

Introducing SF to your Organisation

Jenny Clarke and Shakya Kumara

Abstract

To help with the successful and smooth introduction of Solutions Focus (SF) to organisations, we offer a “Stimulus Spectrum” of possible interventions. Drawing on our own experience, we caution the SF enthusiast with the words of Insoo Kim Berg: “if you want to be fast, go slow.”

Introduction

Not surprisingly, fans of SF often become seized by missionary zeal and they want to tell everyone all about it. However, we advise moderation and suggest that there are many subtle ways of introducing these radical ideas to people.

By way of analogy, think about contemplating a journey from London to Edinburgh. Whether you choose to make the journey by rail, road or air will depend on many things: the journey time, how comfortable and enjoyable the journey itself might be, the price, the companies’ timetables, any personal preferences you might have . . . but it’s very unlikely to depend upon an in depth study of the engine characteristics of the various forms of transport. Of course, there are conferences for engine enthusiasts, but you’re unlikely to find many passengers at these gatherings.

At our workshop at the SOLWorld 2012 conference in Oxford, we hosted a workshop designed to help participants think about how best to introduce SF to specific organisations. The workshop was open to all, whether based inside or outside the organisation in question. Our aim was to explore the whole range of possibilities for engaging people in the approach, to help participants find the “sweet spot” for their own particular

Address for correspondence: sfwork, 15 St George’s Avenue, London, N7 0HB. info@sfwork.com

situation and organisation. This article is inspired by that experience.

Where to start – and with whom?

In the terms of our analogy, it's important to distinguish between the journey and the engine that powers the journey. SF equips us for all sorts of different “journeys” – or tasks – as browsing through the growing body of literature devoted to SF in organisational contexts shows. These include performance appraisal, strategic planning, negotiation, conflict resolution, organisational performance, developing a coaching culture . . . Unless you are addressing a group of “engine aficionados”, we think it's best to inquire about people's hopes for the journey first.

SF work always starts with one or more “Customers for Change.” A customer for change is someone who wants something to be different, and wants to do something about it. So the first question we must ask ourselves is – who do we think might be customers for change?

Having identified these people, we need to find out if they really are both looking for change and willing to do something – and get a very clear idea of what kind of change they are customers for.

A seasoned SF practitioner would do this using the Platform tool (Jackson & McKergow, 2007). Chris Le Breton, a participant in one of our courses remarked that “You can't leave the platform until you have a ticket”. This is a brilliantly succinct summary of an important phase of working with people in an SF way.

It involves listening to what people have to say about the situation, giving them confidence that you have heard the story, and establishing the direction in which they want to go. It is also wise to ensure that there is sufficient enthusiasm for the journey. This enthusiasm is likely to stem from an exploration of the benefits of moving in the chosen direction – from their own perspective and those of their various stakeholders. The “sales” meeting is an important part of Platform building:

rather than talking about our approach and how great it is, we are better occupied in showing an interest in what people want!

One possible pitfall here is having more enthusiasm for the change than your “customers” do – they’ll need to be driving the train, so if they’re going to want to get off at the next stop then it’s just going to waste everybody’s time. So it’s worth spending plenty of time establishing the Platform, and being ready to drop the project if the “customers for change” turn out not to fit the definition after all.

How to start – choosing a point on the stimulus spectrum

We have come across many ways of introducing the approach; they can be placed on a spectrum of possibilities, from the shout-out-loud to the more subtle. Here are some of them:

Edict

This is probably our least favoured method, and yet one which is used surprisingly often. Someone high up in an organisation comes across SF ideas and likes them so much that he decides that the whole organisation should “be solution focused” and issues an edict to that effect. SF courses are arranged, a few aha moments are enjoyed, and soon everything fizzles out. Without any attempt to cultivate customers for change within the organisation, this becomes just another of the boss’s initiatives. This is a good way to generate “resistance” and to damage the reputation of SF. When asked to take on a task like this, our response is to ask for an issue to work with first – and then perhaps reveal the methodology to those who show an interest.

We came across one voluntary sector organisation, where the poor consultant had been instructed to “make the organisation SF” – and given a year to do it! Unsurprisingly, she was encountering resistance (a sure sign that a more SF approach is needed). With some SF coaching she soon realised for herself that she would be far better off *doing* SF. So she

continued by asking people what was already working in their part of the organisation. The project immediately started to go much more smoothly.

Leader

Some leaders have the gift of inspiring people with their own ambition, enthusiasm and commitment. If someone like this decides to introduce the SF approach, it is more likely to succeed than the “Just do it” option, but it still might suffer from being perceived as top-down or not-invented-here.

A true leader has more than one way of making the whole organisation SF. He may simply lead by example, using SF and waiting for people to notice a different style of questioning and talking and a change of focus away from problem talk to a focus on what is wanted. Or he may be more explicit about what he is doing from the start, commenting on what he is doing whenever it seems unusual, and recruiting SF champions to join him in studying, practising and reflecting on the approach.

We have seen this work very effectively in an organisation which already had a culture of collaboration and collective decision making firmly established. The CEO was indeed a genuine leader as we describe here – and even so took a “small steps” approach. SF was introduced in one workshop and the annual review meeting. Only when that met with everyone’s approval was a short workshop arranged for everyone, followed by a more in-depth training programme over 5 months for the entire management team and steering group. The results have been quite remarkable – for example one manager reports that customer workshops that used to take 3 or 4 days are now taking just 1 day.

SF enthusiasts

The “Arbetsförmedlingen” is the national agency in Sweden set up to help jobseekers find jobs. Initially, one or two SF practitioners working in the agency used SF in their role supporting clients in their hunt for work.

The results were so good that the curiosity of neighbouring offices was aroused and gradually the whole Agency became familiar with the SF approach – without any top-down edict or policy. Results and enthusiasm did the trick. On the CLUES website, you can read about how the project was carried out in Värmland County by Björn Johansson and Eva Persson, under the supervision of Michael Hjerth, who had had experience elsewhere in Sweden.

Here we see the power of SF enthusiasts, quietly going about their everyday activities – but with an SF slant. Whether it's through measurable results in the bottom line or less tangible things like working atmosphere and spirit, SF champions can draw attention to their methods and spread their use without any “policy initiative”.

Project/System/Initiative first, then deconstruct

Experience has taught us that this is the most effective and satisfying method of introducing SF to an organisation. A “do it by edict” enthusiast or a charismatic leader may have invited us to introduce SF to their organisation but we like start with a project, a journey in terms of our analogy, and work on that before looking under the bonnet (hood in US English). The examination of what was different and interesting about the approach can come later, when people have experienced for themselves the energising effectiveness of the approach. This does a lot of the Platform work for the SF devotee who wants to share the approach.

We were once asked to introduce SF to a small family business making artistic giftware. The leader wanted the entire staff of 30 to get together “to learn about SF”. This was a great opportunity to do 2 things: give the staff a meaningful experience of the approach and teach some SF tools (the OSKAR model devised by Jackson & McKergow) at the same time. Early on in the workshop, we asked the participants to list on post-it notes what they saw as the key issues facing the company. Grouping these issues into “Hot topics” (Meier, 2005), participants were asked to discuss who the stakeholders

were, what they would like to see and what wider benefits would stem from that. They were then asked to frame the topics in terms of “what do we have to get right?” A Future Perfect exercise (Jackson & McKergow, 2007) led to a rich series of flipcharts showing the ideal situation from the perspectives of the teams working in raw materials stocks, production, retail and admin. After the 2 day event, we learned that they had completely transformed their working space and they had got to grips with the tricky question of stock control – of raw material and of finished goods. Not surprisingly, this was enough to make them SF fans and the company re-named one of their meeting rooms “The Solutions Room”.

One-to-one coaching

Many companies offer their employees coaching, either by external coaches or by specially trained members of their own staff. We have found that coaching can be an effective way of introducing people to the SF approach in a low-risk, non-threatening way which can lead to other assignments as (some) coaches become aware of the wider possibilities of the methods.

Shakya started his SF career from within an organisation. After learning SF skills, he started offering SF coaching to colleagues – for example, one new area manager was struggling with her role to the point of considering resigning. After a series of coaching sessions she became very effective in her role (and went on to become the director of the entire chain, just 5 years later). With a number of success stories like this, senior management gave their backing to further SF initiatives. To date, managers in the organisation have been trained in SF Coaching, SF Negotiation, SF Time Management and SF Performance Management. Both of the two divisions in the organisation have implemented new appraisal-style systems based on SF.

Guerrilla tactics

This is the place for you if you're feeling isolated in your use of SF ideas and don't feel that you have enough authority or influence to introduce the approach in your own work place. It's SF without permission, or "guerrilla SF". It's also the way to go about things if people are weary of new initiatives and/or suspicious of anything with a label – "what are they doing to us this week?" Here are a few suggestions:

- Show curiosity: how did we tackle this kind of thing before? Who else has done something like this?
- Notice things out loud – the same ideas expressed as observations: the last time we did this . . .; so and so seems to manage this kind of thing well; we already have x and y which gives us a good start.
- Affirm – Naming strengths and resources.
- Ask pre-suppositional questions – Questions which presuppose *Agency* – how did we do that? *Knowledge* – how did we know that that was the thing to do? *Awareness and observational skills* – how did that make a difference? *Reflective ability* – what did we learn from that?

Just Me (SF on yourself)

This is not easy – but it's possible! We find that saying things out loud has a different quality and effect from just thinking them and so we highly recommend having an SF buddy and using the resources of the SOL-L and similar on-line forums. As a last resort, dictating your thoughts can be useful.

Bringing the approach to consciousness

Once people have seen remarkable change, they are likely to be interested in knowing what helped make it possible. That's a good time to tell them about the nature of the "engine" – SF – and excite their interest in using it in other ways in future.

Some people may be interested in going so far as to learn to use SF tools themselves, devising ways to tackle all sorts of stuck situations when they arise. With obstacles being cleared more rapidly, the whole organisation becomes more effective. Furthermore, when armed with SF tools people are more responsive – both to change from above and to the needs of internal and external customers. In this way, the organisation as a whole can become more responsive and agile.

Conclusion

There are many ways to introduce SF to an organisation – and it's worth thinking about which is best in your situation. We recommend taking the time to find genuine and enthusiastic customers for change, and starting work at the most appropriate point on the Stimulus Spectrum. You may choose to introduce SF explicitly at first – or to simply help people to do a truly excellent job, and only reveal the “engine” behind the excellence once its powerful nature has been demonstrated.

References

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Jenny Clarke and Shakya Kumara are consultants, trainers and coaches based in the UK. They work in sfwork with clients in a variety of industries, including health, finance, manufacturing, IT, energy and the voluntary sector.
jenny@sfwork.com shakya@sfwork.com