

Let's talk about success!

Guidelines and 6 arguments why to talk about successful experiences

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Nothing succeeds like success.

Success in one case is likely to be followed by success in other cases.

Summary:

There are good reasons why we should professionally reflect upon the topic of success. When success is openly talked about, it contributes to ensuring and further developing professional quality. When successful situations are visualized, we can learn from them and use them in future situations. The author has presented guidelines, where in a structured way, teams can positively utilise their successes and build on their knowledge, as a suitable method for success orientated counselling with clients.

Should we complain once again, about the seemingly unlimited ability to yammer which social workers and in general, everyone involved in psychosocial, work seems to possess in an almost unlimited abundance? The answer is a clear no. Independently of what one could complain about – for the best reasons and with the best intentions - it is high time that we focused on resources at hand. We can learn something fundamental, in particular, when we are consciously aware of our own resources, knowledge, abilities and successes and this is especially the case when success is discussed or talked about. In this paper a whole series of good arguments defending this notion is presented along with some guidelines to refer to when discussing success.

"Learning from your mistakes", is certainly a motto that rings true. Far too seldom do we hear that something can be learnt from successful experiences, from things that turned out well or things we were able to manage well at work. Evaluation and self-evaluation are essential components of psychosocial work. By and large this model is presented as an instrument for quality control, which is of great importance in terms of further professional job development. It has been tested, altered and further developed by various teams, in supervision consultations and in continuing education sessions (compare Herwig-Lempp 1993, 1997, 2004). It is a concept that can be applied rather easily and it can be practiced or altered by therapists. It changes one's outlook or a team's outlook in such a way that attention is not placed on the mistakes and failures but rather steered towards successful events and situations that turned out well. Basically, it is simply using

the solution and resource orientated concept that social workers use when working with clients but instead of working with clients, social workers can use it to evaluate themselves professionally.

An invitation to take part in an experiment

I would like to invite you to take part in a little experiment: try to remember a situation which took place last week at work where you were pleased and thought “I did a good job”, where you were successful or others found that you did something very well. This does not have to be something very dramatic or great, rather it should be something casual, perhaps at first something you did not even notice- but now it has occurred to you. I am certain that all of us have numerous smaller or sometimes greater feelings of success on a daily basis, at work; otherwise, I suspect we wouldn't be working there any longer. Here is another tip, take the first situation that occurred to you; imagine it again and jot it down on a piece of paper in 3-4 sentences- or better yet- tell someone about it.

The following are some examples of what teams of professionals working in various fields of social work considered to be examples of successful events:

- *Yesterday, I had a talk with a client, I was very nervous about the session, but it went really well.*
- *The excursion last Friday, which we organized was exceptionally nice.*
- *Last month I finally settled a long-term case that was very difficult.*
- *My boss has recently praised me for my work.*
- *At the last office meeting I finally got up enough nerve to say what I thought.*
- *I was finally able to give Mr. X a quick-witted answer.*
- *Last week I was very well prepared for my session with Mrs. Y.*
- *I led our last team meeting rather well.*

As we can see, successful experience can be summed up in one sentence in most cases.

With a few questions that are listed below in detail, I would like to invite you to take a closer look at an internal dialogue on successful experiences. (It might also be helpful here if you let someone else ask the questions). Give yourself some time before you answer the questions, so your answers are not too short. When you have found an answer, an aspect or a point of view, try to find at least another follow-up question to ask or be asked, such as, “What else?”, “How else?” or “Do you have any other ideas?”.

- What made it a success? To what extent are you satisfied with this situation
- What did you ??? do to ??? contribute to this success? How did you contribute to the good results? - How else?
- What kind of ?? Which? ??? advice would you give a colleague who is in a similar situation? What else should be considered or paid special attention to? How can they prepare themselves? What other tips or advice would you give him/her?
- How did you reward yourself? If you did not reward yourself, let's assume you did, what would you have done to reward yourself?

If you have taken part in this experiment and have answered these questions, then you have already formulated your own ideas about what it is like to talk about (your own) success. Now, you probably have some arguments in favour of this idea on the tip of your tongue.

This “discussing success” has been especially successful when used with teams or small groups, when consulting colleagues or in supervision situations. My arguments are based on my experience in these areas of application. My argumentation is as follows:

The arguments defending the statement: Why should we talk about success?

In view of the examples of successful experiences given above, it has happened that one person or another was a bit hesitant to come up with an example, but that does not mean that a hesitant response is of “lesser value” than what was listed above. Since some people are hesitant to participate, one could perhaps quickly or rashly ask, why do we have to discuss this topic at all? The examples sometimes seem to be meaningless, banal, unimportant or much too self-evident and insignificant to waste words on or to make a fuss over.

1st argument: We are successful at our work- if we want to be aware of them, we have to talk about them.

Karin, when requested to try and remember a situation where she had done a good job, reacted spontaneously with the following statement: “ I cannot think of anything.” After she had listened to the others, she suddenly smiled and said: “ Now I have something to tell.”

When this exercise is done with a large group, there will always be a few who cannot think of something: either nothing occurs to them or more commonly they believe that they cannot come up with an account of success- actually most of them will reject the first thing that they spontaneously come up with as insignificant. An interesting experience regarding this question is a situation where one has been successful, where the person in question is pleased with him/herself and his/her work, in situations where the person in question is aware of his/her own success, and where he/she is consciously aware of it and can appreciate it. The prerequisites for this task are that someone is interested in it and asks about it.

Of course, we really do have successful moments, e.g. minor, major, short-term and far reaching successes, otherwise, we presumably would not work at our jobs any longer – if we found that we could no longer bear to work there or because it has become intolerable for the company (employer) to employ us any longer. In order to be aware of these successes, which are undisputed, we have to be able to speak about them; someone has to ask about them, has to induce us to remember them and to talk about them, someone has to incite us to think and talk about them with his/her curiosity and through listening. Only then can we start to reflect on our successes and evaluate them.

2nd argument: When we talk about our successes, we can learn something from them.

Gisela responded to the question regarding success as follows: Yesterday, we had a play afternoon with the children which was very successful.” What did you do to help make it a success? “ Ah, actually I didn’t do anything special: the weather was so nice that all of the children were somehow in a good mood and so it was a very pleasant afternoon”.

The following is claimed to be an ever-present evaluation problem for social workers:

Success cannot be proven, nobody knows for certain if the situation client X finds him/herself in has improved because of the work the social worker has invested in the client or because of external circumstances that are unrelated to the social workers interventions.. For example, when a youngster with a drug problem considerably reduces his drug consumption or even goes back to school on a regular basis, it still remains unclear whether this is *because of* or *despite of* or indeed *completely dependent* on the time consuming, intensive social pedagogical private consultations. It is assumed that proof of positive effectiveness cannot be given. Interestingly enough, it is true that the mistakes can be identified by the social worker him/herself or by others, with unbelievable clarity and severity. If yesterday's afternoon had not been successful, Gisela could probably, without any difficulty and being very self-critical, recount how she was responsible for the failure.

Only when we begin to reflect on our successes, can we learn something from them. A prerequisite is that we perceive them as successes, that we understand them as our successes, and that we reflect and recognize the way in which we participated and were responsible or shared the responsibility for them. In this way we can obtain information and concepts as to how we must behave when we want to experience successful moments again in a similar situation. As long as Gisela traces the success of the day back to good weather and the children being in a good mood, she had nothing to do with the afternoon and indirectly she devalues herself and in doing so she renounces learning anything from this experience, learning which could be used for future play afternoons.

In order to induce Gisela to think how she participated in the success of the afternoon and to be able to call it a success, the following question, for example, is suitable: "Let's assume that you yourself contributed to the success of the afternoon: In what way did you do this?" If she answers now with, "I was well prepared", "I had slept well and I was in a good mood", or she responded with, "My head was free of other thoughts, I was mentally there for the children and did not have to think about anything else", one could then curiously ask, "What did you do to put yourself in a good mood or what did you do keep your head free of other thoughts". Now Gisela is beginning to realize that she herself had something to do with the success of the afternoon- and now she begins to realize how she can use this information in future.

3rd argument: When we talk about our successes, we can learn something from them

When we talk about our successes someone is listening. And whoever is listening about our success, can learn from it. As it is generally considered a good thing and we gladly learn from mistakes made by others, "I would certainly never do it like that!", so in this manner we can also learn from the success that others have achieved.

This is a decisive argument: we can mutually make use of our knowledge and of our experience. For this reason "Discussing success" is suitable for teams and work groups- e.g. as "success rounds" at the start of a discussion regarding a special case or for supervision. I get new ideas and can learn from my own experiences, as well as learning something from the success of others.

A question that is especially useful for others is: "What advice and tips can you give other colleagues that are in a similar situation?" "What should he/she be thinking of, what

should he/she be considering and taking into account?” Actually, I think that all of the questions can be in the same manner “useful” for those being questioned and those listening. With this formulation, one especially induces the person talking to consider his/her experience again, from a different perspective and it is therefore likely that other aspects will be discovered that might not have been considered before.

4th argument: When we appreciate our success, we can value our work and the work of our colleagues.

“Frank, who have you told about your successful conclusion of this case?” “Nobody, well nobody means my partner.”- “And how did you reward yourself?” “It just made me happy, nothing else.” “Well let’s assume you rewarded yourself, what would you have done?” “I would have gone to the cinema or gone out to a restaurant”.

On courses and in supervision after the “success round” has been completed, (where everyone is asked according the guidelines to share a successful work experience with the group), the question is then asked: “In your opinion, why might it be useful to talk about our successes?” Very often the first answer is: “Because you just feel better when you talk about it.” This shows that: We deem ourselves, our successes, and our work worthy, we feel good about ourselves, we are motivated and we feel enthusiastic about our work and are therefore, able to reinforce these feelings over and over again to benefit our work (previously called: “positive reinforcement”).

The strangest question in the guide to discussing success was found to be the question pertaining to rewards and how the participants felt about getting recognition from others. The most frequent and spontaneous answer to the question: “How did you reward yourself?” was: “The success itself was the reward”. “It is my job, I don’t need a reward for doing it”, or “I am paid to do my job, that’s enough for me.” One of the smaller groups of social workers rewarded themselves with cigarettes- or a coffee break or (when it was a major success) with a book or with an article of clothing or went out to dinner in a restaurant. Here you must not think that I am propagating one *must* reward oneself. However, one can or respectively, could, reward oneself, if one wants to- and in doing so one could in particular deem ones work once again worthy and set it apart as something of value.

For many the following question sounds odd: “Who did you tell about your success?”: why, at all, should we tell someone about our successes? The first person who is usually told is one’s spouse or very close colleagues, sometimes friends are told, however, the entire team is almost never told. (It is remarkable that it is not reported on, when considering that successful cases are essential and imperative components for professional discussions). Bosses or supervisors are almost never told; according to a common opinion found among social workers, they are usually only told, or have to be told, about failures or things that did not work out well. The question still remains as to how superiors can/could appreciate and value the work and achievements of staff members, when they are usually only told about the negative aspects of the work.

5th argument: resource orientation begins with success orientation

The catchword “resource orientation” is used by everyone everywhere and can be found in the majority of concepts. Successful situations can also be considered as resources, in that, situations that have been managed satisfactorily in the past, can serve as a basis for

one who is preparing for similar situations in the future.. Furthermore, this can help to ensure that in future success will be a more likely outcome.

To talk about success is to talk about resources. Moreover, one is dealing here with renewable or even unlimited resources: no one is at a disadvantage when these successful situations are “cannibalized” and “exploited”, they are in other words inexhaustible.

As in systemic therapy and counselling, when talking with clients about “what’s going well”, what shouldn’t change” and “what you are satisfied with” which is standard procedure nowadays, one can also begin systematically to ask: “In what areas is my work successful?”, “Where have I been (once, sometimes, often) successful?” You can follow up these questions with: “How can I transfer this to other areas of my work?”

In this way I can get to know my abilities; for instance: during one-to-one talks I am very good at perceiving the client’s mood and the how he/she is feeling during the therapy- I am not very successful in talks with several persons. Instead of directly concentrating on improving my “ability to work with a group”, I can begin to analyse the skills I have or employ in one-to-one talks, then I can ask myself what are my strengths and in what areas am I competent? Then I can consider how to transfer these skills and strengths to group discussions and talks.

6th argument: Discussing success is a component of quality management

Quality management is gaining more and more significance in the field of social work. Evaluation and self-evaluation is becoming more and more important. Discussing successful achievements is a component of quality management and development and hence is regarded, on one level, as a professional method which can be applied to case consultations with colleagues, empirical evaluations, or concerning qualitative client interviews.

In this respect, the discussion guidelines for reflecting on success that will follow can be applied and understood as an instrument of quality management. Due to its simple and manageable structure, it offers a concept for evaluating work that has been done well and in turn contributes to ensuring the quality of the work in question.

Does this correspond to reality?

It goes without saying of course that there are counter arguments, or reasons why one should not or should not talk too much about one’s success. This indicates that it is possible to overestimate one’s own success (or even make up a successful situation), It is also possible that an assessment of one’s own success does not correspond with what really happened, or when someone talks excessively about his/her successes a person can become arrogant and conceited. This can lead to a person judging him/herself falsely. “We are not bragging”. Social work is one of the few special areas in the service sector where it is frowned upon to display one’s strengths and abilities and to demonstrate frankly and outwardly one’s success.

These above-mentioned reflections may be applicable and for some individuals they may be helpful, as a protective mechanism against lofty overestimation. However, the question remains if one should, in principal, be pessimistic or optimistic. Whereas, the question is probably the wrong one, (which one of the two is more important), since it is

a matter of usefulness: what point of view and attitude is more helpful to us and for our future work.

So, for whom is it the most useful, for example, for those who work in teams and supervision or is it useful only when we discuss our mistakes and failures? What advantages can we derive from abstaining to ensure and remind ourselves of our successes? The approach presented here can only induce one to have a somewhat more realistic view of one's own work and achievements, simply because the successes are also included in this overview.

The guidelines for discussing success: How can we talk about our successes?

The aim of the guidelines concerning how to talk about success (see box... .) is to mediate a simple concept, namely how I can induce the person I am conversing with to talk about his/her work in the context of success and successful intervention, and how to analyse and to recycle this information, for the person talking, myself and others involved.

All of the questions are a device to help trigger a person thinking about his/her successes. This is not mandatory in anyway. Whoever does not want to talk about his/her success does not have to. Being invited to talk is an offer that one can decline (or one might wish to return to later). Strangely enough, it is usually easier for us to accept an invitation than to submit to pressure: the same question becomes unpleasant the moment I have the feeling that I 'ought to' answer it.

Discussion guidelines:

How to assess success in a useful way

Types of questions used to ask about success

- When was the last time you were satisfied with your work?
What pleasant situation have you recently experienced?
In what situation were you successful? Describe other examples.
Tell us briefly about another recent successful experience.
Don't use more than 3-4 sentences.
What factors contributed to your success?

Questions concerning your own contribution

- How did you do it?
- How were you able to be successful?
- What did you contribute?
- Which of your strengths and abilities did you use?
- What did you do to prepare yourself?
... *What else? How else? Anything else? What do you mean by...?*

Questions concerning how to use this experience in future

- How can you use the knowledge you gained from this success again? To what other situations could you transfer this successful situation?
- How could you use the strengths and abilities you have demonstrated in future situations?
- What advice, tips or recommendations could you give to others if they were in a similar situation?
... *What else? How else? Anything else? What do you mean by...?*

Questions concerning self-recognition and receiving recognition from others

- How did you tell others about it- so that they could reward your work – and may be even could learn something from you?
- Who else could you have told?
- How did you reward yourself?
- Let's assume that you would rewarded yourself for this success – how could you do?
... *What else? How else? Anything else? What do you mean by?*

All of these questions are open questions, questions which cannot simply be answered with “yes” or “no” and no alternative answers are provided for you to simply tick off: The question is formulated in the following way, ‘Which of your strengths did you use?’ instead of: “Were you able to use your tremendous amount of knowledge?”). This enables those being questioned to find out on their own the areas of their competency. The questions are constructed in such a way that they limit one from bringing too many

of his/her own ideas into the discussion, however they allow those participating in the talk to remain curious as to what the others have to say.

Questions which begin with let's assume, or what if you had done... are also conducive to further thought: "Let's assume that you had rewarded yourself in some way, what would you have done?", "Let's assume that you had another tip for your colleague who was in a similar situation...", Assuming that you knew what you had to do to succeed, what could it possibly be", these are all tricks which "force" someone to give in and talk about their secrets- they are offers which can make a successful situation as optimally useful as possible.

The same holds true for the follow-up questions: "What else?" and "How else?" that could be formulated as follows: "What else can you think of that contributed to this success?" "Do you have any other tips?" What is astonishing about the question "What else?" is how it fosters the attempts to answer the question with renewed strength: neither the person I am talking to nor I know for certain if another answer will crop up, but experience has shown that the question is just barely asked before the other person begins to answer it (this is somewhat different if I would ask: "Can you think of something else?") (also see Hargens 1998).

Transference how and where

Success is something that we can actually talk about. Perhaps now you feel like trying out these guidelines for discussing success or (some of them) in your work. In the following some situations are presented along with "some suggestions as to how to use them".

In order to practice this method you could begin by you and your colleagues asking each other about their successful experiences. One of you can describe a situation where it went well and where you were pleased with yourself or with the situation. The others are to ask only questions taken from the guidelines: Choose one to three questions from each question block and ask "openly" about: "How else?" "Can you think of anything else?", "Let's assume that you had some advice to give, what would it be?"

Begin team meetings, case reports and supervision with a "success round", everyone has to tell about his/her own personal successful situation from the previous week. First of all it has to be arranged beforehand that everyone may ask a fixed number of follow-up questions, altogether 1-3 questions. Please keep in mind that reporting on one's own success has to be learned; begin with minor successful situations. The strength of the question lies in the structural clarity of the success round. However, if you alter this structure please base your structure on one that everyone can easily adhere to it.

If you would like to practice this (or if you already have experience), you can begin by conversing with clients about success: in one-to-one talks, with couples, with families, in groups, or with adults, youths and children. For all of the above-mentioned groups there are good arguments for talking about success.

The model that has been presented here, shows only a few of the imaginable possibilities, discover some of them yourselves. To conclude, I would like to wish you all the possible success.

The story of a count who became very, very old because he was an excellent connoisseur of life.

He never left his house, without putting a handful of beans in his pocket. He took them with him so he was able to savour more consciously, the beautiful moments in his day. With the beans he could count these beautiful moments more easily.

Every positive little thing that he experienced during the day – for example, a pleasant chat with someone on the street, his wife’s smile, a delicious meal, a fine cigar, a shady place in the midday sun, a glass of good wine, for everything that pleased his senses he took a bean from his jacket pocket on the right side and put it in the pocket of his jacket on the left side. Sometimes he moved two or three beans to the left pocket at the same time.

In the evening he counted the beans that were in his left pocket. The minutes he spend doing this was a celebration for him. So consequently, he was able to see again right before his eyes everything that happened to him during the day that was beautiful and pleasing, and this made him happy. And even on evenings when he only had one bean to count, he found his day successful, and he found that life was worth living.

(source: unfortunately unknown)

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