose perspective got experienced in the simulation.

Together with around 20 participants the expected result could be achieved in this workshop. At the end of the third day the services for each strategic business field regarding market attractiveness and competitiveness (for today and the expected future) was positioned. At the same time the knowledge transfer between the specialists got enhanced.

Conclusion

The "SolutionStage" as a Solution-Focused application of psycho- and sociodrama allows, through the inclusion of physical acting and not only talking people, an increase of the creativity in finding solutions. It makes an important difference, whether that what on the "day after the imagined miracle with which the problem disappeared" is different and better based on a conversation or on a "test stage in wonderland". On the test stage it is experienced through physical acting and the words get experimentally transferred into exemplary actions in different varieties.

The aspect of physical visible and in the physical encounter tactile action enhances the linguistic communication and interaction. It can be used particularly for solution findings in the corporate setting. Especially there it is helpful to break through and enlarge practiced dominant linguistic communication patterns.

This enhancement of the communication and interaction releases creativity, which is essential for example in the development of strategic important products and services. In this article I have introduced a case study about that.

"SolutionStage" as a Solution-Focused scenic work is not a behaviour training and no game with given cases and stories, but a free improvisation. It enables and make easier:

- the use of potential, which stays unexploited by only talking about solutions and get activated within "solution acting"
- the release of additional experiences about everything which works better
- the concrete test, focus and practice of attitudes in which it works better

This Solution-Focused scenic work gets supported by a director as a process supporting coach with the goal that the actor's ideas can develop out of the figures and stories. This corresponds to the Solution-Focused basic principle, which Moreno formulated for the psycho- and sociodrama.

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THE AUTHOR:

Hans-Peter Korn works as mentor, coach and trainer for business & management affairs. He is Chief Manager of KORN AG (Switzerland) and lecturer at different universities in Switzerland and Austria. Starting as scientist (PhD) in nuclear physics he then worked as line- and project-manager for 25 years in power plant engineering, financial industries, air transport industries and software engineering. Becoming fascinated of systemic and Solution-Focused management in theory and practice he started his own business as an OD- and PD-consultant.

contact@korn.ch