

Scaling for Coaches: 10 minutes for performance and learning

by Peter Szabó, MCC

The best opportunities for personal performance improvement usually happen during daily work situations, if these opportunities are used for learning. Solutions-focused scaling questions help to make the most of these learning opportunities in less than 10 minutes. The questions are simple to ask, easy to slip into any professional conversation and they have been proven to work. You can use them on yourself or to facilitate performance and learning for others.

The basics of scaling

Scaling is probably the easiest tool in the Solutions-focused model for immediate application. The most commonly used scales within solutions-focused conversations are the progress scale (see example below) and the confidence scale (on a scale from 0 to 10, how confident are you that you will accomplish the next small step towards your goal?). Of course many other kinds of scales can be invented and utilised: customer service quality scales, motivation scales, core competency scales etc.¹

Example: Progress Scale

"Let's take a scale from 0 to 10. 10 stands for having completely reached your goal and 0 stands for the moment when you first started to think about this goal. Where would you say things are between 0 and 10 right now?"

Scaling questions can serve four major purposes:

1. Giving hope and confidence in what has already been accomplished

Usually answers are above 0 allowing you to focus on the things that already work – even a little bit. Asking "How is your answer different from 0?" is an invitation for solution-talk. Whatever is said in response helps to build confidence and hope about things that have already improved. It helps to focus on the distance already travelled and to better understand the useful activities that made it possible: "how did you do that?"

2. Offering shades of gray

Scaling can help to introduce observable differences between what seems either black or white. Often it is useful to ask: "How is your point on the scale different today from yesterday or how is it different in this project compared to that one?" The invitation is designed to find relevant and influencable differences that really make a difference. Once detected these differences can consciously be used to extend and build on existing solutions.

3. Focusing on small next steps

Whatever the actual position on the scale, a very important move is the next small step upwards. Asking "how will you notice that you have moved up one point on your scale?" is an invitation to focus the attention on observable signs of progress and improvement. Followed by "and what else?" it opens up a range of options and ideas for small and realistic things to do differently.

4. Considering consequences of having reached the goal.

Scales help to define the wanted state. Some people want to reach 10, while for others reaching 7 or 8 is exactly where they want to be. Asking "how will things be different when you have reached your goal on the scale?" uncovers what people will be doing differently then that they are not doing now. The more the described future activities are concretely embedded into the real life situation, the more they can function as signposts for improved performance.

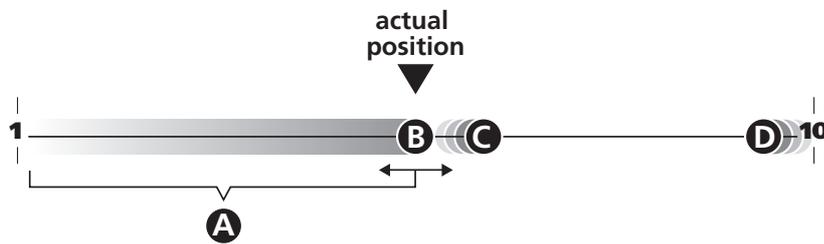
¹ Berg/Szabo 2005: 66

² www.solutionsurfers.com

³ Gallwey 2000:88

⁴ Jackson/McKergow 2002

4 scaling functions



A building confidence

B introducing shades of gray

C focusing small next steps

D considering in consequences of having reached the goal

Seven Principles for solutions-focused scaling

1. Be respectful

Remember to ask for permission if you have no mandate to work on performance and learning. If there is no request for help, do not help. If something works do not fix it. Ask your partner: "what would be helpful to you?"

2. Set a clear learning frame

Create a distinct difference between 'solution-surfing' and the normal 'getting the job done' talk with content discussions, tips and to do lists. Sometimes the mere using of scales creates this difference. Sometimes putting a Skaleboard² on the table, or drawing a scale on the flip-chart is a clear enough visual signal. Do whatever it takes to support your partner shifting from action mode to reflection mode.

3. Go with what is said

Solutions in learning and individual assessments of it are surprisingly subjective. They are most effective when left at that very personal insight level. Bringing in your own view into someone else's reflection mode leads to endless and useless discussions. Remind yourself that you are not asking questions to receive an answer but to provide learning and reflection time for your partner.

4. Appreciate what is there

Phrase your scaling questions in a way to generate information about existing resources and exceptions that already work. Remember that solution talk creates solutions, while talking about deficits and problems makes problems bigger.

5. Look for differences

Absolute figures like scales (or grades) are – as you may remember from school – not so relevant for learning. What really makes a difference is being aware of differences between figures, giving relevant information about what really works.

6. Count to 20

Scaling questions can be unusual and difficult since they introduce a new and different way of thinking. So give your partner enough time for learning reflection. Count to 20 while you are waiting for an answer and when you reach 20, count again.

7. Stop after 10 minutes

No matter how tempting it may be to go on, 10 minutes usually provide more than enough reflection material to be put into action steps. Remember that reflecting on performance is just as strenuous as it is fulfilling.

Performance improvement through learning on the job

Challenges that you are currently facing in your job provide optimal opportunities for improving your own performance – like in a huge 24 hour multimedia sensurround seminar that was just set up for your learning, with unlimited funds for stage setting, brilliant scripts and talented actors. The sequencing of the plot is tailored for the benefit of your best possible improvement. All experiences are directly transferable to make your next project even more successful. Management Coach Timothy Gallwey³ simply asks: "In this seminar called 'your life' are you enrolled as a learner?"

There are three major factors to consider when looking for positive change in your real life/work situation

- the clarity of your vision about what you want to achieve ('future perfect'⁴ at the right end of the scale)
- the extent to which first steps are concretely designed ('small next step')
- and finally the extent of belief that it can be done (valuing all the 'counters' that are present in the left range of the scale)

This is why scaling proves to be so effective. In less than 10 minutes, scaling questions can generate useful perceptions and relevant information necessary to start improvement.

Scaling questions to get you started

1. On a scale from 0 to 10, to what extent do you take advantage of learning opportunities in your job?
 - * What accounts for the difference between your answer and 0?
 - * And what do you do to support this learning?
2. On the same scale, where would you like things to be?
 - * What would you do differently as a consequence of having reached that level?
3. Suppose time goes by and you move one step higher on the same scale, what would tell you that you had accomplished that one small step?

Using Scaling with Teams

Jane is the new leader of a quality management team. She wants to improve the effectiveness of the team meetings she leads and is using scales for on the job learning.

Asking for direct feed forward

Before closing the regular weekly team meeting Jane allows 10 minutes of solutions-focused process reflection:

“On a scale from 0 to 10 how effective have we been as a team in reaching our goals for the meeting?”

Being used to this type of questions Bill answers:

“To me it was a 5. And what made it a 5 was that I appreciated how we clearly and quickly postponed discussion of the 3rd topic since nobody was really prepared.”

The other team members also give their ratings and thoughts. And Jane marks everybody's answer on a large scale drawn on the flip chart. She also writes down helpful contributions.

In less than 10 minutes, Jane accomplished at least three things:

- She made everybody conscious that effectiveness is a learning issue for the team.
- She positively reinforced people and actions that contributed to the effectiveness of the meeting, providing learning about what works.
- She learned about the things that were considered helpful by her team members.

When applying scaling questions with teams it is important not to get stuck in debating figures or looking for agreement about the ratings. The absolute ratings are used only to elicit relevant information about whatever was working in the meeting. It is not important whether an individual team member rates the scale stands at 3 or 9.

Where most of the ratings turn out to be low (eg below 3), it makes sense of course to go with the team flow and spend less time with what DID work and more time with what needs to be learned by the team and how it could get just one point higher on the scale.

Preparing next work/learning steps

At the beginning of the next team meeting Jane posts the flipchart again.

“This is what we said at the end of the last meeting and now I am curious how effective we will be this time. Knowing our agenda for today and knowing how we work together as a team, please give me your guess of what you will say at the end of this meeting about our team effectiveness? And how will you know?”

Jane marks the guessed figures with a different colour on the flipchart. She also writes down information given by each team member about necessary actions and the stated positive consequences of reaching the respective effectiveness level. For example, from Paula's contribution, she notes: 'First discuss what needs to happen with a topic on the agenda → getting to the point faster'.

These five minutes of introduction may prove helpful to

- focus the team members' attention on a learning goal
- create a range of options for useful actions to be taken during the meeting
- elicit a motivating image of how well the meeting could go.

Focusing on what worked

At the end of the meeting Jane takes another 5 minutes for performance assessment:

“Looking at where we were during the last meeting and how we did today: hat has become better on our team effectiveness scale? Where would you say we are now?”

Paula's overall rating at 8 is even higher than her guess of 7. Several times she herself had helped the team to clarify the goal. On the other hand Bill scores at 4, lower than last time. He is disappointed about the length of individual statements and overall discussions. Jane understands his frustration and asks him:

“Any ideas on how we managed not to fall below 4? What did we do today that worked even a little bit to keep statements and discussions no lower than 4?”

Jane might choose to bring up the effectiveness scale again sometime later. Since the team is familiar with this way of working, her next scaling inquiry could be as short as half a minute:

Celebrating moments of excellence

In the middle of a next team meeting all of a sudden Jane senses that the team is buzzing. She asks the team to hold it just for a short moment of effectiveness rating:

“Let's just take a quick round with team effectiveness ratings for these last 5 minutes, how are we doing on a scale from 0 to 10, everybody?”

Usually there is no need to spend time on what the individual ratings mean. A quick round with just a figure stated is all it takes to shift into learning mode and enjoyment.

Of course this inquiry can also be used when things do not seem to go so well. Jane might use it in a not-knowing way to find out, whether she is the only one subjectively suffering an apparent lack of effectiveness. She might also use the question deliberately to remind the team that this unpleasant experience could be used for learning. Again a short shift of awareness is usually more than sufficient to provide learning and potential change – so it is ok to just get back to regular work discussion after the round and maybe do another round later when helpful differences become noticeable.

Using Scaling with Individuals

Jane's boss, Alan, is a natural in scaling using scales in his conversations with simplicity and ease.

So here are some of Alan's favourite applications with individuals.

a) defining the learning goal

In one of the first meetings with Jane, Alan wants to know which learning opportunities are important to her in her new job. She lists several things that she is eager to learn more about. One of these is how to lead effective team meetings because she had suffered with lousy meetings lead by her former boss. To help Jane define her learning goals, Alan asks the following two scaling questions:

"Take a scale from 0 to 10 with 10 standing for the most effective team meetings that could ever be led and 0 standing for the opposite. How high do you want to get with your learning on this scale?"

While Jane's answer is an 8, the figure for the goal may vary from person to person and from learning topic to learning topic. So it makes sense to go with whatever figure is stated.

"What will you be doing at 8 that you are not doing now in your team meetings?"

It is important at this stage to relate the learning goal to realistic actions in the learner's real environment. It was at this point that Jane successfully started to develop some ideas to put into action at the next team meeting. All Alan had to do was to ask an occasional: ***"what else?"*** in order to increase her options for improvement. In Jane's case, Alan had every reason to trust that her ideas were realistic even for the next team meeting. If there had been any doubt he could have wrapped up at the end with: ***"You have clearly defined many things that you would do at 8. So tell me what level on the scale seems***

realistic to you for the next meeting and which things would you do at that level?"

Note that even though Alan is Jane's boss, he lets her define how far SHE wants to get with her learning and which next steps SHE wants to take. So using scales to facilitate learning can be a somewhat different conversation from regular managerial discussions. As manager he typically talks about what needs to be done in order to get results (what do we need to do to get there?) When using his learning scales, he often asks about the consequences of having reached the result (What will you be doing differently after you have reached your goal?). He wants to make progress credible and thus possible before it becomes clear how to get there.

Introducing differences

Next time she sees Alan, Jane brings up her experiences with the last team meeting. Her overall rating of how she did as leader of the meeting is at 6. Alan congratulates her and asks:

"I'd love to know some details, so tell me about two specific moments during the meeting, one where you were clearly above 6 and one where you were not so happy with your performance"

Jane takes some time to think and then comes up with a conflict situation at 3 and a moment that was at ten. Of course Alan is solutions-focused enough to be curious what made the 10 to be a 10. To discover more information about the differences that made a difference to Jane he asks her:

"What exactly did you do at 10 that you did not do at 3?"

The more specific a description of concrete activities, the more options for future steps become available to the learner. And since there is such a huge gap between 3 and 10, Alan could also chunk down and ask Jane how the situation with the 3 would be different after just taking a small step towards 4.

Changing perspective

One way of defining learning is putting more appropriate ideas into ACTION. So in most cases for learning to happen there should be a clearly visible difference observable from the outside. Therefore it is useful to introduce the perception of an outside observer into the scaling questions from time to time. For teams this perspective can be the focus of internal or external customers. In Jane's case it could be her team, or Alan her boss, or her customers in one of her projects.

So continuing the conversation Alan asks Jane:

"What will be the first small sign your most sensitive team member would notice during the next conflict situation that would tell him or her that you have moved from 3 to 4?"

Focusing on the distance travelled

The next encounter between Jane and her boss is a short one. They walk past each other in the middle of a long hallway and both just have one minute to spare. Jane says that she is on her way to a project meeting that she will be leading. With a broad smile on his face Alan points to the two ends of the hallway and says:

"OK Jane, this is a walking scale. That end of the hallway that you come from is 0 meaning the moment when you first started to think about learning how to lead meetings effectively and that end over there that you are heading towards stands for 10.

Where are you right now on your personal progress scale?"

Jane smiles as she walks way past Alan. Continuing almost all the way down the hallway she finally stops and shouts: "This is where I am, Alan!" He quickly checks her total distance travelled and estimates an 8. "Time to move on to new learnings Jane, don't you think!" he replies.

Nine and a half

To move 1/2 point higher on the scale in your own learning, you might want to try some of the ideas here. Most people who have experienced scaling questions find they give more visual and emotional clarity, a sense of precision and a high concentration of thought. Most new practitioners of solutions-focused conversations will appreciate scaling questions since they make it easier to get to the point and to stay with the client's perception.

However, you don't have to believe this! Please find out for yourself and learn more about what is useful about scaling for you. Make sure to regularly ask your conversation partners:

"By the way, how useful is this conversation for you on a scale from 0 to 10? What is useful and how can we make it even more useful for you?"

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