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CHANGE YOUR CONVERSATION, CHANGE YOUR ORGANISATION

SF consulting leveraging strategic methods of collaboration

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This chapter focuses on the facilitation of culture change and working systemically within an organisational context. It offers an Asia-based case study of how the author used a solution focused (SF) consulting approach over an 18-month period, from initial briefing to celebration of achievement, and how it created a cultural energy conducive to generating shared ownership and shared leadership. The SF framework and complementary group methods applied will enable the reader to have a clear sense of how an SF-based program design and delivery, within an Asian context, was instrumental in creating a collaborative culture and cohesive high performance teams.

A blended approach: Solution focused and strategic collaboration

Two fields of work have particularly shaped how I have co-facilitated desired culture shifts in organisations:

- The solution focused approach
- Group methods of strategic collaboration

I have witnessed how an SF consulting approach to whole system change can be visibly transformative for organisations and teams in Asia. I feel very grateful to be able to share my perspective and experience on this topic.

An SF approach to group work creates an environment conducive to useful conversations and interactions. The focus on what is wanted helps to transcend actual and potential barriers whilst generating a rich picture of the preferred future and tangible progress clues for next steps forward.

The art of hosting groups through leveraging powerful methods of strategic collaboration ensures that all group members have the opportunity to share their hopes, questions and views. These group methods foster integration and cross-pollination across roles, seniority, ethnicity, gender and leadership levels during the generation of the rich shared visions and plans. This is extremely useful in multi-cultural Asia where respecting hierarchy, seniority and consensus is deep cultural value and can make working with diverse groups particularly challenging.

Group members choose which conversation they want to continue and which roles and responsibilities they own, building accountability. The degree to which employees assume ownership and responsibility can be impacted by societal cultural norms. Investing in building ownership as a core organisational value can be particularly impactful in predominantly Asian environments where strong traditional, collective values (perseverance, harmony, self-sacrifice and respect for authority) contrast with individualistic, more Western values (expressing personal autonomy, freedom to decide and speak out for oneself).

This blended approach creates an environment conducive to open, honest cross-sharing, which builds greater trust and connection and enables the more introverted, common amongst many Asians, to speak up and get their views represented.

Case study: Transforming our working culture

Background. In mid-2013 my team and I took a brief trip to work with an Asia-based R&D centre of a global pharmaceutical company. The project sponsor, a member of the senior management team (SMT), described their desire to shift the culture from the current small within-group style, to a more collaborative, systemic working approach. This was the beginning of an 18-month organisational culture change journey for the whole centre. We utilised an overarching SF framework at each stage. Our approach was somewhat emergent, building on shared learning and tailored to each stage and the systems involved.

Stage 1: Partnering with the SMT – clear direction. Our SMT clients were ready customers for change. They were clear that they would need to (a) listen to their people and (b) refine organisational priorities and their own practices.

Listening. We kicked off with my team conducting some interviews with a representative sample of 20 per cent of the whole site. We explored their best hopes for the future, mainly in terms of 'how things get done around here' (our broad definition of organisational culture), plus what was already in place and under way towards this preferred future. As a result of these research conversations, the SMT, agreed to certain objectives:

- To build whole system cohesiveness and contribute to the development of the R&D talent pool, particularly in the area of systemic team-working.
- To create an environment where site employees can express and act on their hopes, concerns and opinions
- To foster trust and inspire responsibility towards realising a shared preferred future of 'working effectively across and beyond the organisation'.

Refining the big picture. The SMT decided that providing all employees with a clear direction of the big-picture goals for the next three years was a key first step in this culture change process. I facilitated a full day off-site where SMT members discussed five SF questions to help them refine this big-picture direction:

What do we do well now? An exploration of what they already did well helped the SMT to ease into the process, build confidence to move forward to subsequent steps and create the space for open and honest dialogue.

What do we need to get right? We explored current and likely future challenges, and short- and long-term opportunities for them as a management team and as a site. Exploring this up front,

before moving on to their shared preferred future, was helpful as the SMT were itching to discuss current challenges and needed changes.

What is our shared preferred future? We explored what they wanted to upgrade given what they do well now and what they need to get right. A rich collective description was elicited through various process questions.

What is already in place towards this preferred future? The team used the preferred future output to help them consider all that was already in place.

What are our immediate next step actions? The SMT prioritised several key actions they could take to move closer to their preferred future work culture.

Impact. The SMT members shared that the use of the SF framework created a positive, open energy that helped build trust levels between them and the inspiration to make the identified changes. Two valuable benefits particularly stood out for them:

Firstly, the detailed description of their preferred future gave the SMT a clearer idea of key objectives and progress clues towards achieving these, particularly in the area of high-performance, collaborative team-working. It helped them to focus on what was possible. The shared exploration of *what else* and *what next* in the short term was particularly helpful.

In Asia, recent success has been the norm, and relished prosperity can hinder future-focused inquiry and reinvention. It can also lead to a struggle to adapt to changing conditions. Hierarchical centralised leadership has been the tradition in Asia together with expectations that seniors, experts and 'gurus' will provide all the answers. Currently, however, the global challenge for organisations, including this R&D site, is to flex to a high-agility approach where shared leadership, working across boundaries and managing and valuing diversity are becoming increasingly necessary. This requires conscious evolution.

Secondly, the SMT shared that acknowledging what was already in place boosted their feelings of resourcefulness and their readiness to act. They realised that acknowledgement and feedback were visibly absent practices within their current organisational culture and they made a commitment to make positive changes in this area. An acknowledgment mind-set fits nicely with the Asian cultural value of honouring and respecting all and offered a much needed balance to the current problem focused culture.

Review. I met with the SMT for a check-in conversation a few weeks later. The SMT had been meeting more regularly and working more cohesively. They were energised and focused and had put into action many of the immediate next steps they had previously identified.

Stage 2: Towards greater cohesiveness and inspired accountability – whole site. With the SMT refined preferred future in place, we focused on how the whole site could best achieve the key objectives (inspiring working environment and collaborative, high-performance team-working). In June 2013 the whole R&D site team met off-site. An over-arching SF framework was combined with the use of two group methods that foster strategic collaboration – the World Café method and Open Space Technology (OST). Through this blended approach, we were able to create and model the mood, energy and behaviours that the SMT were aiming to foster internally, in terms of collaboration, being solution focused and inspiring accountability.

The World Café process involved three whole-system group conversations based on the following SF questions:

• What possibilities can we see for the next three years in terms of how we (whole site) create an inspiring working environment and high-performance team-working?

- What is in place already towards this?
- What do we need to get right over the next 18 months?

This method created a safe space for both rich small-group sharing around these core questions and cross-pollination of ideas and integration as participants moved around to join new discussion groups. This method allowed the whole system to meet and yet avoid potential barriers brought by mixing different functions, generations and levels, transcending strong Asian cultural expectations around hierarchy and seniority. The small group size and several rounds of conversation created the space for intimacy and trust to gradually build, which typically takes longer with largely Asian groups.

Through the OST, we created a marketplace where everyone had a chance to propose a topic that they deemed important to be developed. Participants formed topic stations around the room, self-selecting which discussion they would join and sharing responsibility for work on that topic. Conversations focused on next 18-month priority actions sourced from the World Café process. This OST-style process helped to create a mood of passion, responsibility and ownership in line with key organisational objectives and move away from reliance on the traditional hierarchical leadership of the past.

The results of each discussion were compiled and shared with the whole site, and further topic taskforce meetings were arranged with a commitment to present ideas and action plans to the SMT six weeks later.

Impact: This stage 2 process was extremely successful in building and sustaining momentum towards achieving the desired preferred future culture. The mood of the centre shifted significantly over the next nine months, driven by inspired adoption of the SF language and principles we had collectively practised. Nine staff-led taskforces were operational and active for a nine-month period. All SMT-approved taskforce initiatives were put into action and completed. New practices were introduced for meetings, and the physical workplace space was redesigned and radically improved to nurture and sustain further collaborative, cross-boundary working.

The most felt progress clues nine months later were: staff confidently speaking out and engaging more with one another in group meetings and large-group social outings and activities, supporting each other (beyond the self mind-set of offering each other ideas and cover) plus greater interaction and more cross-pollination across departments. Two particularly noticeable positive changes were increased acknowledgement of what was already in place and appreciation of their colleagues, who had now become an integral part of the new organisational culture.

Stage 3: Towards greater shared leadership – top teams. Through on-going development and coaching work with the SMT and their direct reports, we were able to build further alignment, cohesiveness and shared leadership. The SMT had been operating as one system, and their direct reports had been focused mainly on their down-lines. Through various team development sessions we worked on building systemic working across the SMT-1 level (2nd tier cross-functional management level) and also together with the SMT (SMT + SMT-1 as one system). Team-working at both of these levels had been missing thus far. We worked on building self-awareness (individual and team), sharing behaviours, and giving and receiving feedback and on-going progress checks to build and sustain the habit of celebrating what was going well. The growing acknowledgment, mind-set and practice helped pave the way for greater courage to reinvent the organisation and regenerate, including having necessary difficult conversations, an important muscle to build amongst a culturally very polite predominately Asian workforce.

Stage 4: Celebration and on–going evolution — whole site. In March 2014 we (my facilitation team, SMT and SMT-1) held another whole-site planning session, this time focused on questions that inquired beyond culture and performance. We leveraged the opportunity to celebrate recent achievements and most appreciated shifts plus to model and reinforce relationship building and collaborative working practices.

Overall delivery impact. At the end of 2014, the feedback from the SMT indicated that they felt change not only in the area of desired culture change but in terms of increased results, productivity and strategic agility, which was extremely positive and encouraging.

The changes achieved were a win–win. The organisation gained from more effective team working at all levels in the organisation and beyond, greater diversity of input and increased productivity. The SMT were able to get more from their direct reports and from each other, expand their big-picture view, be less insular and feel more supported. Individuals and teams were generally having more fun and growing both their relational skills, and at the same time, their capacity to deliver results together, working systemically with others across and beyond the organisation.

In closing

I believe there is real genius in leveraging this combination of an SF framework, language and principles together with methods of strategic collaboration. This specific blend of ingredients works, as over time it creates a 'How can we best interact and achieve with one another?' mind-set that builds a new more conscious organisational culture.

Organisations are largely their conversations, the sum of their conversations and interactions. If leaders and colleagues can support one another through helpful solution focused interactions, building on existing strengths, we are better placed to adapt, innovate and successfully navigate our future. Within the rich multi-cultural environments we operate in Asia, consciously managing the diversity and unity within our workforces and building collaborative, cohesive and committed workforces, through conscious, strategic design, can significantly and positively impact organisational culture and effectiveness.