

# ACCOUNTING TECHNICIAN

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# How to create a solutions-focused culture

It only takes a few small changes to start your staff focusing on solutions rather than problems, *Maureen Pound* explains.

There is no quick fix to changing the entire culture of an organisation. However, you can make small changes that will help you escape from the quagmire of drama and problems that weigh people down and into the freer and liberating space occupied by solutions and planning. It's this space that produces action, results and a happier, more effective workplace.

So where do you start and what strategies can you explore and implement straight away?

- **Self-directed learning**

Encourage all staff to think for themselves and work towards their own solutions where possible. Often people become reliant on others giving them the answer so they don't get into the habit of thinking things through themselves.

Let people know that initiative and exploration are valued in the business. Ask them questions such as "What is your ideal outcome?", "What ideas do you have to get the outcome you want?" and "What's the first step you would like to take?"

Make sure you genuinely support them to be more self-directed and that you are not just asking them these questions until they come up with what you perceive to be the right solution.

- **Vision and planning rather than drama and detail**

Have you ever been in a meeting which is taken up with one complaint or excuse after another? People start feeding off the negativity in the room and it becomes quite toxic.

When this happens, it's really difficult for people to tackle problems and find solutions. Recent research indicates that while people are focused on problems and drama their brain releases stress-related compounds like cortisol, and they are unable to problem-solve effectively.

However, if individuals feel supported and respected, and focus on vision and

planning, then the feel-good compound and precursor of adrenaline, dopamine, is more likely to be released. This enables clear thinking and supports problem-solving and action.

So how can you start to get people to focus on vision and planning instead of drama and detail?

1. You can let them know what the expectations and focus of the meeting will be, and that this is a more effective head-space to be in.

Facilitate meetings with questions such as "What would we like to achieve?" and "How would you like it to be?" rather than "So what is the problem?", "Who is responsible?" or "Why?"

2. Make people aware of the Vision and Planning Focus Model pictured below, and remind them that, after becoming aware of a problem and of its importance, the best place to focus on is the vision and planning. When this is clear you can move on to nut out the details that will enable you to take action. Avoid drama and problems.

- **Quality feedback**

It may seem elementary, but the importance of providing specific genuine

positive feedback is often overlooked. "Thanks, John" or "Good work" is often not generous or specific enough, especially in response to someone achieving exceptional results.

"Thanks, John. I really appreciate your contribution to the team. You really supported us to reach the deadline" would be better. A statement such as "Thanks, John, I really appreciate your honesty", even when John has not performed well, is also an example of specific genuine positive feedback.

There is always something to acknowledge people for. Doing so puts them in a state where they are much more receptive to accepting other feedback and working with others towards a solution.

- **Realistic challenges**

A physiotherapist once reminded me of the difference between 'good' pain and 'bad' pain. There is a real difference when you stretch your muscles to keep them supple and healthy and when you overstretch and cause injury.

I like to use this analogy in the workplace. We want to promote the equivalent of good pain and we want to support people to create that for themselves. You want to stretch yourself and others to try new things, and find new solutions and ways of working.

- **Explore alternative solutions**

Encourage people to look at a variety of approaches. You don't have to reinvent the wheel if something is working, but don't fall in the trap of going through the motions and doing things the same way if this is not working well.

The added benefit of encouraging creative thinking is that people get a buzz from coming up with new ideas and are more likely to implement them if they have ownership.

**Vision and Planning Focus Model**





# solutions-focused culture

- Empower others

How can you truly empower others? Trust them to work on their own solutions and be willing to let them fail, safely.

By this I mean that you need to provide some sort of structure which allows people to experiment, make the occasional mistake and learn and grow, without jeopardising the business. This can also save time as it frees managers up to work on their own solutions instead of solving everybody else's and spending too much time putting out spotfires.

Empowered staff are going to become much more independent and solutions-focused if they know that you believe in them and that you trust them to try and find the solution.

- Structure and placement

Make sure there is structure and placement in conversations. Let people know what is required of them and that their input is valued. For example "John, I'd just like to go through the job list with you. This is not an official review, it's just to go through a few ideas together. I'd love to hear your suggestions." This is much more effective than "John, we need to go through the job list."

You can also do this at the beginning of meetings. "In this meeting we are really going to focus on solutions. If it's OK I'd like to show you a great model called the Vision and Planning Focus Model. This will support us if we get off track."

It's not difficult to start implementing strategies to support a solutions-focused

culture. Simply empower yourself and others to work in the vision, planning and solution space. You'll create a happier and more successful workplace in no time. ■

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