

We want to keep what works and evolve from there: Matrax Ltd

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Abstract

Becoming an SF practitioner is a continuous process of acting and reflecting. In this case study I describe and reflect upon a team coaching initiative with a Bulgarian company in 2011. I present the chronology of the seminar and offer some reflections and learning points.

Introducing the company

Matrax Ltd. is a home goods distributor for Southeast Europe. It is a small and innovative company, founded in 2005. With a combination of a good sales team, some “quirky” marketing and bold retailers, Matrax quickly became known as the company to emulate. Six years later, Matrax has expanded into new markets – Greece in 2006, Romania in 2008 and Macedonia in 2010. Based in Sofia, the company has a team of 30 people and rising annual sales.

The situation

However, the fast growth of the company, the uncertainties of the global economic crisis, and the failure of two successive CEOs to lead the company well, caused the company to encounter serious financial difficulties. To improve financial results and at the same time effect business growth, the managing board implemented structural changes. Prior to restructuring, they wanted to help raise the morale of the team, have staff engage more actively with the company

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mission and ethos, and encourage them to communicate better with each other and with their clients and partners. For better decision-making, they also wanted to take on board the team's views about which of the company structures and business processes to keep in place, and which to change.

The opportunity

The board decided to address this situation in a coaching seminar with a cross section from each of the company's departments, i.e. a dozen or so people. One of the directors of the company had previously had several disappointing experiences with conventional team building approaches and especially their low rate of success in getting people efficiently engaged with improving the working climate and seeing its importance for business results. He knew about my involvement with SF and invited me to facilitate a team coaching and learning event. I was given two successive afternoons (4–8 pm) for the event itself. I could also access staff as I saw fit before the seminar. The possibility of post-seminar coaching sessions with either smaller groups or individual staff members was also discussed as desirable.

My position

I am not completely new to the company. My position is best described as that of a privileged outsider. A couple of years ago I ran a diversity training event with the managing team and have great appreciation for their liveliness, sharpness and self-confidence. Earlier this year, I also coached (using the SF approach) their financial department to help them see the arrival of a new chief accountant in a positive light. Being partly familiar and partly new to the people and context gave me a good start, but I needed to find out more to be able to respond adequately to what the client wanted.

Prior to the seminar

Prior to the coaching event I wanted to:

- 1) become as clear as possible about where the Matrax managing board wanted their team to be in the future and why they wanted to have some of the current organisational and business practices changed;
- 2) clarify expectations and find out how the seminar participants viewed the training opportunity in terms of what they wanted to be different; and
- 3) make myself familiar with the language of Matrax.

Regarding 1) I had three half-hour meetings with the members of the managing board. I heard less of the desired future and more of the difficulties and ‘problem’ points. I took note of that but, playing with the grammar after the meeting, I transformed the ‘deficit’ formulations into the language of a desired agenda:

- effective communication across the departments;
- information exchange and communication procedures are in place and are observed;
- everybody accepts rules of the workplace;
- rather than being encapsulated, business processes flow freely and smoothly;
- performance at work (and beyond) is in the spirit of the company mission and values.

Apparently, the board did not see themselves as customers for change. They were explicit about giving their team of managers and employees the ‘freedom’ to work it out by themselves.

Regarding 2) I had half-hour conversations with the newly appointed HR manager and three of the prospective seminar participants working in three different departments of the company. I wanted to find out what went well in their job. Following that, I sent an invitation letter to each of the participants. I included some practical information about the venue,

time and duration, introduced myself, and briefly presented the rationale of the forthcoming seminar and its objectives (based on the issues and concerns identified by the board and by the participants I had met). Inspired by the *Virtual Cocktail Party* exercise (McKergow, 2011) I then sent out a second message asking the participants to imagine the future and envision the benefits they gained from the course and the signs of useful change they were seeing for themselves and others after we had finished our work together. I was thus hoping to encourage them to think about the forthcoming seminar and help form expectations. I also wanted to give them a taste of the intended positive spirit, openness, sharing, and personal engagement. Everybody responded and the data I collected was massive. It was ever so useful because it brought to the surface some of the resources we would be using to develop the seminar content and focus on the solutions. On the level of methodology, it also assured me that the participants felt fairly comfortable with personal communication and engagement.

Regarding 3), all conversations and correspondence were like intensive language lessons for me. I immersed myself in the company discourse and, in addition, surfed their website to get an idea of how they present themselves to their clients.

Planning the event

There were several keys that I followed in deciding what to do and how to do it. I discuss them below.

The scaffolding image

I saw my task as mainly crafting the frame within which the communication processes flowed. In my pre-seminar discussions with the HR manager and later on, at the start of the seminar, I used the image of scaffolding (prompted by an earlier reading of Bruner (1996)) to help describe my role and that of the participants. The scaffolding was to serve as a support for us to build a space of shared practice and

knowledge. The actual content was going to emerge in the interaction process.

Solutions Focus

Another important lead were the principles, methods, and tools of SF. It was feasible to apply them in this particular context because:

- results were wanted quickly;
- the people of Matrax spoke and performed in a highly competent way and struck me as capable of walking their own way towards what they wanted to achieve;
- I could see there were many company practices working well already and building on them was practicable and achievable;
- I found the people I met and corresponded with wanting somewhat in personal engagement; they needed, I thought, some help in taking it upon themselves to initiate positive change;
- I deemed the narrative of their organisation could be usefully enriched by interactional descriptions, cliché-free language, specific detail of doing, and solutions generating discourse.

All throughout, I kept the three basic principles of SF in mind, namely:

1. don't fix what isn't broken;
2. find what works and do more of it;
3. if it doesn't work, stop it and do something different (McKergow & Clarke, 2007, p. 2).

They worked for me on two levels. On the one hand, they guided my own work, e.g. choice of activities, listening to what was being said and observing interactions. During the event, on the other hand, I discovered they went down with the seminar participants remarkably well, whenever it was appropriate to work on that meta-level of 'theory'.

Sources

For the detailed structuring of the seminar and use of SF tools, I drew on ideas from our course (SF Business Professional 2011), the resources provided and the SOLWorld forum discussion, and also from McKergow and Clarke (2007), and Jackson and McKergow (2007). Another source I used was Gargiulo's (2007) storytelling approach to personal development and organisational interventions.

Programme

A couple of days before the seminar I sent out the programme. It featured the seminar rationale and its overall direction, as well as the titles, times, and objectives of each one of the sessions.

The goal was to look into Matrax' future in the context of the more general business tendencies in the country and beyond, and to work out what everybody on the team can do so that they:

1. communicate better and more effectively within and across departments;
2. develop understanding and ownership of the company mission and values;
3. grow personally and professionally by taking initiative and responsibility;
4. engage with and contribute to the ongoing and future changes in the company.

The seminar

Participants, setting and time

The venue was one of the southwest facing premises in Matrax' showroom on the top floor of the building housing Matrax headquarters. The seminar took place in the afternoons of 7-8 July 2011. The days were hot, with

temperatures as high as 35° C. The twelve participants represented the following departments: sales, marketing and branding, customer service, logistics, and finance.

Platform building

We spent the entire first afternoon building the platform. Our first step was in the direction of engaging with the company ethos and taking ownership of the organisational values as articulated in the Matrax mission statement. The guided process of interaction that ensued contributed to the communication objective as well and brought forward a lot of counters and strengths.

To begin with, we did the *Expression cards* exercise (Executive Training ~ Team Quest, 2008). Participants chose three image cards: the first one they linked with their own personal idea of the company, the second one with what they do in the company, and the third one with their idea of a good working day. This introductory exercise stimulated personal talk within a work theme. It generated curiosity and created movement from personal and own experience to jobs and work.

The second exercise was *Stories in words*, inspired by Gargiulo (2007, p. 140) where participants read the company mission statement and circled a couple of words they felt were personally important to them. They then jotted down experiences, memories of which were triggered by the words they had just circled. In groups, they shared their stories. The participants thus (re)engaged with the values of their company and took on the role of authors involved in developing Matrax' story (objective 2).

Strengths and benefits

Session 2 started with the *Strengths and positive attributes* activity (Aoki, 2009) with the aim of developing the participants' skills to, first, express themselves positively, and importantly, to gain confidence in affirming their colleagues

(a vital component of objective 1). Everybody had a sheet of paper with their name on it and passed it round for people to write what kind of strengths (one or two) they see in that person. At the end, the sheet returned to its owner full of compliments and he/she chose which three to read out loud.

After this positive round, we started examining the *Benefits* territory. In groups, participants listed the parties who would benefit from communicating better and more effectively (objective 1), as well as from the current and pending changes in the company. These were colleagues (including themselves) within and across departments and countries (Romania, Macedonia, Greece, Italy, Bulgaria, France, etc.), managers, the accountants, partners and suppliers, dealers, clients and customers, the relevant governmental and non-governmental institutions, the media companies involved in commercial campaigns, and their own families and partners. Having thus identified the wide range of stakeholders, the participants turned to the advantages they themselves, and the others, would gain. On flipcharts they made extensive lists of what the benefits would be. The benefits were: friendly working climate and various synergies; enhanced creativity and freedom of action; ‘multiperspectivity’ and better understanding of the positions of others; easier access to the company information flow; better decision making processes; timely analyses; expanded markets; reducing expenditure and extending the range of good services; satisfaction with the job.

Through vigorous interaction, the meaning of improvements in communication and changes became both visible and audible, and therefore real. The process was all the more valuable because the richness of meanings came about as a result of the participants learning about each other’s experience in interaction. They filtered it all through the concepts of benefit and gain to construct new collective knowledge.

What works well and hot topics

Having clarified why change was desirable and indeed necessary, it was time to take the next important step, i.e.

produce a detailed picture of what was already working well in the company and at the same time identify the 'hot topics'. These were the things the team needed to get right by drawing upon their existing good practices and procedures, but also by finding out what was needed from change. Thus, in Session 3, the last one for the day, the participants chose to format their ideas in two column tables, one of which contained their achievements, while the other one listed their 'hot topics'. Between the groups, over twenty hot topics were listed. Most of them were practical, specific, and to the point. Occasionally, a 'big' word or two would sneak in, thus making my explicit input on simple language justifiable.

On such a 'hot topics' note we parted and my task for the evening was to assess the outcomes of the first day in terms of where we were in the seminar process, and what in the programme, as originally planned, could stay and what had to go or become modified. Deeming that we had done a thorough job with building the platform, I decided to combine the four separate 'hot issues' lists, see what categories of issues emerged and present them to the participants on the following day.

The list ran as follows:

- Fast, timely, accurate, open, well-structured and measured information flow.
- Effective and efficient communication between colleagues.
- Transparent working relationships within and across hierarchical levels.
- Empathy and collegiality, healthy organisational climate.
- Clear market strategies and objectives and, deriving from that, relatively stable priorities.
- Continuity in the work and busy-ness flow.
- A smooth and rhythmical decision making process.
- Transparency of in-company procedures thus reducing slippage and mistakes.
- Employee participation in decision making with regard

to changes more generally, and procedural changes in particular.

- Delegating rights and responsibilities.
- Rhythmical completion of tasks and projects.
- Personal commitment and taking care of tasks.

Second seminar day

At the start of the second seminar day I handed out the list of 'hot issues' and asked the participants to check and modify it if necessary. While they were working on that, I made a platform-like drawing on the flipchart and symbolically positioned the items from the 'hot issues' list on the platform. I then explained that this was the platform for change we had built together and asked the participants to give it a name. Five minutes of brainstorming resulted in the following formulation: *We want to keep what works and evolve from there, so that we are positively distinct from all the competition in providing quality services to our clients and ourselves.*

Looking back to the overall seminar process, I think this was an immensely useful turning point. I noted a significantly different change in the behaviour of the participants. Dynamics changed, conversations became lighter and more cheerful, and it seemed that all twelve people headed in a direction which had become commonly negotiated in dialogue. The moment was ripe to tackle the Future Perfect.

Future Perfect

I asked the participants to imagine they waved a magic wand and the positive difference they had just named had occurred. All their hot issues had been resolved. What would a perfect week in Matrax look like? The team divided themselves into two groups, making sure in each of the groups they had representatives from the different departments, and set out to produce Monday-to-Friday scenarios of a perfect week. They could use every form of expression available to them at the moment, e.g. verbal text, images, sketches, various artefacts,

to describe what they would see happen (Johansson & Persson, 2007). The two scenarios differed somewhat in design but abounded in detail and concrete action and humour! The people in them were real and played out in their real names. They were involved in activities, some of which were familiar, some were new, but all of them happening in a climate of development and improvement. Evolution mostly concerned the ‘how’ of the work, e.g. internal communication was conducted promptly, tasks were completed on time, changes did not happen in their own right but were being agreed and synchronised, priorities did not change overnight. The two storyboards voiced ideas that were repeatedly ‘wow’-ed and applauded. In the midst of laughter and applause, however, most people were taking notes in full seriousness. Next, the participants paired off for the Scaling exercise.

Scaling and counters

The purpose of this session was for the participants to explore how they rated their current position in relation to the ‘perfect week’ they had just outlined in minute detail. The task was completed in pairs where each pair agreed a rating on the 1–10 scale and identified specific things that led them to that particular point on the scale. They recorded their practices, resources and qualities on separate post-its and, by way of physically emphasising their actions, as each pair presented to the rest of the group, they stuck the post-its around their number on the scale.

Unexpectedly (for me), the task, intended as largely numerical and descriptive, evoked big complicated words, some of them bordering on clichés. This turn from the simple language of the session before to the big words of abstraction baffled me but there and then I had no time to ponder on the reasons why it occurred. Patience, continuous reformulations, and urging people to keep their comments concrete and tangible helped (only) some of them reverse to a vocabulary of specifics. (Jackson & McKergow, 2007, p. 93).

Small actions

Bearing in mind the struggles over language, *Scaling* took twice as long as planned. There was no time to elicit descriptions of what the pairs' next position on the *Scale* would look like and what needed to happen in order for them to arrive there. A disadvantage, this actually triggered a move that worked, and is currently still working, as a positive change of plans. We set up a post-seminar online forum and could thus carry on with and complete our course work, sustaining a lively conversation at the same time.

What is better for the people of Matrax

It may be too early to know how the seminar influenced the day-to-day communication of the participants in the seminar and whether the change made a positive difference in the behaviour of those who did not take part in the seminar. However, some things have occurred:

- The seminar participants committed themselves to the event and generously contributed to working out together what could be better and how.
- They interacted with each other in a zone that, as the seminar unfolded, they created for themselves and filled in with words, stories, and outcomes. Some were complete newcomers to this discursive zone, others were more familiar, but all acknowledged the novelty of this type of communication. It was different from the office and professional discourse they were versed in and yet was concrete and generated action.
- The managing board and the remaining workers in Matrax have received, via email, several of the seminar outputs:
 - The list with the benefits of improved communication.
 - The list of 'hot issues'.
 - The two 'perfect week' scenarios.

- The actions, resources and qualities which have led the seminar team to their current position on the 1–10 scale.
- The seminar team are contributing their small actions on the way to N+ in the newly established post-seminar forum space.
- Several of the participants have initiated communication with the members of the managing board to make recommendations in relation to the pending re-structuring.
- The corporate mission statement is now more familiar.

Lessons learned

I myself emerged a different person from that experience. It reassured me that I can facilitate and coach a team, using SF – a new approach for me altogether. Next time I want to make sure that I:

- double check the tools I intend to use against the agenda of the specific learning event;
- take the learning processes further when, and only when, the platform is clear, named, and agreed;
- rehearse the instructions for the scaling activity so that I make myself crystal clear to the participants;
- balance coach self-confidence and presence with giving more and more space to people to interact as they move along the supporting scaffold;
- listen more carefully to what is being said;
- trust the dialogue more;
- keep to the bare (useful) minimum references to my own experience, no matter how relevant and revealing I think they are;
- facilitate more confidently the emergence of simple language; and
- relax and laugh a lot more.

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