

Case

Wow! A Japanese Bank Adopted SF
How we use SF in problem focused teams

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Abstract

In Japanese banks the problem focus is much more common than a solution focus. People often seem surprised when I report that SF works really well in banks. Some say, "Oh, it's like magic! "How did you succeed in making such a rigid organisation adopt SF?" or ask, "What kind of changes were actually achieved?" or "What kind of techniques did you use?" I would like to answer these questions by elaborating on two cases in which SF helped to develop high-achieving teams. Before reporting these cases I present the framework and follow-up of my SF training and the synergy effect in a team.

SF framework in my training

The SF framework that I use in my trainings is based on Mark McKergow's 6 SF tools: Platform, Future Perfect, Scale, Counters, Affirm and Small Actions. I introduce 10 SF steps to building SF teams:

1. Take a look at present situation
2. Build a Platform
3. Future Perfect
4. Gap/Problem
5. Turning the problem into Objectives
6. Finding Resources
7. Rough Steps for Future Perfect by using resources

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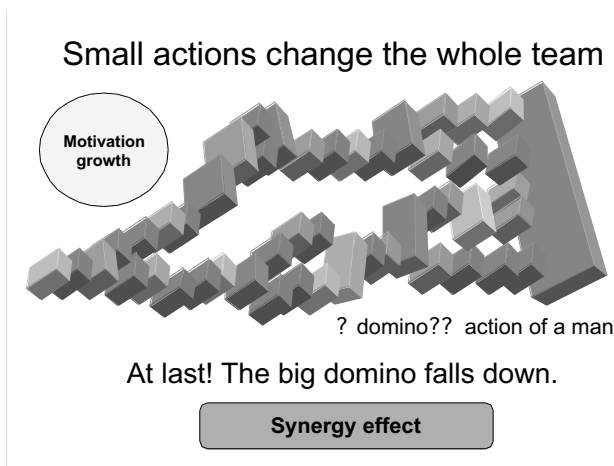
8. Small Targets
9. Small Steps
10. Small Actions.

Throughout these steps, appreciation and compliments are given.

I follow this framework in all my lectures and exercises. After the training, the trainees can use these 10 SF steps in their team or organisation and apply them to design change in their teams and organisations.

When the training is completed, each trainee makes a “branch managing strategy sheet” following the above framework. Items on this sheet are: strengths & resources, vision (wishes & future perfect), objectives (tasks to realise the vision), strategy (rough description of the next steps), goals, targets & steps, plan and appreciative messages from the manager. I also encourage them to prepare and share wholehearted compliments with their subordinates. Three months later we meet again to discuss the small actions they have taken and share the successes.

Synergy effect in a team



The synergy effect in a team is like a domino game. One small domino cannot topple a big domino. But when several small dominos hit a larger one, it will fall down. Likewise, when SF is used in a team, one small action leads to the next one ... and then the next ... and the next. The synergy effect in the team will promote mutual positive influence, higher motivation, human development and stronger trust among employees. I have experienced this phenomenon many times myself. So my hope is that other managers can experience this magic too.

Case 1: Mrs. Hidaka's success case

Mrs. Hidaka is the branch manager at the Saga Kyoei Bank Ltd., the local bank in Japan. Her team consists of 10 people. She made a “low-energy and low-performance” branch into a lively high-achieving team in only 2 months using the 10 steps of SF work.

1. The situation prior to the training

Many customers came to the windows but the tellers were too busy to do sales activities. During meetings only the manager took the floor, telling the staff members what they should do. The staff consisted of obedient people, but they achieved little and felt little satisfaction in their work. Mrs. Hidaka wondered how she could create a workplace where her employees achieved a high level of efficacy and satisfaction. During the training she became convinced that SF could help her out. After the training she carefully composed her “branch managing strategy sheet”.

Mrs. Hidaka's Branch Managing Strategy sheet

Vision

She first developed her vision: “We will have a strong sense of achievement and be proud of our realisations.” She also thought of a slogan to describe this vision: “Positive & Cheerful”. She communicated this vision and slogan to the staff members with enthusiasm. She saw to it that they would

develop a concrete image of the branch when it embodied the vision and the slogan. For example:

“Every day clients are queuing for advice.”

“Our staff members advise clients in a friendly and kindly way.”

“Clients thank our staff for their good advice.”

“Staff members come up with many ideas and suggestions.”

Objectives

She then announced two major tasks, which will help them to realise this vision: 1. Pretend you are in the clients’ shoes and do whatever it takes to please them. 2. Stimulate one another to reach a high level of performance.

Strength & Resources

Eager to encourage her employees, she recited the resources of the branch: 1. We make very few handling mistakes even though there are many window customers. 2. We are facing a main street and there is a large parking lot next door, which is convenient for many customers. 3. We greet our customers in a cheerful and energetic way. 4. Everybody has good intentions and listens and accepts the manager’s direction and advice. 5. The lobby is spacious and comfortable.

Strategy

In my training I ask managers not to “tell” the staff members what to do, but rather to communicate their action plan as a declaration of their own intentions. Mrs. Hidaka vowed to realise the following strategy. She said: “I vow that, by listening well, I will create a workable system that will help you to give the most relevant information to our customers. Furthermore, I vow that I will create an environment for all of you in which you will be able to set your own goals, make plans and manage yourself. And finally, I vow that I will

help to build a team in which all of you are able to cooperate and achieve our shared goals.”

Goals

The goals were not expressed in productivity outcome but rather as the preferred level of competency of each member. Given the fact that the sales objectives had already been achieved, setting these again could have de-motivated the staff members. Therefore, Mrs. Hidaka presented the members with the following goals:

1. Knowing all the characteristics of the products and services so that we can answer all sorts of questions from the customers.
2. By developing our communication, listening, and sales skills, becoming confident that what we offer to the customer is valuable.

Small steps

They decided to take the following steps:

1. All staff members will help to clean the spacious lobby to attract the customers.
2. We will improve our service.
3. We will study products, the economic situation, stock quotations, etc.
4. We will improve our sales skills by using role-plays in order that beginners can sell the products.
5. The manager or older team members will demonstrate their sales skills to beginners while serving customers together.

Compliments

Finally Mrs. Hidaka prepared her “Compliments from the Manager”. In front of all the other staff members, she gives a

compliment to every employee. For example, to Mr. A, sub-manager and administrative leader, she said, "Mr. A, I truly appreciate that you train younger staff members with so much detailed care. Please continue this good communication with the employees. You also take great care in greeting the visitors. I want to make our tellers the best in Japan in greeting our customers with a beautiful smile. Therefore, the first thing that needs to be done is to enhance the employee satisfaction so that they can, in their turn, ensure customer satisfaction. So Mr. A, let us create a fantastic branch for our customers!" To a trainee saleswoman she said, "You are doing very well for a beginner! I know it's hard for a woman to do sales activities. Even though you may not succeed right away, I am sure that opportunities will knock on your door in due course. Go slowly if you want to go fast. Please engage in as much conversation with the customers as possible. Keep in mind that every instance of small talk with a customer might contain a treasure."

Assigning suitable roles

Mrs. Hidaka saw to it that everybody's resources would be utilised in their respective role. An employee who was good at facilitating groups became the meeting leader. Somebody else who was good at greeting customers became the greeting leader. A very tidy person became the decoration leader. A seasoned teller became the consulting leader. The role of mentoring leader was given to an experienced sales person.

Small actions

Mrs. Hidaka expected that the staff members would not speak freely if she facilitated the discussion on the actions each of them would undertake. After demonstrating a facilitation method she had learned during the training, she left the meeting room. The staff members discussed the actions that each of them would undertake.

As they achieved their goals, their confidence rose and they moved on to take more actions.

Three typical examples:

A novice teller sold an investment trust on her first day behind the window. She said, "I just did as we learned in the role play yesterday!" The manager and the team congratulated her. And that positive energy carried on to other activities.

An employee from the sales department decided to attend the funeral of a customer's family member. Normally this happened only in the case of important clients. This time, an exception was made. The sales person presented his condolences to the family, with no intention of talking business at this point. The family appreciated this gesture and contacted him later to consult on some financial issues. He managed to sell them two important products.

Everybody joined in cleaning and decorating the spacious lobby. The customers noticed it and started giving positive comments from the very next day. All the staff members joined in celebrating this small success. Both the staff members and the customers felt very comfortable in this clean and beautifully decorated environment. As a result, the staff's motivation increased.

Results

The following results occurred within 3 months of the training.

- Staff members took the initiative to set up improvement meetings. This led to a continuous flow of new initiatives.
- They enjoyed the sales role-plays.
- Even though the number of customers increased, the staff members really started to enjoy the sales conversations. They improved their skills visibly.
- The lobby and sales booths were much cleaner than before. Customers were greeted individually.
- Senior staff members had learned so much by teaching the younger ones. Everybody had found the joy of learning by participating in the study groups.

- The staff members became eager to finish the job earlier so that they could start the study group on time.
- There was a general increase in the level of satisfaction and the sense of achievement.
- The success of the branch was truly remarkable. Starting from the 31st position, they ranked 5th after this project.

Mrs. Hidaka reported, “When I took the SF training, I thought this was exactly what I was looking for! I felt a lot of trust in my employees and tried to communicate as much as possible with each of them.” Her staff members gave the following feedback: “We want to keep this manager forever.” “We have very good relations in our team now.” “The manager works with us.” “I get so much job satisfaction now.” “We have hard times, but I enjoy every day.”

Elements of her success

1. Mrs. Hidaka’s enthusiasm. She did not act like a typical Japanese bank manager who mostly works hard to achieve the goals set by a head office.
2. Assigning a leadership role to every team member according to their own resources. She showed a good example of brain storming in an SF way: the staff members came up with many ideas and implemented them.
3. Acknowledging what was already working well and appreciating all initiatives of the team members.
4. All employees started giving compliments after each successful small action. Both the appreciation and the successes inspired others to take action. This led to a series of successes in a very short period of time. What followed was a synergy effect of small actions.

Case 2: Mr. Jo's success case

The second case I would like to present is Mr. Jo's success case as the branch manager of the Yamaguchi Bank Ltd. His branch consists of 16 young employees.

The situation before the training

Situated in an ageing community and being very accessible, Mr. Jo's branch mainly attracted an older clientele, even though they had their accounts in other branches of the same bank. As the tellers were too busy attending to these clients, they had little time to engage in sales activities. This, in combination with the 2007 financial crisis, made it hard for them to achieve their sales goals. After following my training, Mr. Jo was able to shift his focus from gaps towards resources and discovered plenty of them in his branch.

"Branch Managing Strategy" sheet announcement

He drew a clear picture of a future perfect and shared it with his staff members. He said, "Let's focus on our strengths and try to achieve targets which are feasible in a short period of time. This will build our confidence. It is better to take small steps and build further on them, rather than wanting everything at once." They chose the following slogan: "Together, positively, joyfully, actively". Their aim was to create a workplace where everybody would enjoy themselves and feel united in accomplishing the goals. They wanted to build a good rapport with the customers to enable them to enjoy their warm-hearted services. Finally, they hoped that their professional dedication would allow them to grow as human beings.

Compliments from the Manager

Then the manager complimented on what he appreciated in each of his employees. Here are a few examples. To a sub-manager he said, "You play a very important and central role

both in promoting the projects and as an advisor. I really appreciate this. Let's share the burden and move forward together." To a group manager of a customer service section he said, "Your colleagues appreciate that you have a respectful attitude towards our customers. They also value that you keep a close eye on your subordinates' work and that you support them really well. Please keep on doing what you do." A receptionist was praised as follows, "I am so impressed that so many customers look forward to having a chat with you when they come to our bank! Your smile is so attractive. You are the face of our branch!"

Objectives

The team set up a meeting to discuss how they would realise their future perfect. They decided to work on the following themes:

1. Finding out how to deal with busy days.
2. Supporting each other by focusing on each other's strengths.
3. Training ourselves and becoming more confident in our products and services.
4. Finding information on real estate in order to invite enterprises to the industry zone.
5. Finding out what senior citizens' needs are in order to attract more clients.
6. Making sure that our customers feel welcome to encourage them to visit the bank more often.
7. Sharing all the information and work as a team.
8. Making the effort to stick to the goals and achieve them.

"What's Great about Our Colleagues Sheet"

Before putting these ideas into action, the team set up an event in order to improve their mutual interactions and discover each other's resources. For that purpose, Mr. Jo used "What's Great about Our Colleagues Sheets" (WGOC

sheets). Each sheet consisted of the colleagues' names and 20 blank columns. Every team member was asked to find out each other's strengths and resources and to write them down on the sheet. Mr. Jo brought the compliments together and posted them on the office wall. The employees enjoyed reading these lists and started to discuss who wrote what about them. This activity also helped two conflicting colleagues to be reconciled.

Cultivating resources and taking small steps

Instead of asking them to work on their weaknesses, the manager wanted the staff members to cultivate their resources. The manager used to expect his employees to be at the top of the rankings. Now he is more realistic and moderate in what he demands from his team: the average of the district is good enough. Moreover, he no longer demanded scooping a large corporate client. Instead, he focused on bringing in new accounts from companies in the neighbourhood. This appeared much more feasible and in 3 months the team attracted three new clients. Finally, they also started a "Success Share" meeting. The aim was to create opportunities for every staff member to share a success story, not only from the work context, but also from the private sphere. For example, a colleague shared a story of his wooing a girl and getting engaged. The other staff members blessed him. The manager expects this initiative to bring a sense of enjoyment in their work.

Results

These are examples of what they achieved in only 3 months!

1. Attaining the first and second rank in the monthly district sales campaigns.
2. They attracted three new corporate clients, which they held to be impossible before.
3. The "WGaOC" sheet event opened up friendly commu-

nications among the staff members and they started to learn from each others' strengths.

4. Study groups and experiences of the "Success Share" meetings helped to build up confidence in weak areas.
5. Young employees developed their potential through small successes and gains.

Success factors

1. Most importantly: focusing on the resources of the team helped the manager to gain more confidence in his job.
2. By using the "WGaOC" sheet the team members acknowledged each others' merits.
3. They utilised existing resources and had many small successes.
4. Keeping goals small and not too big was also a very important success factor.
5. The team members were enjoying the work and trusted each other.

What are points common to both cases?

What do both managers have in common?

1. They shared their future perfect vision with the staff members with enthusiasm.
2. They complimented each staff member.
3. They made use of existing resources and achieved many small successes.
4. They kept goals and actions simple and feasible in a short period of time.
5. Small actions and successes triggered a synergy effect.
6. Both managers and staff members were enjoying the work and trusted each other.

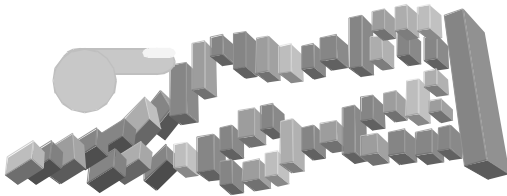
Although there are many common points, both cases are unique. SF is used in a different way. The most important thing, however, is to start with whatever feels good. It is key

to connect between your employees and what you try to do. If you are not sure, ask them, as often they will come up with useful ideas.

A second step

The spillover effect is very important. When you topple a row of dominos, they sometimes get stuck in the middle. When you push the domino a second time, it starts falling down again. So, all you need is a gentle second push. Likewise, when a first action is effectively taken in your organisational change process, you give a gentle second push. The point is that you give the team the opportunity to take a second small step given the positive momentum the team enjoys. The manager plays a mostly supporting role.

In no time a gentle push for a
SECOND STEP!



Conclusion

If you use SF in your team, you can witness fantastic changes. The synergy effect in the team will promote mutual positive influence, higher motivation, personal development and stronger trust among team members. The trainees are able to experience SF in my training and use it right away. It is my pleasure that SF helps a lot of my trainees to turn their teams into high-achieving and lively ones.

References

Jackson. P. Z. & McKergow M. W. (2007). *The Solutions Focus: Making Coaching and Change SIMPLE*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

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