

In dealing with differences amongst people: How to Establish an SF Mindset of Curiosity (instead of Judging)

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One of the topics that came up during the Unconference on SF in large scale organisations was, “What are small SF interventions that make a world of difference (in (large scale) organisations)?”. It made me think of something magical that is extremely helpful in dealing with diversity - the SF mindset of curiosity to replace judging.

In this article I’m taking you along some core elements and insights of my workshop at the Unconference, in which I start from the solution focused insights I gained from natural horse behaviour. It is a further elaboration of the wide spread of Solution Focus in nature, that I write about in my book *“Connective Clarity. When Horses Invite You to Take up Authentic, Solution Focused Leadership”*.

1. Exercise on perspectives

Each participant was given a piece of paper on which one perspective was written. There were three different perspectives:

- *You want to hide 1 kg of cocaine in this room*
- *You want to organize a children’s party in this room, for 6-year olds*
- *You are an architect, specialized in maintaining the authenticity of old buildings.*

The participants were asked to look around in silence, not sharing their role with their fellow participants. They had to write down some things they observed about the room when looking around from the perspective they were given on their piece of paper.

At the end of the exercise, the participants were asked to share their observations. Based on that, they identified who they thought had the same perspective, and finally the perspectives were made explicit. Overall, people knew who their ‘comrades’ were; however, sometimes, as was the case during the Unconference, people with the same perspective describe completely different things, to the extent that their ‘comrades’ do not recognise that they have the same perspective!

The conclusions of this exercise were:

- Your perspective defines what you see, and even when you share the same perspective, observations might differ
- We all have different perspectives, we all see things (potentially) differently
- If you focus on your own perspective, you easily get into discussion with people who have a different perspective
- If you regard your perspective to be *‘the truth’*, you get easily into the judging mode towards other peoples’ descriptions that come forth from their perspective
- If you see your perspective as one perspective out of many, as *‘a truth’*, you are more open to listen to and explore the observations of other people.

2. How to deal with differences amongst people in a constructive way?

a) Deal with “self-evidence”

- *Can you quickly do this? It’s urgent!*
- *Act normally!*
- *I have done enough, now it is up to him*
- *I clearly explained it twice, she should be able to do it by herself now*
- *You knew I should always be copied in!*

Sentences like these contain a lot of self-evidence:

- How much time is *quickly*? What is the exact deadline when mentioning that something is *urgent*?
- Is *your 'normal'* the same as *my 'normal'*?
- What exactly is *'enough'*? Is he aware of what *'it'* is? And that now *'it'* is *up to him*?
- How can you know whether *having explained it twice* was indeed enough? Do you know for sure whether your explanation was *really clear* to her?
- How do *you know for sure* that *I knew* that you should always be copied in?

The conclusion from the exercise was that self-evidence can prevent your *'radar'* (see 'Mindset, "Interesting"' below) from sweeping around, thus keeping you out of the mental state of alertness that is needed to deal with differences in a non-judgemental way and to see opportunities. Self-evidence often manifests itself in fixed principles, convictions of how (you think) things are and is thus "I"-oriented, you see your perspective as *the* truth.

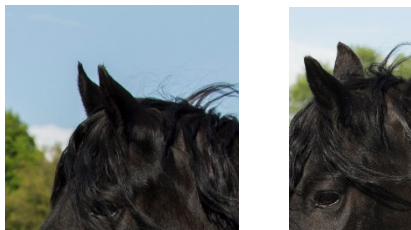
An antidote for getting stuck in self-evidence is a mindset of, "Interesting!", see below.

b) Adopt a Mindset of "Interesting!"

When something unexpected attracts the attention of a horse, the horse will stand still and explore it by observing ('mindset, "Interesting!"') to gather the information that is needed to decide whether to flee or to stay. They check whether the predator is hungry or not. This requires only a fraction of time and can be done from a large distance. Horses also constantly check each other's signals in order to stay attuned amongst themselves. This constant state of alertness enables them to instantly communicate and act as needed.

What horses pay attention to you can read easily from the movement of their ears. The ears show that horses continuously have their attention sweeping 360°. Even when their attention is drawn to something and the horse seems to focus on it, pointing its ears towards the strange object, an ear moving from time to time shows they are at the same time still scanning their surroundings.

Some things can get extra attention in a moment, but horses always keep their radar on. After all, having a real focus for too long can be life-threatening for a prey animal; while focusing on something in front, a horse might be attacked from behind. 'Attention 360°' enables them to have an essential mental state of alertness, of being awake, of having the mindset of, "Interesting!".



We don't have horses' ears, but we can adopt and use the mindset, "Interesting!" to scan our – also figurative – surroundings. For people, 'Mindset, "Interesting!"' is an antidote to reacting automatically from their *layer* of judgements, emotions, interpretations, assumptions and scenarios.

Exploring with 'Mindset, "Interesting!"' is a Solution Focused action; it drags you away from a focus (on the problem) to being aware that there are always other options ("and what else?"...). There is a desired future, (the horses and the predator mentioned above wish to survive). The exploration gathers information about present options (flee or stay) and leads to actual small steps (well... preferably big steps in the case of 'fleeing').

Adopting 'Mindset, "Interesting!"' requires a brief standstill, a "Stop". Horses do that literally. In communication amongst people you can establish this by:

- Explicitly saying something like, "Hold on"; "Just a moment"
- Rephrasing what you experience as *layer* (see above) of you and / or of your conversation partner into information by:
 - Gathering information (e.g. "What do you mean by saying...?")
 - Giving information (e.g. "Your answer surprises me")

Installing “Stop” as a reset button requires only a fraction of time and you can then *choose* how to proceed (thus *inter-act*, don’t *react*):

- Go into a further exploration (“How can we deal with this difference?”)
- Accept the difference to be a limitation (“This is how I see it. That is how you see it. Let’s agree to disagree”)

3. Output of the workshop

How can a mindset of, “Interesting!” be helpful in (large scale) organisations? And how can we help to establish it?

Some useful insights were:

- **‘Checking’** to replace ‘assuming’. “Do I hear you say that...?” If you resolve to check your message and your *layer* (of judgements, emotions, interpretations, assumptions and scenarios) with the message and the layer of your conversation partner(s), it makes the chance as high as possible (there is no guarantee in the context of communication) that the core message will really be surfaced. Checking for clarity is a way to establish (more) connection
- **‘Describing’** to replace ‘judging’. If you, for example, doubt whether the answer, “Yes, I will do it” is a genuine “Yes”, you can describe the verbal and non-verbal doubt you notice in order to check it, as in “Do I notice some doubt in your answer?” In this way, by describing that you notice some doubt, you invite the other to bring up elements of resistance, if present
- **‘Inter-acting’** to replace ‘reacting’. It is possible for you to influence the behaviour of other people by consciously choosing your own behaviour instead of reacting spontaneously or automatically (see also www.toolshero.com/communication-skills/rose-of-leary/)
- The importance of installing **“Stop”** as a reset button to get / to keep out of reacting automatically. Communicating “Stop” is a solution focused action that creates space for exploration.

The book *“Connective Clarity. When Horses Invite You to Take up Authentic, Solution Focused Leadership”* can be ordered on Amazon, on www.connective-clarity.org or send a mail to wendyvandenbulck@equoia.org.