GWENDA SCHLUNDT BODIEN

CREATING PROGRESS

The progress focused approach: tools for coaches, leaders and teachers

For Aletta & Reinder

I especially thank Coert Visser
for twenty years of extraordinary collaboration

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Introduction

The day before my father turned two, he was put in a Japanese internment camp in Indonesia. He was five years old when he came out. He suffered the cruelties of the camp leaders, the lack of food, sanity, water and medication during his early childhood years, but that didn't stop him from subsequently developing himself and finishing his PHD just before his sixtieth birthday.

My mother grew up in the war in a tiny village in The Netherlands, where strict rules and morals were imposed on every member of the small community. There was no question that, being a girl, she had to learn how to run a household and wasn't allowed to go to college. She did what she was expected to do, but as soon as she could she picked up study after study.

Both my father and my mother imprinted a few strong messages in my sister and me; *always keep on learning* and *be your own person*.

My father's life is extraordinary and ordinary at the same time, and so is the life of my mother. The lives of my father and mother aren't that different from the lives of many other people. Their life stories are both special and normal. Everybody has their own impactful stories to tell. Those stories are personal and different, for sure, but they also are very similar in a way; they are stories of feeling (un)connected, feeling (un)able to deal with your life, feeling (un)free to choose your own path and (not) having a purpose. A narrative of well-being consists of the same three key ingredients for all people: meaning, hope and purpose.

When we tell our stories we use many words. We need those words to make sense of our experiences and together they become coherent stories. In choosing our words we shape our own meaningful stories. We make sense of who we are, and telling these stories helps us create a meaningful life for ourselves.

Words play *such* a big role in our lives. They influence what we think and feel in the moment; an unexpected compliment cheers us up, whilst angry words can spoil our day. Words can have long term consequences; what's being said can lead us to file for divorce, push us to go to war, give us the courage to start a new education or choose a new career path. Unlike many other things in life that we have less control over, we can choose our own words. In doing so we shape our lives, as well as the lives of people around us. What more reason could we possibly need to choose our words carefully? This book is all about that – words that work.

In 1999 I came across the Solution Focused Therapy approach. Back then I worked at as a management consultant. I had done so for about ten years, and I had learned a great deal about how I wanted to work with my clients. I had noticed that my work was most meaningful to me when my role was only small and my clients made tangible progress. The contrast with what the organisation valued was striking; the bigger the project, the more I was appreciated. It was confusing for me. Sure, the size of my lease car and the end-of-year-bonus were pleasant but those things didn't make me any happier. Over the years, instead of becoming more engaged, I became less so. So I started working for myself in December 1999, around the same time as I got to know the Solution Focused Therapy approach (developed by Steve deShazer and Insoo Kim Berg).

A few years earlier I had met Coert Visser, my working partner for 20 years now, and we immersed ourselves in the Solution Focused Therapy approach. We worked in organisations and were not therapists, so not everything we learned from Insoo Kim Berg and Steve deShazer was applicable in our work. We tried to apply the therapeutic approach in a way that fitted an organisational context.

This learning process took many years and resulted in our version of the Solution Focused approach which we used in coaching, training and, later, in management. Between the two of us, we wrote five books about Solution Focused Coaching, Management, HRM and Change in organisations. We developed many new tools, like the four roles model, the seven-step-approach and our micro-approach of leading from behind. The Solution Focused Therapy approach has been a very important source of inspiration for us and many of our interventions today are clearly inspired by their innovative work.

We were never too sure about the name ‘Solution Focused’, because to us it seemed not to be precise enough. ‘Solution Focused’ sounded like a quick and dirty, rushed approach to offer solutions, instead of the slow, patient process of helping someone find his own way forward that it is. Another thing that bugged us was the lack of scientific evidence that the Solution Focused approach actually worked. Given its history this was understandable; the approach was innovative because it advocated inductive therapy and worked with the client’s story, instead of imposing a therapeutic theory on the client. Albeit understandable, we thought it was important to base our approach on scientific evidence and not just anecdotes.

Ever since I was at university, where I studied Human Resource Management in the ‘80s, I have had a deep interest in psychology. It’s fascinating to try and find out which mechanisms apply in our psychological world. Luckily, psychological research has improved a great deal over the last decades and provides us with more and more robust psychological insights. Coert and I studied many psychological theories and thought a lot about what to call our approach. This thought process resulted in our choice for the label Progress Focused Approach, in 2013. We wrote many books about the Progress Focused Approach and this is the first one in English. The ideas in this book are based on psychological research: Dweck’s Mindset research, Deci & Ryan’s Self Determination Theory, Amabile’s Progress Principle, Ericsson’s research into Deliberate Practice and psychological principles such as the negativity bias, the reciprocity principle, the Dunning-Kruger-effect and so on and so forth.

This book contains seven chapters and a checklist. The aim of this book is to give you an overview of progress focused principles and techniques, so that you can decide for yourself if there’s anything useful to you. People sometimes ask me ‘Why would you use psychological science to decide what to say?’ They assume that just ‘being yourself’ and ‘saying it as you feel it’ is authentic, and better than grounding what you say in scientific theories. However, our intuitive responses are not necessarily the most effective responses to have. Saying it as you feel it may come at unforeseen costs.

On top of that: you always use theories whenever you say anything, you’re just not always aware of the theories that underly your words.

Those implicit beliefs and theories determine what you say and how you look at things, so ‘just being yourself’ implies that you constantly use naïve psychology and are not aware of it.

Chapter 1 is a very short one and it basically invites you to engage in a writing exercise. Three situations are presented in that chapter. If you like that sort of thing, you can write down what you would say in each of the situations that are presented. Then, having read the subsequent chapters, you might like to return to the same situations to write down your responses again. It’s an effective way to train yourself and reflect on your progress.

Chapter 2 consists of eight mini-chapters and each one describes a belief underlying the Progress Focused Approach. If you’re interested in the theory and science behind the Progress Focused Approach, this chapter summarises these theories.

Chapter 3 provides twenty progress focused interventions which can be used in many different sorts of conversations, regardless of your role.

Chapter 4 zooms in on the role of coaching. This chapter shows how progress focused coaches conduct coaching conversations in which their clients formulate their own goals and find out what works for them to achieve their goals.

Chapter 5 is about progress focused leading and is useful for managers, parents and for anybody else who can impose certain goals on someone else and expect certain behaviours and results. This chapter is about creating the conditions in which employees, students and children can motivate themselves to achieve the progress they need to achieve.

Chapter 6 is for teachers and trainers who want to facilitate the development of autonomous learners. This chapter offers do’s and don’ts for high quality motivation and a growth mindset in the classroom, as well as checklists to prepare for and reflect on lessons.

Chapter 7 is for those who would like to reflect on their answers in chapter 1, after having read the other chapters.

The book finishes with a checklist summarising Progress Focused interventions and a summary of the four progress focused roles: helping, training, directing and instructing.

All of the dialogues and examples in this book are true examples and real-life cases.

The book is aimed at coaches, leaders, and teachers who are interested in using tools to make meaningful progress in their work.

Gwenda Schlundt Bodien
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1. What would you say?

Please meet Sally, Julia and Mark. Sally is a self-employed coach and she coaches managers and professionals who have work related issues. Julia is a manager in a rehabilitation centre and she is responsible for several Units, such as the Speech Therapy Unit. Mark is a teacher at a secondary school and he teaches English to teenagers. Even though Mark, Sally and Julia work in very different environments, they have one thing in common; they have lots of conversations with other people in which important topics are discussed and addressed.

Sally talks with clients who turn to her for help. Julia talks with coordinators of the several Units she is responsible for and with patients, family members, other managers, her boss. Mark talks with students, parents and colleagues. Most days all three of them conduct crucial conversations.

Sally, the coach, had an unpleasant experience last week. During a session with Jim, one of her clients, she began to develop a suspicion that he might have marital problems. It was not so much what he said, but she just sensed it. Jim had asked for her help in making a career decision. They had spoken five times and up till that point Jim hadn't made a lot of progress. He was still doubtful; stay where he was or move on to something else. Sally felt he was being evasive and indecisive out of fear for the unknown.

She decided to share her intuition with him and told him: 'This is our fifth session together and you keep on repeating the same things to me. You tell me you don't know whether to stay in your current job or move on to do something you find more interesting. You then leave our sessions with a clear idea about what you want to do, but the next time we talk nothing has happened and you're back at square one. I am going to share my intuition with you, if that's okay. I feel that you are being a little evasive and indecisive...might you have a low self-esteem issue…? Might you be afraid to make a choice because you fear you won't succeed…? My intuition also tells me there is something not quite right between you and your wife, so I wonder if there is something wrong in your relationship?' Jim had smiled politely but had clearly closed down. He had cut their session short, indicating he needed some time to think. He'd said he didn't know if he'd be coming back but would let her know.

Suppose you were Sally. What would you have said to Jim? It might be interesting to write down what you think now and read it again when you have finished this book.

Julia, the manager, really struggles with the Speech Therapy team. The coordinator of the team and the individual team members often come to her with their work issues and complain about each other to her. They constantly tell her their workload is too demanding and they ask for more time and more staff when they know there just isn't any budget left. Julia had a team meeting which went badly. The coordinator of the team, Gillian, had yet again asked Julia for a bigger budget and the team members complained they didn't feel heard by Julia.

Julia had told them that they had to treat two new patients as well as the patients that were already scheduled in and that complaining about it wouldn't change the fact that these patients needed their help! She had continued by saying: 'It's been four years now of continuous complaints about the work pressure and you constantly ask for more money, more staff, more means and more time to do the work. I am fed up with it! Please just grow up and get on with your work, instead of putting all your efforts in telling me I don't hear you and making complaints about your colleagues behind their backs!' There was dead silence after this angry outburst and the team had left the room after the meeting, some of them with tears in their eyes. Julia knew she had some damage repair work to do and she went home feeling emotionally drained.

Imagine you had been Julia. What would you have said in this meeting?

The other day, Mark, the teacher, had a bad experience with a few of his thirteen-year-old pupils. He had just closed the class room door and had started to give the kids their test results back, when four boys entered. They were late and not for the first time. Mark said: ‘Oi, go to the school office to get a late slip, all four of you!’ The four boys protested and started to explain why they were late, but Mark didn’t want to have any of it and didn’t listen. He repeated, a little louder this time: ‘I am not interested in your reason for being late, I want you to leave the class room and ask for a late slip. Now, off you go!’

The boys left the class room angrily and it took them a full ten minutes to return with their late slips. This time, a member of staff was accompanying the boys. He said: ‘I just thought I’d come with these lads. Someone accidently locked these boys up in a room during lunch time, so they really couldn’t get out and that’s why they were late’. Chris, one of the four boys, said loudly: ‘Yes, so that’s why we were late, and you didn’t want to listen to us! It’s not fair!’ Mark got very annoyed by the tone in Chris’s voice. He said, sounding very tough: ’It’s not about the reason why you were late, it’s about the way you talked back when I said you had to ask for a late slip! You don’t talk to me that way, do you understand me!’

The staff colleague quickly left, whilst Chris said: ‘What do you mean, keep calm please!’ That was it. Mark looked Chris straight in the eyes and ordered: ‘That’s enough, Chris! Go to the Heads’ office right now!’ Chris left the room, banging the door behind him. The other three boys sat down and half an hour after the lesson had started, they could finally join in. Chris missed out on the entire lesson and the tension between Mark and Chris had only worsened.

Imagine yourself in Mark’s position. What would you have said? How would you have handled the situation?

2. Eight beliefs about progress

For Sally, Julia and Mark, the way their conversations work out has a strong impact on how they experience their work, how they think about their work and how they feel about it. Conversations that go well have a positive impact on their motivation, their thoughts and their feelings about the work they do. These conversations help to make progress in their work. However, conversations that don't go so well have an even stronger negative impact, both on how they feel themselves and on the progress they are able to make with others.

This book is for people like Sally, Julia and Mark. It's for everybody for whom having conversations is important. In this book, you will find many questions and other interventions you can use in your professional conversations with one central goal in mind: to make meaningful progress. These interventions are tools in the progress focused toolbox.

What is TPF

Let's start with a definition of The Progress Focus (TPF). TPF is a practical approach for making meaningful progress, consisting of tools and techniques which are based on psychological theories. It's about what we can say that makes people *believe* it's possible to make progress. It's about what we can say that makes people *want* to make progress. It's about what we can say to help someone *dare* to step out of his comfort zone and learn something new. It's about what we focus on in our conversations so that progress becomes visible and tangible. It's also about all the things we *don't* say in our conversations and all the things we *don't* think and *don't* believe.

TPF is based on several theories that come together in a coherent manner. The theories that underlie TPF are the growth mindset theory, the self-determination theory, the theory of deliberate practice, the theory of the progress principle, the solution focused theory and specific progress related psychological principles and theories. This chapter is an attempt to summarise these theories in the form of eight beliefs about progress. The purpose of the chapter is to provide you with a short and coherent mental representation of TPF.

The eight beliefs are the following:
1. Believing progress is possible has a strong impact on actually improving.
2. Intelligence, personality and capacities can and do change.
3. Deliberate practice underlies expert performance.
4. Autonomous motivation leads to high quality progress.
5. People are resilient and there are many pathways to progress.
6. It is possible to define what meaningful progress entails.
7. Making small meaningful progress is the most powerful motivator.
8. A progress focused interaction enhances meaningful progress.

Each of these beliefs are based on the theories outlined above and these beliefs underly the practical interventions which you will find throughout this book. Many of us have had the experience that we were talking with someone who was using some sort of conversation technique which gave a very artificial flavour to the conversation. If people notice that someone is using techniques, they can start to feel manipulated and even feel they're not taken seriously.

In my view, techniques can turn into something genuine and authentic when you firstly understand and endorse the underlying beliefs and theories and secondly when you know exactly why you ask what you ask and say what you say. That way you can be transparent. To get to that level, it's good to explore what the theories underlying TPF are, what the beliefs entail and to work through those and the theories, so you can get your head around what it is that *you* find useful.

Belief 1. Believing progress is possible has a strong impact on actually improving

What are you good at now which you never would have believed was possible? Maybe a skill which your teachers, your parents or friends told you was beyond your capabilities? Even though it might take some time to come up with an example most people will be able to find one. It could be riding a bike, playing a musical instrument, giving presentations to large groups of people, reading books, learning a foreign language or even doing maths. We've all learned skills that we weren't very good at when we started. Skills we never thought we could achieve.

How did you learn to get better at it? What helped you to get better? When people reflect on these questions and on what helped them, they come up with these sorts of answers:

- I just kept doing it and kept on trying when things got hard.
- I asked for feedback from someone who knew something about what I was trying to learn.
- I experienced small successes, which motivated me to continue.
- I got angry inside and wanted to prove people wrong when they told me I couldn't do it.
- I reflected on my experiences and learnt from them.
- I deepened my knowledge about what I wanted to get better at.
- Someone believed in me and told me I could learn it and get better at it.

The interesting thing about these answers is that they all refer to behaviours that help to improve. They refer to what one does to improve and the process that underlies one's improvements.

So, what is mindset and, more specifically, what is the difference between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset? Carol Dweck introduced these terms in the '90s. She discovered that some people have a fixed mindset about their intellectual abilities and talents, whereas others have a growth mindset. These two different mindsets have consequences for people's behaviour, feelings and performance. Here's how that works.

Fixed Mindset

In a fixed mindset people believe that intelligence is innate and can't be changed. They believe that everybody is born with certain talents and deficits and there's not much anyone can do about it. If you don't have talent or ability, you'd better accept that and focus on something you are already good at. Effort is inconsequential if you don't have the intelligence, talent or ability to perform the task well. Your innate talent puts limits on what you can achieve in a certain domain. If you don't have a talent for managing people for example, you can work on it as hard as you like, but it will never become your strength. Logically, people who believe innate talent puts limits on what one can achieve will tell you it's better to focus on your talents and strengths than it is to focus on improving your weaknesses.

Dweck's research shows the effects of a fixed mindset on performance, feelings and behaviour. For example, in many different experiments she found that children with a fixed mindset:

- Become more and more anxious when performing tasks which gradually become more difficult.
- Start to lie about their performance to protect their self-esteem.
- Admit being willing to cheat the next time to perform better at the task.
- Believe that mistakes and failures are a sign of low capability.
- Believe that effort is useless if you don't have talent.
- Focus on performance goals (grades et cetera) instead of on learning goals (the process of getting better at the task).
- Believe they are not a 'good girl' or 'good boy' if they make a mistake or fail at a task (at a very young age, performing well equates to being a good person and performing badly, a bad person).

How is a fixed mindset created?

How do children develop a fixed mindset? They are not born with it. In fact, there is a natural tendency in humans to master tasks and take on challenges. Children are eager to learn new skills and initially they acquire these skills through play. Children are intrinsically motivated to play and stretch themselves so that they learn new things. Intrinsic motivation is what drives us to search for optimally challenging environments. So, a fixed mindset is not inborn. It turns out that a fixed mindset is created through the child's experiences.

If a child generally learns new things quickly and easily, he doesn't experience there is a link between effort and performance. It doesn't require a lot of effort to get good results, so he might not develop effort beliefs. Effort beliefs are the beliefs that effective effort will make a difference regarding your performance. For this child it takes a long time before he experiences that he needs to work hard to understand something.

At some point though everybody will experience setbacks in their lives. Everybody will have to put some effort in sooner or later. With a fixed mindset the first failure or setback is interpreted as: 'I am not good at it after all. People always said I was so smart and talented, but they must have been wrong all along!'

Self-fulfilling prophecy

When people attribute their failures and difficulties to a lack of intelligence, talent or ability, they don't see the point of putting in more effort. Since intelligence, talents and abilities are innate it's no use trying harder. So, the person gives up, feels anxious, flees from the task, shows a lack of interest and motivation and doesn't overcome his problems. This lack of effort and strategy becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Due to a lack of effort, the person doesn't improve, which strengthens his conviction he is not smart enough or doesn't possess the required talent.

This causes a downward spiral, from a lack of belief that one *can* make progress to a lack of effort and strategy to worsening performance and task avoidance. Children are most vulnerable, but adults can also suffer from fixed mindset beliefs. When adults take intelligence tests and fail, this triggers a fixed mindset in them as it does in kids. When they get labels like 'you're not a maths genius' or 'you're a great manager', this triggers a fixed mindset in them also. When their performance is judged and explained in terms of their personality type, talents or intelligence, this also puts them in a fixed mindset.

Some people think that a fixed mindset implies that you just accept who you are and don't push yourself. They subsequently believe that a fixed mindset is a good way to have a relaxed life. However, that's not the definition of a fixed mindset and neither is it relaxing when you have one. A fixed mindset is defined as 'the belief that intelligence, talents and abilities are innate and can't be changed'. Children with a fixed mindset are far from relaxed. They constantly feel a pressure to show that they are smart and talented, and their years in school are stressful. A fixed mindset further correlates with symptoms of anxiety and depression. A lack of motivation is often fuelled by a fear of failure. So, when children or adults say they find something that is quite difficult 'boring', it could well be driven by a fear to fail. The mindset theory distinguishes a fixed mindset from a growth mindset. What is a growth mindset?

Growth mindset

The growth mindset is defined as the belief that anyone, regardless of where they are now, can improve and that effort, effective strategies, feedback and help are necessary to get better at something.

So, with a growth mindset you believe that what you can achieve depends on how much effort you put in, how effective your learning strategies are and how supportive people in your environment are. You're not focused on innate talents or genes. You also don't think your genes or innate talents have a definitive say in how skilled you can become. People with a growth mindset don't worry about their current intellectual abilities, because they see their intelligence and abilities as something that can be developed.

People with a growth mindset see effort as a normal and necessary part of getting better at something. When they hit a setback or experience failure, they perceive their experience as a sign they should put more effort in, find new strategies and seek help. Therefore, they don't shy away from the activity but engage deeply and process their mistakes. This has positive consequences for their performance, because effective practice leads to improvements. People with a growth mindset feel better whilst working hard at getting better. They don't see effort as a sign of weakness and their self-esteem does not depend on their performance. They enjoy themselves when they work hard to improve themselves and get better. Failure is never an enjoyable experience, but it's not the end of the world either and it's not an indication that you should stop because you're not talented.

Some people assume that having a growth mindset means you frantically want to get better at everything all the time. That assumption puts them off, it all sounds so very tiring! However, having a growth mindset is not the same as putting yourself under pressure to constantly improve at everything you do. We must all make choices in life as to what we want to focus on. Choosing to focus on getting better at writing for example implies you have less time to focus on getting better at playing the piano.

Deep learning, better performance, positive affect

To summarise; people with a growth mindset focus on the process of getting better at something instead of on showing how good they are. People with a growth mindset enjoy learning difficult things more than people with a fixed mindset do, Their learning is deeper and more effective. They perform better, because they put in effective effort and learn from their mistakes. Their self-esteem is maintained, regardless of their performance. A growth mindset is the belief that you can make progress, regardless of where you stand now.

Growth Mindset about your mindset

The good news is; people can change their mindsets. Your mindset is not a stable part of your personality that can't be changed. That would imply you have a fixed mindset about your fixed mindset. People can have a fixed mindset about one activity and a growth mindset about another. People's mindsets can fluctuate depending on what happens and on what's being said to them. For example, if you get told that the speed with which you can solve a difficult puzzle is an indication of your IQ, this is likely to trigger a fixed mindset in you.

We can change mindsets in several ways. Progress focused interventions stimulate a growth mindset in yourself and others, as will be illustrated in the next chapters. Feedback, for example, is a powerful way to stimulate a growth mindset or, conversely, to trigger a fixed mindset in others. Most of us get feedback from a very young age as to what 'sort of person' we are. We are either smart or not so smart, introverted or outgoing, a great artist or not very creative, a language person or a maths person and so on and so forth. The list of possible labels is endless. Those labels come at a cost. Labelling people creates a fixed mindset in them. This brings us to the second belief of TPF: the belief that it's true that intelligence, personality and capacities can and do change.

To summarise:

- A fixed mindset is the belief that intelligence, talent and personality are innate and can't be changed.
- A growth mindset is the belief that everybody, regardless of where they are now, can make progress and that effort, feedback and effective learning strategies are necessary to make progress.
- People with a growth mindset learn better, perform better and feel better whilst doing difficult activities.
- Having a growth mindset is a prerequisite for the willingness to improve and to keep on trying when you experience setbacks.
- Progress focused interventions stimulate a growth mindset in people.
- The first belief of TPF is that believing progress is possible has a strong impact on actually improving.

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