

# Miracle Scaling

*The 'Miracle Question' is well-known in Systemic Constellations Work. Originally popularised by Steve de Shazer, it asks: "Suppose that this work (constellation or coaching session) is perfect for you and this night, when you are sleeping, a miracle happens. What will be different tomorrow morning?" The miracle question is intended to provoke a metaphorical leap in the client's frame of reference from a problem orientation to a solution orientation.*

*In our work as coaches and counsellors engaged with clients on personal and professional issues, we became fascinated by the miracle question. We wondered if there were scales or grades of miracles, and also if it might be useful for the client if their own 'miracle scale' could be clarified and experienced within a constellation. We developed our 'Miracle Scaling' approach just over a year ago as a type of structural constellation which integrates timeline work<sup>1</sup> from Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) with the miracle question from the solution-focused interview by Steve de Shazer and his team at the Brief Therapy Centre<sup>2</sup> in Milwaukee.*

*What particularly fascinates us about solution-focused work is the principle by which problem and solution lie on different levels. As Steve de Shazer states: "One can think about the solution without having to worry too much about the problem."*

We have noticed in our work that it is often helpful in achieving effective client outcomes, to leave the problem alone once it is identified and focus our attention on the solution. According to de Shazer and in our own experience, this helps people become more creative and incisive and enables them to activate all the resources they need to find their 'best' solution. The clients learn through this process that they have an innate knowledge and ability to achieve their objectives. The miracle question is central to this solution-focused approach and clients are encouraged to become aware of what their bodies are feeling and experiencing as they re-focus their attention from the problem to the solution.

We combined the two approaches of NLP time-lines and Miracle Questions in a structural constellation for the following reasons:

- This mix enables the client to walk through the constellation in a more physically involved way than in a discussion as part of a conventional solution-focused interview, and the constellation puts timeline work from NLP in a fuller experiential context.
- By placing the miracle at the end of a scale or at a point along a scale, clients get immediate feedback about one aspect of their relationship with their objective.
- Using a piece of string to represent the time-line gives us the ability to calibrate the resources needed to achieve a resolution, and gives the client

an idea of deadlines and timescales (which can be particularly important in an organisational context).

- The miracle and the scale enable the client to highlight a specific moment in the future when the solution can be expected.

## SOLUTION PATHWAYS

We often dive into rigid, analytical ways of thinking and behaving, believing they will guarantee success. Instead we become trapped by them. To find a solution, we need to leave these ways behind and adopt the Zen attitude of 'beginner's mind' – a metaphor which suggests that the mind of an inexperienced person can often be more open than that of an expert. This has been clear to us as consultants and coaches even beyond our work as constellators.

For example: Some time ago we asked a less experienced person to manage a project rather than the usual expert. He started involving all the participants, saying he wanted to hear from them and they began experimenting together with alternative paths and solutions. The result was that two strategic projects which had been at a standstill for almost a year were unblocked within a couple of weeks. When we cannot find a way to solve a problem, often all we need to do is to explain it to someone who is inexperienced, in order to build the solution ourselves. Our interlocutor – acting as a kind of coach – simply helped us find the way to the solution.

ARTICLE CONTRIBUTORS: MARCO MATERA  
& RICCARDO BENARDON

Moving from the problem level to the solution level implies jumping from one level of awareness to another.

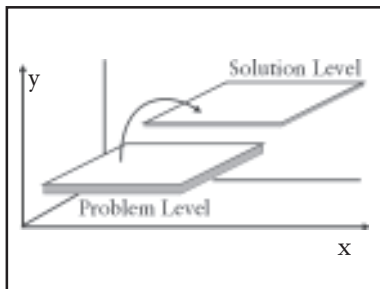


Fig. 1

The solution level offers a different perspective and a different degree of awareness, leaving the client feeling more confident, more aware of their personal resources and more open to different possibilities. All this is represented by axis Y, while axis X represents time.

The question is: how can we help a client move from the problem level to the solution level? And when faced with the solution, how can we help the client explore it in a more embodied – and possibly more transformational way?

Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg use the miracle question within the solution-focused interview in order to help the client change perspective, following an upward path along which s/he follows and re-addresses the problem itself. As part of the solution-focused approach, a scaling exercise is also used in the interview, where the client is asked to describe where s/he feels at this precise moment on a 1 to 10 scale, where 1 represents the problem peak and 10 its highest solution peak.

Looking at the chart (Fig.1) you will notice that the problem level is thicker than the solution level. We believe that this is due to the fact that we are more used to solving problems by analysing them, exploring and separating

them. When working on the problem level we are asked to define the problem, thus creating a frame which becomes filled with all its various aspects. This strengthens our mental image of the problem and activates all the resources needed to describe and analyse it, thus ensuring we remain inside it.

The solution level with its change in perspective is a new approach, not yet consolidated and therefore thinner, with a shorter 'history'. With Miracle Scaling our interest lies in how to give our clients a more powerful sense of their desired solution and help them realise that they have untapped resources which can lead them

The quality leap,  
which represents the  
synthesis of the  
miracle question, lies  
within the question:  
**'If the problem did  
not exist, what would  
be in its place?'**

towards their solution. The miracle question, used in a constellation, activates hidden and unconscious personal resources and these resources are strengthened by experiencing them in the body. It is offered as the culmination of a solution theme and put forward in such a way as to induce us to imagine what would be different in our body if we were to wake up after a night during which the miracle has happened.

Our studies have stemmed precisely from all this. Miracle Scaling is a particular type of structural constellation lasting not more than

5 – 10 minutes, aimed at leading the client along the path towards his or her miracle. The power of this approach lies in having the opportunity to experiment in a physical and immediate way with what is. Because the constellation is so brief and powerful, the client realises that they do not have to have any special expertise in order to move towards their dream or manage their problem and they feel empowered. We find encouragement for this point of view in the Self-Effectiveness Theory of Albert Bandura (2000).

According to Bandura, self-effectiveness is:

*“to be convinced about our abilities to organise and develop the action needed to manage, correctly, the context, in order to get all the objectives fixed.”*

Bandura outlines four basic and inter-related topics that contribute to the success of a solution-focused approach:

**1. Effective management of expertise:** if you increase your consciousness of your successes in difficult situations, and acknowledge that you have already solved similar problems, then you automatically increase your confidence in the resources you have for tackling your current problem.

**2. Modelling:** to model ourselves on (but not copy) a person who can do something well that we find difficult, can be a real support. In a constellation, when we choose a representative for ourselves, we are effectively modelling ourselves on the part of us that is able to reach our goal.

**3. Positive thinking:** The basis of solution-focused work is to observe and understand what is working, as well as to pay attention to existing resources and not to those that are lacking.

**4. Hopefulness:** Hope is more than optimism – it is the ability to open ourselves to the opportunity for achieving solutions. The power of this resource is in the: “suppose that...” phrase that foreshadows the miracle.

**HOW DOES A ‘MIRACLE SCALING’ CONSTELLATION WORK?**

A Miracle Scaling Constellation begins with the facilitator asking, quite simply, “What miracle would you like to happen?” It is important that the facilitator does not give any feedback at this stage. The purpose of the question is to lead the client to a certain insight regarding his or her perception of the solution to the problem. The distinctive feature is that there is no interview and therefore we work ‘blind’.

After naming the miracle, the client is invited to let it come alive by selecting one of several coloured lengths of string. We offer a choice of several different colours and lengths, from which the client chooses, although we offer no feedback on the choice. This coloured string is placed in a line on the floor to represent a 1-10 scale from one end to the other. The client then chooses a representative for his or her miracle and positions



Photo 1

this representative somewhere along the string (Photo 1). After this the client, too, is asked to take a position along the 1-10 scale string in relation to the representative of the miracle<sup>3</sup> (Photo 2).

Here begins the constellation, which draws on the *art* of the constellator – the only instruction being to keep the process as brief as possible, ideally not longer than 5-10 minutes. The choice of such a short time span comes from Victoria Schnabel’s experience. Her ‘espresso’ and ‘cappuccino’ constellations, lasting 2-3 minutes respectively, show how representatives are able to find useful and often truly decisive steps over such a short time-span.

Even though the process is managed freely, depending on the personal style of the constellator, we have highlighted the following considerations for the constellator

Moving from the problem level to the solution level implies jumping from one level of awareness to another

which also represent ‘steps’ in the Miracle Scaling process:

1. How is the client?
2. How does s/he see the miracle?
3. What does s/he feel behind her/him and what does s/he do in order not to collapse?
4. What could be her/his first small step towards the miracle and what meaning would this have in real life?
5. Possibly also, ‘How is the miracle?’

When the constellation ends, it is possible that a brief conversation might ensue, to explore the

question: What else would help the client become aware of the possibility of achieving this miracle? Equally, clients can be left to allow the implications of the work to unfold for themselves.

**REFLECTIONS ON THE ‘MIRACLE SCALING’ APPROACH**

There are three elements in a Miracle Scaling Constellation:

1. The focus, represented by the client in person.
2. The miracle, which represents the client’s desired solution.
3. The string, which represents the scale of and path towards the miracle, which is chosen and placed by the client.

We believe that reducing the time-span and system elements to the barest minimum is an excellent way of grasping the essential aspects of the client’s predicament. The presence of the miracle also makes this type of constellation light, ‘simple’ and more directly meaningful for the client. Miracle Scaling allows us to compress the whole solution-finding process and apply a simple measurement to it, thus giving more power to the solution-focused interview.

Additionally, in developing this form of constellation, we have gathered a lot of information by observing how clients select different pieces of string. For example, using very long or very short strings suggests timescales; miracles placed outside the string are possibly considered by the client as unreachable – because either the client finds the solution too overwhelming or s/he doesn’t have a clear understanding of the solution.

It is the client who brings all the obstacles as well as all the resources necessary to achieve resolution. In

cases where this is not so apparent, we introduce the client to their resources using the ‘cataleptic hand’ technique from structural constellations. This technique involves the constellator relaxing and desensitising his/her hand before placing it into the field of the constellation as a temporary representative. (Photo 3)



Photo 2

In our experience, when clients cannot go on with aspects of their day-to-day life, and cannot move towards more effective solutions, it is often helpful to remind them that they *do* have resources that they’re currently not making use of within the Miracle Scaling constellation; making a physical movement can help the client to realise and draw on forgotten resources. For example, during one consultation a client said, “Having this representative behind me enabled me to become aware of the importance of writing a detailed report. We are all talking about the project but we haven’t written anything yet! Now I am at 8 on the scale, I can feel the power and usefulness of writing such a report and feel that we can do it!”

Special attention must be paid to the setting up of the miracles. We have noticed that when the miracle is authentic and well-positioned, the representative takes on an extremely centred attitude. For those who are familiar with the Values Triangle<sup>4</sup> form of structural constellation, we would say that the representative for the miracle is acting and speaking as a ‘pole’.

As such, this representative would generally not move independently unless requested to do so by the client, does not have special needs, is neutral and speaks for the client’s own good.

When this does not occur (and we have seen several such cases), the image the client would usually have of his or her ‘miracle’ is confused or overshadowed by something else. What you decide to do with the confused or overshadowed element depends on the contract drawn up between the client and the coach, on the personal style of the constellator, on the client’s degree of vulnerability and desire to seek clarity, and on the system being explored. Generally, however, separating the confused aspects of the miracle so that the client sees the true nature of the miracle more clearly is often a decisive step towards a good outcome.

We have also noted how the 5-minute time limit is sometimes not so necessary. Experiments carried out over 25 – 30 constellations included three cases in which the clients in less than a minute, understood the nature of their theme and continued exploration would have taken



Photo 3

energy away rather than have left them with a great insight. Only in one case, with complex overshadowing of the miracle, did the constellation last for more than five minutes.

Because it is so focused and minimal, the Miracle Scaling constellation is effective both as a small demonstration piece and as a tool for personal counselling. We have noted frequently the usefulness of this kind of constellation – it is really amazing to appreciate how rapidly people can access deep personal resources. However, it is very important to remain aware of the degree of vulnerability of the client, when working in this way.

The power of the approach lies in the possibility of experimenting directly with what the nature of the miracle is and with what works in the client’s experience. Not all people have the ability to understand what is working for them, so ensuring clients gain insight about their resourcefulness is an effective guide to using this kind of constellation.

In developing this form of constellation we naturally used it on ourselves as well as with colleagues, before using it in corporate coaching and counselling with clients who need, in that specific moment, to let their own personal resources emerge. The results have usually been very effective – and people leave after short time-spans, filled with enthusiasm and resourcefulness, ready to pursue their objectives.

As one colleague, psychologist Marisa Vecchi said, “I am very grateful to Marco and Riccardo for this integration of NLP, solution-focused work and constellation forms. I have used the Miracle Scaling approach in therapy sessions with clients with very interesting results. I find it is a technique that generates deep insight very quickly.”



Another colleague, businessman Martin Bunger, commented, “Imagine you have thoughts and wishes about things that should be in your future – like we have all the time. Some of them feel warm and cosy, some of them are more factual and cold. Using the Miracle Scale constellation for such a theme suddenly makes it clear what could happen to you if your wish would become reality. It is as though you could jump into an imagined future, anticipate bodily what that could be like and gather a lot of important information about this possibility.”

We are currently continuing to apply, refine and develop this approach and we are pleased to offer it to the international constellations community as another form of structural constellation.

#### Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> In NLP, time-line work involves inviting the client to project an imaginary line in the room, representing a section of time in his or her life (e.g. from birth until the present). The client’s view of themselves in relation to this line – for example, whether they are on it or near it – has implications for the ensuing dialogue with the therapist or consultant.

<sup>2</sup> For further information on the Brief Therapy Centre, founded by Steve De Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg and others, visit: [www.brieftherapycenter.com](http://www.brieftherapycenter.com) [www.thesolutionfocus.uk](http://www.thesolutionfocus.uk)

<sup>3</sup> The miracle is the client’s stated wish ‘outside the problem’; it does not necessarily co-incide with the 10 on the scale (especially within a company, where the scale may represent a much more complex

evolution – even if not longer – of the problem path itself. Miracle Scaling and a few specific questions within the solution-focused interview, aim to make the client leap from one state to another (whether a small or big leap) towards the future in order to bring him closer to ‘his and his only’ solution.

<sup>4</sup> A particular type of structural constellation in which, as well as Focus, the three values of Trust, Structure and Knowledge are constellated.

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