Book Reviews

In Pursuit of Elegance: Why The Best Ideas Have Something Missing

Matthew E. May

Review by Paolo Terni

*I*n Pursuit of Elegance is not a book about Solution Focus practice. It is a business book. Yet I believe this book is relevant to SF practitioners because we share with Matthew E. May a common quest: to focus on the essential, do only what works and nothing more. As the author states:

"The full power of elegance is achieved when the maximum impact is exacted with the minimum input." The key is "leaving out the right things". (p. 6)

This concept is very familiar to SF practitioners. Be it coaching, leading workshops or consulting, we strive to do what works, and only what works, leaving what is not necessary behind. We strive to have the maximum impact with the minimum input. It is no accident that the article written by Dr. Mark McKergow to introduce people to SF on the website of the Centre for Solutions Focus at Work has the title: "How to change everything by changing as little as possible" (McKergow, 2008).

The very birth of the SF approach is based on the principle of leaving out the right things. "They [de Shazer, Berg and others] worked inductively by observing individual interviews and simply by paying attention to what was most useful" (De Jong & Berg, 2002, p. 11)— leaving behind what was not useful.

Matthew May focuses on the concept that "not doing can be more powerful than doing" and explores its implication in different fields (from urban planning to art to marketing) where that idea has been put to work. The result is a very engaging and readable book, where each chapter stands on its own, telling one or more stories about elegance. Echoes of Malcolm Gladwell and his writing style pervade the book. The framework of the book is given by the four elements of elegance, according to the author: symmetry, seduction, subtraction and sustainability. It is the collective execution of these four elements that "determines the uncommon simplicity and surprising power" of elegance (p. 24).

The four main chapters are each centred on one of these four elements:

- "Desperately seeking symmetry". The chapter is a refreshing view of self-organization and fractals, illustrated by two main stories. The first story is about the discovery that there are fractal patterns in Pollock's art work and the fact that people have a natural preference for fractal structures; the second story is an interesting and thought-provoking essay on traffic regulation and the work of the Dutch traffic engineer H. Moderman. Simple rules of self-organisation are shown to beat any top-down system in handling traffic flows — e.g., in some towns "average speed, wait times and accidents have all been cut nearly in half" (p. 57) by removing signals and traffic lights. By removing the illusion of safety and control, engagement and awareness rise. I am sure this concept resonates with many SF practitioners.
- "Seduced by nothing" is a chapter dedicated to the power of ambiguity and uncertainty in seducing us. From Leonardo Da Vinci's Mona Lisa, painted using the "sfumato" technique (without having distinct edges and lines), to the iPhone (no keypad) the examples are many. The conversation then shifts to a more psychological angle: Loewenstein's "information gap theory"

is introduced. Again, this is something of great interest to SF practitioners. For example, here is how the author summarises the research by Soman and Menon: "the best way to stimulate interest is to do three things, consistent with Loewentsein's theory. The first is to arouse curiosity by demonstrating a moderate gap in the observer's knowledge. Second, provide just enough information to make them want to resolve their curiosity. Third, give them time to try to resolve curiosity on their own" (p. 89). This can be seen as a reformulation of what we do in SF practice: we elicit a preferred future, therefore implicitly showing a gap in the clients' situation. By asking clients to find exceptions, enough information is generated to make them confident they can get to where they want to be; last but not least, clients are the ones coming up with solutions, not the SF practitioners. We let clients solve their problems on their own. The author then talks in length, with plenty of demonstrations, about the importance of violating expectations to engage curiosity and foster creative solution-building.

- "Laws of subtraction" is a chapter that is all about the power of "less is more". From In-N-Out Burger to the training regimen of Lance Armstrong; from auto parts manufacturers to the concept of "Not So Big Houses", the chapter is an engaging and fast ride into the world of success by subtracting something from a well-established way of doing things. This is perhaps the best chapter of the book, unencumbered by attempts by the author to make the story fit his framework.

- "On sustainable solutions". Despite the chapter's title, the main point is to bring the reader's attention to two enemies of elegance: the tendency to act right away and the tendency to add something when we are challenged with a problem. As the author concludes: "if we can stop, look and think long enough to ask the right questions and fight our natural tendency to arrive at an immediate answer, we will find ourselves in a better

position to see elegant solutions" (p. 174). Some of the ideas presented in this chapter directly go against what we do in SF practice: for example, the author argues against settling for the "good enough" solution and instead suggests that we keep looking for the best way to solve the problem. Some of the ideas found in this chapter, on the other hand, resonate with SF practice: the ability to see each case as unique (as stated in the SIMPLE model of Mark McKergow and Paul Jackson), and the ability to observe and think things through (our trademark questions: "what would you do differently?"). So, what to make of this chapter? Taking a hint from the "Information Gap Theory" mentioned above, I leave you to the book and to your own ingenuity to solve this perceived ambiguity!

Overall, the book is well written and a pleasure to read. The premise, the power of doing less, is very interesting. The stories told are very captivating, teach valuable lessons and are very informative as they lead the reader to very counter-intuitive conclusions.

The thing I wish the author had done differently is to have refrained from imposing an overall recipe for "elegance". The full power and meaning of the stories told by the author would have been better appreciated if they were not then used as arguments in support of the presence of one of the four ingredients May finds necessary for elegant solutions to happen. For example, the story about traffic flows is very interesting; however, using that story as evidence of self-organisation and therefore of symmetry seems kind of a stretch, or at least very arbitrary. Had the author followed his own advice of doing less by leaving out an organising framework for understanding the phenomenon of elegance, the book would have been even better!

The book explores the idea of elegance as something that is achieved by getting rid of what is not necessary. In a way, SF is elegant because it is a practice that got rid of what is not necessary to achieve change. We do not add solutions.

This is what the author calls "the law of subtraction". Instead, we help clients observe and think. We do not provide clients with reassuring prescriptions, instead we help them engage their own realities. The solution is co-constructed in the inter-action between SF practitioner and client (the law of "symmetry"). We do our best to engage the curiosity and creativity of the client (the law of "seduction"): we invite them to think about a Miracle; we surprise clients because we do not offer advice – instead we treat each case as unique. Last but not least, the solutions that clients come up with are sustainable because they are based on what clients are already doing (the law of "sustainability"). These points, and other points that are distinctive features of SF, can be found in the case stories told by Matthew E. May.

We definitely share with the author a fundamental attitude: doing more by doing less and leaving as small a footprint as possible. As Peter Szabo (2009) elegantly put it: "the coach is merely a witness on the way" (p. 26).

References

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McKergow, M. W. (2008). *Solutions Focus: How to change everything by changing as little as possible*. Retrieved from http://www.sfwork.com/jsp/index.jsp?lnk=6d7

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