Scaling Techniques

Talks about progress often stay vague: "it is fine" or "not so good". Scaling questions turn these feelings into a simple number that everyone can talk about. They come from solution-focused brief therapy, developed by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg. Today, coaches, managers and teams use them in everyday work. A person places the situation on a scale from 0 to 10, and the number then helps to find strengths and next steps.

1. Where Are We Now?

The basic question is simple: on a scale from 0 to 10, where are you now? First, we define the two ends, for example 0 as the worst situation and 10 as the goal fully reached. There is no wrong answer, because the number belongs to the person. It is not a test score, but a starting point. Even a low number is useful, because it shows where we begin.

Example: a friend who wants to sleep better rates last week's sleep as a 3.

At work: Youssef, a customer service team leader, asks a new team member how confident she feels on difficult calls. She answers with a 4.

2. What Makes It That Number?

The second question looks at what already works: why is it a 4 and not a 2? This may surprise people, who expect to talk about problems. Instead, it helps the person notice their strengths and past successes. These are the things that already lifted them above zero. Knowing them builds confidence and shows what to keep doing.

Example: the friend notices that on her good nights, she turned off her phone early.

At work: Youssef asks why her number is a 4 and not a 2. She says that she knows the products well and that a colleague supports her.

3. One Step Higher

Next comes the step forward: what would one point higher look like? The aim is not to jump from 4 to 10, but to move up one small step. A small step feels possible, so people are more likely to take it. The answer should be concrete and visible. When the person chooses the step, they feel more committed to it.

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Example: for the friend, a 4 means putting the phone away thirty minutes before bed.

At work: the employee decides that a 5 means handling one difficult call this week without help. Youssef agrees to review the call with her afterwards.

4. Tracking Progress

Scaling questions become even more useful when they are repeated over time. Asking the same question every week or two shows whether the number is moving. When it rises, we ask what helped, so we can do more of it. When it falls, the number opens an honest talk without blame. The trend matters more than any single number.

Example: a language learner rates her speaking every month and watches it move from 2 to 6.

At work: over two months, her number moves from 4 to 5 and then to 7. After one busy week it dropped, so Youssef asked why and adjusted her workload.

5. Many Uses at Work

Scaling fits many different situations. Coaches use it to set goals, and managers use it for feedback. Individuals can use it for self-reflection at the end of each week. Teams can use it in quick check-ins about a project. Different numbers are not a problem; they are a good reason to listen to each other.

Example: after a training course, participants rate how ready they feel to use what they learned.

At work: Youssef asks his team to rate the new booking system from 0 to 10. The answers range from 3 to 8, and the discussion shows what needs fixing.

Conclusion

In summary, scaling techniques turn vague feelings into clear numbers that open useful conversations. We ask where we are now, what makes it that number and not lower, and what one step higher would look like. Repeating the question shows progress and keeps the focus on small steps. The number matters less than the conversation it starts. Small steps, taken one at a time, can lead to big changes.

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