

Case

“Creating a Workplace Where We All Wanna Go Every Morning!”

Workplace climate change at Canon FineTech Inc.
Japan

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Abstract:

Solution Focus Consulting Inc. (Japan) was asked to help Canon FineTech Inc. change their workplace climate and become more innovative by encouraging more lively communication among the workers. CFT manufactures printing devices for copying machines and other industrial machines. They have 1600 employees and 5 sites in and outside Japan. They had tried some change work with a problem-focused approach in the previous year but in vain. SFC conducted a four month long SF Workplace Climate Change Project at one of their smaller sites (160 people). The project included surveys, training seminars and follow-up meetings. At the end of the 4 months, the survey showed 60% of the employees noticed positive changes in their workplace communication. After confirming the effect of the project, CFT is now continuing the project using their own resources and with as little help as possible from consultants.

This is not so much a logical thesis to prove a point but rather a simple report about an SF change project which is still on-going. I hope the reader will find something useful for you. Thank you.

How a CEO found SF

Any manufacturing company needs to be innovative in order to survive in this highly competitive and high-speed changing world. Where does this innovative power come from? Mr Soma, the CEO of CFT, gave the answer “lively active communication among workers”, which he thought his company lacked. In 2005, he appointed the Personnel Director, Mr Sano, as chairman of the Workplace Climate Change Committee. Mr Sano first adopted a problem-focused approach which did not bring them the result they wanted. He recalls, “We spent too much time finding and discussing the problems. Then we came to discuss how we wanted to be in the future and the people said all sorts of things. But mostly what we were saying was just the opposite of what’s wrong. Just an automatic response. That only immobilised us. We couldn’t move.”

After experiencing that failure, Mr Soma encountered a book on SF management in April 2006 and thought the method would fit their needs. Then he asked Mr Sano to try again with this new methodology. So Mr Sano came to see the author of the book, Yasuteru Aoki, and his colleague, Ichiro Ogura, and discussed the possibility of an SF way of changing the workplace climate.

The client really was a customer for change

Mr Sano talked about how they had failed before and also about the causes of the problem. According to him, the managers lacked the professional training to be effective managers. So they did not know how to communicate with the workers properly. Mr Sano also mentioned that there were three cultures in the company which had not yet been integrated. CFT has a history of two smaller companies taken over by Canon and all the top management came from Canon Inc. That might have created the atmosphere of “them and us”.

We consultants listened to Mr Sano carefully and told him that although what he was saying might be true, we would not start by trying to fix the problem. Instead we wanted to

start looking for resources and possibilities. Since he had read the SF management book, he understood this immediately. So we decided to do a pilot programme at one of their plants in Fukui, in western Japan. The Fukui Plant had 160 employees and was thought to be the ideal place for a try-out.

Mr Sano was truly a customer for change. He was willing to do anything he could and at the same time he was very cautious in carrying out this project. He knew who to contact first and how to go about it. He called the manager of Fukui Plant, but did not just tell him to do this project. Instead he asked him to read an interesting book that might be of use to him. And later on he suggested that the plant manager take this pilot programme. He was very careful not to give the impression that he was proposing this because the plant manager was not performing well. Instead he gave the impression that because the Fukui plant had already had some success in improving the climate he had chosen it as the most promising place for the success of this new endeavour. Throughout this project, he exhibited this kind of respect for the people, and we noticed that that was one of the important success factors for this project. So the plant manager, Mr Kurachi, agreed to accept the pilot project at his plant.

Pre-intervention preparation

Mr Sano wanted us to train managers first so that they could be the initiators for more lively communication at the workplaces. He expected managers to give more compliments to the workers and also to be resource-oriented rather than deficit-oriented. In Japanese manufacturing industries, the most common practice is “Kaizen”, which makes the managers ask “Why?” at least 5 times whenever a worker does something unsatisfactory. When the relationship is not good, this often turns into blame and resistance on the workers’ part, which is not conducive to good workplace communication. He thought SF communication skills would change that situation.

So a 2-day SF training event was planned for managers at the end of August, followed by a 2¹/₂ hour follow-up meeting every three weeks until December. Mr Sano thought this would not be enough. So we added a one-day SF training event for selected assistant managers so that they could be of help to managers in carrying out the tasks. And in both trainings we asked for volunteers to participate in an SF promoting team which was supposed to act as a regular champion of the project.

Before the training started, the consultants visited the president, Mr Soma, and asked him what kind of workplace climate he wanted. He said he wanted more lively communication among workers and he wanted managers to promote that. But he did not go into any more detail. He seemed to think it was up to the people in the workplace. I had expected him to speak more, but later I came to realise this was his wisdom. When the leader is too active and charismatic, other people tend to be just followers who wait to be told what to do. And this is exactly what they did not want.

A month before the training, we conducted a small written survey about workplace communication to be filled out by the managers. Basically we asked what had been good so far and what they wanted to improve. The result showed that there were some positive changes already and also that the managers were willing to change. We interpreted the data we gathered under a positive light.

We also conducted pre-training group interviews to listen for resources and challenges. In answering the question “What kind of workplace do you want?”, the plant manager, Mr Kurachi, said “I wish that everybody in this plant felt like coming to work every morning instead of dragging themselves forcefully.” This phrase somehow survived among us to be the theme of this project. People started to refer to the project as “the project for creating a workplace where we all wanna go every morning.” The sound of this phrase somehow resonated and gained popularity.

Managers' training

The consultants examined all the information gathered through the surveys and decided that the objectives for the 2-day managers' training were:

- #1 to give a framework and concept for the whole change project
- #2 to let the managers experience more appreciative communication among themselves
- #3 to give SF theory and tools to use in workplace communication, and
- #4 to explore the possibility of an ideal future workplace climate.

To achieve #1 we gave the following theme, explanation and theories

The theme of the whole project was described as “changing what happens between people toward a preferred workplace climate.” It's not about changing an individual. It's about changing *what happens between people*. So the desired result should be achieved from both sides of the communication. The responsibility is a shared one. We indirectly conveyed to them that “You don't have to feel guilty for bad communication because it's always mutual. At the same time nobody can escape from this shared responsibility.”

We also expressed a \$5,000 phrase “workplace climate change” in \$5 small words.

“Workplace climate is made up of everyday small communications such as greeting, exchanging information and the facial expression and emotional tone that go with it, how you write emails and how you put up a note on the bulletin board etc. Workplace climate is not a big unchangeable thing but a collection of all these small things. So if each one of us becomes aware of how we communicate and change it even a little bit, the sum of those little changes will become a climate change.”

Organisational Climate Equation was defined as:

Organisational climate = The quantity of communication x the quality of communication. So “workplace climate change” means increasing the quantity of communication and improving its quality.

To achieve any spontaneous and ecological change in organisations we need to feel safe. This derives from the extent and quality of the interaction with each other. Expressed conversationally “People know me here. I know people here. I’m told about what is happening in this workplace.” Then a feeling of security arises, positive attention is directed toward the environment and appropriate actions follow. When I explained this part to a German friend, she immediately exclaimed, “Oh, this is so Japanese!” I was surprised. Maybe Japanese people are more community-conscious than conscious of being independent.

All these theories and explanations were given only to encourage and motivate people towards more and better communication.

To achieve #2 we did following exercises

- 1 “3 Things I Know About You.” Everybody mingles and tells each other what he knows about the other person. If nothing comes up, ask.
- 2 “Life Talk.” In groups of 3, each person in turn talks about his own life for 15 minutes and the other people just listen.
- 3 “Resource Interview.” In groups of 4, everybody interviews each other about their past positive experiences at work.
- 4 “10 Words Association Game.” The instructor gives one word and everybody writes down 10 words which they associate with the given word. And in groups of 4 people are asked to count the number of words which they have all written down. Usually zero is the expected number, and they discuss what they learn from the result.

- 5 “Reframing”. Looking at your own and other people’s “shortcomings” in a positive or a different perspective.
- 6 “Strengths and Positive Attributes sheet”. Form a big circle. Everybody has a sheet of paper with his name on it and passes it around for people to write what kind of strength they see in that person. At the end the sheet returns to the owner full of compliments.
- 7 “Positive Expectation sheet”. Form a big circle. A sheet of paper with a name on it is passed around for people to write what they expect for that person in the future. The sheet has a leading sentence, “It is 20XX (future) now. The climate change was so successful! I now notice X is doing and I appreciate this very much.” Blank space to be filled in.

To achieve #3 and #4 we did a 90 minute power point presentation and lecture on the SF approach. We also did the following exercises:

- 1 “SF reflecting team”. In groups of 4, everybody gets 12 minutes to be supported by other members for solving their issue using the Reflecting Team format.
- 2 “Future Perfect Skit”. Four people form a group and discuss & write a scenario that illustrates a future perfect scene at the workplace. And each group performs it in front of everybody else.

The training was successful. Mr Sano said, “I’ve never seen so many smiles and heard so much laughter in any managers’ training before.” One manager said, “I felt so relieved when I heard the solution has nothing to do with the problem.”

The managers seemed to enjoy the communication exercises, especially the “Future Perfect Skit”. I was a little bit worried about this exercise because the group included many grey haired Japanese men in their late fifties who were not used to this kind of activity. I had to admit I was wrong. To my surprise, this was the highlight of the training and everybody enjoyed the skit! Six groups of four men

performed different scenes from their daily work. Each skit had two parts. The first one was “before SF” meaning the days before they took SF training, and the second one was “after SF” meaning the days after the training. The “Before SF” part often included a sarcastic short description of the bad communication among themselves. And the managers laughed at it themselves. And then the “after SF” part followed very nicely in a “life after the miracle” tone. So this created a very healthy atmosphere.

Four assignments were given at the end of the training

- 1 Keep an SF journal in a given format;
- 2 Practise giving compliments to colleagues, workers, family and friends;
- 3 Do “Life Talk” at least once with somebody you don’t know well;
- 4 Get to know about the people you work with and keep a “people list” with information.

Follow-up meetings were 2½ hours long. Managers were divided into two groups of twelve. Basically what we did was ask “What’s better?” and “What can be improved?”

Other interventions

Mr Sano thought managers needed assistance from their subordinates in trying to introduce this new idea into the organisation. So they selected 20 assistant managers and gave them a 1-day SF training which basically covered the same content as the managers’ training.

We also asked for volunteers to participate in the Fukui SF team. 11 members volunteered, including senior managers and line workers. The first task for the team was to create a platform for this project, the “Fukui SF Declaration”. In the managers’ training and assistant managers’ training we had them discuss what kind of workplace they wanted and come up with words and phrases that expressed their ideal

workplace climate. Based on these words and phrases the team discussed the direction of this project. The product of that discussion was the Declaration. “Know each other, Vitalise each other, Leap together.”

This was shown and explained to all the managers and assistant managers in the plant and served as the platform of this programme. This phrase was posted on the walls and some people started to put it in the signature part of emails.

Where is the Future Perfect?

So we had a solid platform and we wanted a Future Perfect image. In the follow-up sessions, we tried many forms of Future Perfect questions and we expected the managers to come up with concrete images of a great workplace climate. Maybe some description like “When I have our group meeting XXX speaks up first and clearly states the objective of the meeting,” etc. Then if we could combine those small future perfects together somehow we would have the Future Perfect. That was the idea. But most of the time the answers were more vague like “We will put our efforts in maximising. . .”

So my colleague, Ichiro Ogura, suggested that we show the video of Pike Place Market, which is famous for its book version called “Fish”, and also a documentary video of South West Airlines. I truly appreciated this suggestion because I never thought of using a tool like that. I realised I was being too dogmatic about “the client being the generator”. So we used both of those videos. And the effect was strong. One manager said, “So that kind of thing is possible! It can be real. Why don’t we do it?”

So we had not yet generated a future perfect image of the workplace. But the videos sustained our hope that a better workplace climate was possible. We kept saying “Let us not stop exploring our future perfect image. We will find it.”

Survey at the end of the 4-month intervention

We conducted an outcome survey for the 4-month long SF climate change work in the middle of December. 80% of all the employees at the Fukui Plant answered the following questions as indicated below;

A: Improvement in communication between managers and subordinates:

- | | |
|---|---------|
| 1 Managers are communicating more than before. | YES 64% |
| 2 Managers are making efforts to hear what subordinates want to say. | YES 67% |
| 3 Managers are giving more appreciative messages. | YES 60% |
| 4 Managers now make others feel easy to talk to. | YES 60% |
| 5 Subordinates are feeling less that “It’s no use talking to the boss.” | YES 45% |

B Improvement in people’s communication at your workplace:

- | | |
|--|---------|
| 1 Pleasant greetings have increased. | YES 63% |
| 2 People are communicating more. | YES 61% |
| 3 People know each other better. | YES 62% |
| 4 More people are expressing themselves at meetings. | YES 45% |
| 5 People’s opinions are appreciated more. | YES 47% |

This was good enough for the company to decide they would continue with the project. So Mr Kurachi appointed Mr Oomori as the leader of the SF promoting team for the following year.

New stage with a new team

The original Fukui SF team which was not very active was disbanded and Mr Oomori chose 8 people including himself as members of the new SF promoting team at the beginning

of 2007. CFT and SFC agreed to make a new contract that said “less intervention” from the consultants. So we decided that the SF seminars for line workers should be carried out by the team members. They watched my 2-day training for the assistant managers in February. And we had three meetings after that to create the content of the one-day training for line workers which was simple enough for the team members to give. And 4 trainings were planned for the end of March. These team members had their normal job and this SF team activity was extra work for them. So there was not enough time to train them to speak effectively in front of people. We had to use what was there and not what wasn't.

So here they came up really creatively with many ideas to make the training effective.

- 1 Use of two people acting as clowns before the lecturer comes in to make the atmosphere light and cheerful.
- 2 Team members wore brightly coloured shirts instead of their factory uniforms. This is not usually done in factories, so it made a very different impression on people.
- 3 A mini survey for the workers to fill in what they think about SF Climate Change work. The team members wanted to be ready and know what to expect from the workers.
- 4 Video recording an interview with the CEO to show in the training. In the video Mr Soma made it clear that he recognised the positive change already happening and also that he was going to support this activity fully. This message was such a great encouragement for the team and the other workers at the factory since they usually have very limited access to the CEO.
- 5 Shooting several sequences of video of the Future Perfect Skit to show the point of SF communication and also to show as examples of the skit that the participants were going to create in the training. The process of making the video became an effective learning opportunity for the team members. Discussing which

scenes to choose and making an ideal communication scenario made them reflect on their workplace communication or climate in a future positive orientation. The quality of acting was not refined at all in the video, and there was natural slapstick humour. So it had a very user-friendly effect on the training participants. They laughed at the video and maybe thought, “I can do that and maybe better.” Indeed the questionnaire showed what people liked most in the training was this Future Perfect Skit.

- 6 Shaking hands with the participants as they left the training room after the seminar. All the SF Team members lined up at the exit of the training room and said goodbye to everybody. This added a very friendly impression at the end of a long day.
- 7 Doing a survey after each training and using the feedback in the next training. They really did this well. Every time they did new training they reported something was better than the previous time.

I was so impressed by the change that showed in the team members. These are people who are not at all experienced in doing workshops in which they are supposed to engage the audience in interactional activities. But when they took the responsibility, they used so much of what they already had. There was a leader, but the leadership seemed to be shared by all the members of the team. One member commented “This team is a bunch of great doers. I say something just casually and they immediately add some ideas and make it happen.”

Future Perfect Skit

According to the post training questionnaire, the highlight of the training seemed to be the Future Perfect Skit. Many people commented that after the Future Perfect Skit they began to see what they could expect from this climate change programme.

In my opinion there were three reasons why this activity was well received and well made use of.

- 1 Workers' Autonomy: Workers were not taught but given an opportunity to express themselves about their own future.
- 2 Physical Concreteness: Seeing physical action leaves very little room for misinterpretation. So the message was clearer than written or spoken words.
- 3 Sharing the Future Happiness: Every skit has a happy ending, so it elicits positive feelings like after watching a good guy hero movie. When it is about their own future workplace it also gives them a sense of happiness.

SOL2007

The company saw that their own people could already give SF training to the workers and so made a decision to send two men to SOL 2007 with the consultant in order to further facilitate the process. Mr Oomori and Mr Okudaira, both senior staff engineers and leaders of Fukui SF promoting team, came along with Yasuteru Aoki to Bruges in May 2007 to do a 90 minute presentation on their climate change programme. They don't use English in their daily work, so they had a hard time preparing for the presentation. But their presence itself at the workshop meant far more than what they said verbally.

I was so honoured when I heard that CFT was sending two men with me. I thought this was a great opportunity to energise the people at Fukui plant by letting them see that what they are doing is such a valuable project, worthy of being presented at an international conference.

Their presentation was well received by the audience at the workshop. So when it was over, many people came up to them to shake hands and give compliments. The two leaders were so happy that later on they told me I should bring the SOL conference to Japan in the near future. They also said they want to bring younger staff to the next SOL conference, and possibly their CEO the year after. People became happy and they want to do more of it. Isn't this an ideal SF client!

Editorial Note

The editorial team is introducing a short commentary following each case study. The aim of this is to demonstrate how the case study reflects the SF approach, which may be of particular interest to new practitioners. It also provides an opportunity to highlight insights around SF that arise from the case study.

Relating the case study to SF

This case study is a wonderfully elegant example of the use of SF in a large organisation. This elegance stems from the trust that Yasuteru Aoki and Ichiro Ogura place in the SF process and the refined and nimble simplicity with which they apply that knowledge. It also demonstrates how well SF can be married with other knowledge in organisational development.

From their first encounter with Canon FineTech, Aoki and Ogura use an SF approach. They accept Mr Soma's view when he says that "lively active communication among workers" will create the "innovative power" that he requires. As SF consultants, they are following the client rather than going in to apply their own solution to the client, which is a more common form of consulting. (There is more about the innovative power of communication in the paper on "Networking with an SF Outlook" in this edition of the journal.)

They listen to the problem when Mr. Sano talks about it, but do not focus on it. Accepting the client's wish to talk about the problem as much as they want to and no more is an important recognition of a human need within SF. Even though Mr. Sano was familiar with SF, he still found this to be important.

In this discussion, Mr. Sano brilliantly pinpoints what is different about SF when he says that their previous answers to their problems were simply the "opposite of what's wrong". This is a fundamental distinction between SF and

what is commonly thought of as being focused on solutions. When the on-stage scenery from which we search for a solution is still the problem, the scenery is not likely to change and the solutions that are acted out will be problem-based. As marriage counsellors know, if you look for a spouse who is the opposite of your parent, you are still marrying your parent. This may have been why the video of the Future Perfect Skit was so powerful for employees in the case study; in it the scene had changed completely. Understanding all of this, Aoki and Ogura state that they would not start by trying to fix the problem, but simply look for resources and possibilities, not knowing where the search may lead or where the answers would lie.

Aoki and Ogura use a precise application of the SF principle that “the action is in the interaction” to create a mindset for success by naming the communication project “changing what happens between people toward a preferred workplace climate”. They deliver the idea that responsibility for the climate does not lie wholly within people, but in the shared space to which they contribute. This separates the result from the individual, freeing them to create the new climate without feeling totally liable for its outcome. If the outcome is positive they can share in the success. If negative, they do not feel trapped by personal blame and can share ideas to move it forward. They are well aware however that change does not come through abstract ideas, but through everyday language and actions. As Aoki and Ogura experience, management-speak tends to be vague; the employees made statements like “We will put our efforts into maximising...”. The beauty of SF is that its style of questioning turns the abstract into concrete, practical steps for change. They developed exercises and worked with employees’ ideas to achieve this. All their exercises also had a further SF twist, by focusing on discovering resources and creating positive expectations in practical ways.

Two other factors stand out. Aoki and Ogura had no difficulty with dropping the first Fukui SF team who were not very active. It is important to establish the idea with clients

that finding the preferred future is a set of experiments and that if something doesn't work, we should stop doing it and try something different. This is a brave but important step for SF consultants, whose reputation depends on success. The other difference in consulting is that it is the job of the SF consultant to make themselves redundant as soon as possible, an approach that Aoki and Ogura actively pursued by making a contract for less intervention.

Issues emerging from the case study

When Ogura suggests they bring their own expertise and show management development videos, Aoki describes his realisation that he had been too wedded to the idea of the "client being the generator". The classic notion of the "client as the expert" has been debated on the SOL-L listserv recently.

Michael Hjerth (2009) has written:

The idea of "the client is the expert" ...can lead to absurd consequences like the idea that any view of the world is as valid as another...That is the point of "the map is not the territory"! Some maps fit better than others. If we, after realising that...go on to forget the territory, we are on a slippery slope into ethical problems ...The client is not the expert. But, I'm not the expert either... But I, and my client have much better access to our own experiences than the other. Access, however is not the same thing as mastery. Mastery is something that you perhaps can develop with careful hard work and practice...I have completely stopped using the idea of the client is the expert, for these reasons.

Whither SF in this aspect? This comment frames consulting far more as a partnership in which each party brings their experience and also provides a frame for dealing with ethical problems. Hjerth has provided a nuanced understanding of the client as the expert for further discussion.

Aoki's discussion of charismatic leadership raises another issue: the contribution that SF can make to the area of lead-

ership styles. For example, while charismatic leadership is necessary in certain situations, SF practitioners would be highly conscious of ensuring that employees' resources, such as their accumulated knowledge about the business, are utilised. In addition, SF practitioners would recognise that the need to "blame for success" also becomes more urgent, so that the ripple effects that foster further change by sharing success are generated. A structured examination of leadership styles from the SF viewpoint would be a worthwhile contribution.

Finally, Aoki describes the respect that Mr. Sano shows the plant manager at Fukui by suggesting he takes on the project "because he had already succeeded to some extent in improving the climate", rather than because he was not performing well. It is interesting to wonder from an SF point of view, whether the respect that is shown within Japanese society for others has contributed to its economic success.

Reference

Hjerth, M. (13th September 2009) How to deal with unethical actions of a client. Message posted to SOLUTIONS-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM