Solution Focused Leadership – the other side of the elephant

Four distinctions between SFL and SF coaching

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Abstract

SF Brief Therapy, SF coaching, SF training, SF Leadership, SF organisational development … – talking and writing about SF practice reminds me of the tale of the blind men touching an elephant to learn what it is like. They all feel various parts and describe it differently. So, what's an elephant? All of what they explore and much more.

In the last two years, I have conducted worldwide qualitative research to find out what leaders say that works in SF Leadership (SFL) practice with the aim of making SFL accessible for leaders and organisations worldwide and engaging more people to lead in a SF way. Within this project it became clear for me that SFL and SF coaching belong to the same "elephant". However, depending on the angle that we explore it from, it can look quite different. SF leaders sometimes also coach their employees, but SF Leadership has many more facets. While SF coaches usually focus on conversations between the coach and the client, serve the client's goals, follow a SF process, and are happy that the coaching ends after only a few sessions, the success stories suggest that SFL can be much more seen as a leadership style with ongoing interactional behaviour between leaders, employees, and stakeholders. As part of the organisation, leaders can also have their interests at stake. SFL can furthermore be characterised by a wide range of SF interventions – from short everyday interactions to long term SF management cycles. In particular, the short everyday interventions displayed in the success stories focus on only a subset of SF elements and not on the whole SF process. Moreover, SF leaders also seem to

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support SF interactions between employees and with that the forming of a SF culture. The positive effects of these dynamic ongoing SF interactions can help to spread SF fast amongst employees and amplify SFL mutually. This way organisational change is fostered with SFL from the inside. Thus, SFL as a leadership style not only encourages good solutions and high employee engagement, but is also a promise for an organisation's success in a demanding fast-changing dynamic world. SF Leadership – a promise for the future and the other side of the SF elephant.

SF Leadership – ongoing interactions in between

Although more and more SF people work in organisations, SF is still widely seen as a therapy, coaching, training, or facilitating approach, but not yet as a leadership style. In my own leadership experience, I was fascinated to realise how useful SF in leadership positions can be and what effects it can have. These two observations and the aim of making SF Leadership (SFL) more accesible to leaders and organisations, led to the worldwide research that I have conducted in the last two years. The main goals of this research were to find out what works in SFL and to describe SFL in a model. Not much literature has been published about SFL, either applying SF coaching principles to leadership (e.g. Mussmann & Zbinden 2005; Cauffman & Dierolf, 2006; Radatz, 2007; Bannink, 2010; Mussmann, 2011) or focusing on a specific profession (e.g. Froeschle & Nix, 2009). It has, furthermore, been shown that SF training can have a significant effect on leadership behaviour and outcomes (Hoffmann, Lueger, & Luisser 2006). This is very promising.

In the SF tradition of focusing on what works, I wanted to find out what leaders say works in SF Leadership and derive a model that describes what SF Leaders do. The first part of the research project, therefore, consisted of five focus groups and six expert interviews to find out what SF leaders say they do and how SFL can be spotted. Out of these first ideas with the constant comparative method using selected coding to develop a (constructivist) grounded theory, an initial theoretical model

of SFL and 20 behavioural propositions of SF leaders were developed. To validate these ideas, an online survey with 57 participants was conducted that aimed to find out what SF leaders say they do in practice, what works especially well for them, what supports them to lead in an SF way and what a descriptive model of SFL could look like.

The findings described in Godat (2013) show that SFL can be described as ongoing interactional behaviour with the focus on "Platform Building", "Future Perfect", "Discovering What Works", "Affirming", "Small Steps (Signs)", and "Experiments" between leaders, employees, and stakeholders with the aim of achieving better results, influencing behaviour of others, and/or feeling better as a leader. Supportive behaviour of superiors, employees and stakeholders, as well as the desired outcomes, can amplify SFL behaviour mutually.
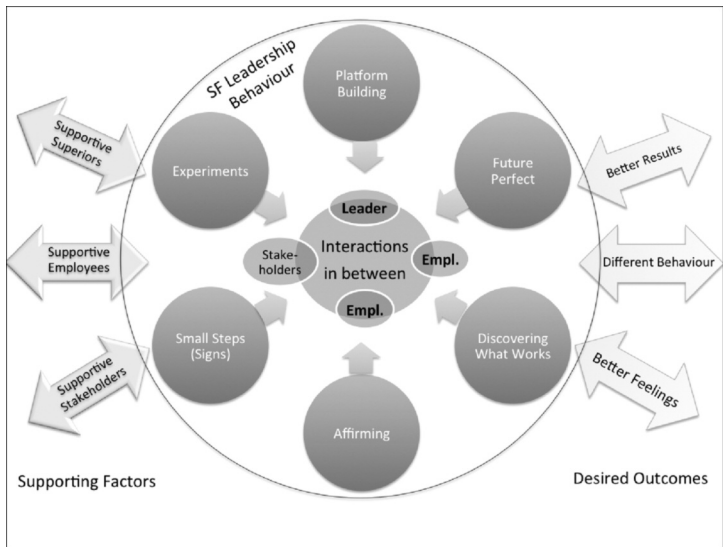

Figure 1 Model of SF Leadership

SFL – a leadership style and the other side of the elephant

Practitioners around the world are currently developing SF in many different fields. At this year's SOLworld-conference SOL2013 in Bad Pyrmont, participants shared experiences in SF group coaching, SF teaching, SF facilitation, SF organisational development, SF leadership, SF project management, SF coaching and many more SF applications. Listening to the various aspects of these different fields of practice reminds me of the tale of the blind men touching an elephant to learn what it is like. Since all six touch different parts, they describe it differently. So, what's an elephant? All of what they feel and much more. And what is SF? All of these applications and much more.

SFL and SF coaching also belong to the same "elephant". However, depending on the angle that we focus on, it can look quite different. Like SF coaching, the successs stories of the SF leaders show that SFL can be applied in different situations, e.g. in every day conversations with employees and other stakeholders, performance appraisals, project management, recruiting interviews, facilitating meetings, or in evaluating past cooperation. The vast majority of the portrayed situations in the conducted SF Leadership Survey cover one-to-one or group conversations. The main instrument used in these SFL stories as well as in SF coaching are the different SF questions (e.g. about Future Perfect, what works well already, small next steps, etc.), also inherent in most of the SF tools used by SF leaders, like scaling, diary of solutions, visualisation of the desired future, evaluation forms of what works, reflecting teams, resource gossip, resourceful observations, miracle brainstorming, story telling, or peer-affirmation. SF coaching and SFL can, therefore, look quite similar. However, if we look from a slightly different angle, we can also find relevant distinctions between SFL and SF coaching. Looking at the success stories of the Solution Focused Leadership Survey these four distinctions can be seen:

Table 1 Four distinctions between SFL and SF coaching

SF Leadership	SF Coaching
1. ongoing interactions	1. one- or two-time interaction(s)
2. the leader with his/her own interests at stake	2. the coach supporting client's goals
3. a wide spectrum of applications	3. a SF coaching session
4. fostering SF behaviour between employees	4. focusing on the interaction between the coach and the client

1. Ongoing interactions

While SF coaching is often seen as a one-time interaction, or maybe a limited more-time interaction if the client comes back for a second or third time, SFL seems to take place on a regular base for a longer time – maybe even daily – in between the same actors. Most of the success stories stress this ongoing character of SFL in between the Leader, the employees and/or other stakeholders. These quotes illustrate this well:
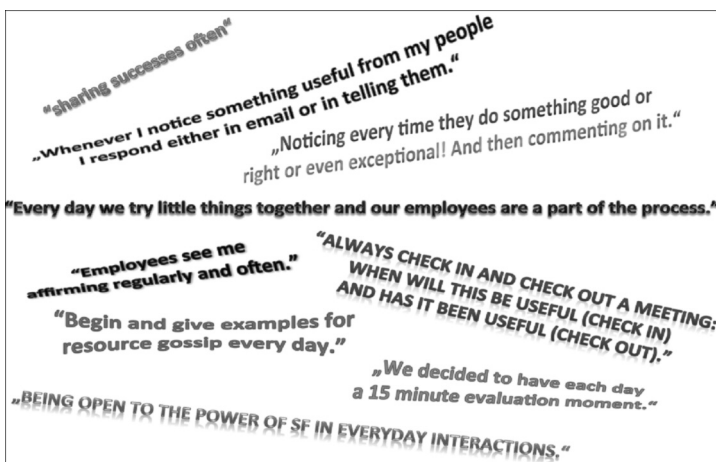
Figure 2 Quotes for SF as ongoing interactions

With this focus on continuing SF behaviour, SFL can be much more seen as a leadership style, a continuous type of behaviour, than a way of coaching in a leadership setting.

2. Own interests at stake

In both SF coaching and SFL the interactions take place in between, either in between the client and the coach or in between the employee and the leader. While the results of the survey don't say anything about the difference between employee and client, there is one relevant distinction visible between the behaviour of the leader and the coach. In SF coaching, especially where it is not mandated, the coach usually puts himself/herself fully into service of the client's Future Perfect. Although this can be the case in SF Leadership too, the survey results indicate that SF leaders also have their own interests at stake. The own goals of the leaders mentioned in the success stories can be divided into three categories:

Influence behaviour of others	Achieve better results	Feel better as a Leader
e.g.	e.g.	e.g.
• more motivated, energetic, active and creative employees	• more useful meetings	• feel less pressure to "fix it all myself"
• employees that take over more responsibility	• productive conversations	• carry the responsibility together
• people cooperating better	• attained goals	• experience less stress
• stakeholders acting differently	• better solutions	• etc.
• team members behaving in a more relaxed way	• next steps	
• employees that focus their energy on goals	• performance appraisals that make more sense	
• etc.	• get better service from other departments	
	• etc.	

Figure 3 Goals of the Leaders

SF interactions are neither seen by the leaders as an end itself, nor solely to support employees, but in most success stories as a means to foster behaviour of others, to reach better results and/or to feel better as a leader in a leadership position.

Furthermore, there are 4 different types of Future Perfects visible in the success stories:

1. **The Future Perfect of the Leader:** The Leader sets his/her Future Perfect and engages others in a SF way to contribute to it and/or to achieve it.
2. **A shared Future Perfect:** The Leader fosters SF conversations to create a shared Future Perfect.
3. **The Future Perfect of the organisation:** The Leader engages others in a SF way to reach the Future Perfect of the organisation.
4. **Individual Future Perfects:** The Leader encourages the creation of individual Future Perfects.

All four types are relevant and can occur at the same time. The significance and a possible hierarchy seems to depend strongly on the situation and on the perspective of the leader. In projects, for some leaders it's important to have their own Future Perfect first and then involve others. Other leaders stress the importance of a shared Future Perfect and see no need to have their own picture of success in the beginning. Moreover, there seems to be no hierarchy of these four types. All are important and can depend on or at least influence each other mutually (indicated in Figure 4 with the grey arrows). While the Future Perfect of the organisation and the shared Future Perfect are often created mutually, the Future Perfect of the leader and the individual one of the employee seem to be more individualistic.

Since leaders are part of the organisation, they also have their interests at stake in the creation of various Future Perfects. Their interests are relevant in the creation of their own Future Perfect, that of the organisation, and maybe even of shared or individual Future Perfects. The four types also reveal that, even though SF leaders generally encourage

employee participation, there are also areas, e.g. the Future Perfect of the leader, where SF leaders can and sometimes have to decide themselves without involving employees. It's seen as a leadership task to decide when and how to involve employees in a SF way. While SF can be used to identify and help discover Future Perfect, here SF serves another purpose: it's seen as a means to engage people in reaching the desired outcomes. Leaders thus not only try to support teams and employees to come up with their individual or shared desired future, but also apply SF to motivate employees to help reach the goals of the organisation and/or of the leader. In addition SF leaders quite often try to embed the desired future of stakeholders and customers; "another thing that supports SF is putting the customer in focus" and building a "future perfect that includes the individual, team and organisation view and benefits to all stakeholders."
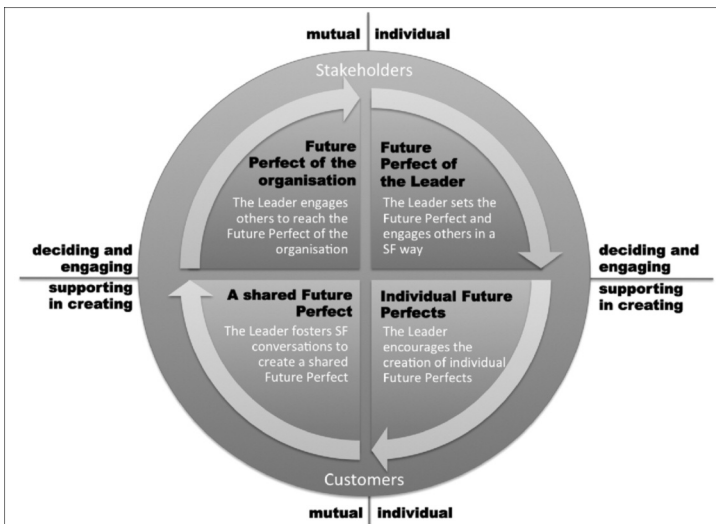

Figure 4 Four Future Perfects in SF Leadership and the behaviour of the Leader

3. A wide spectrum of applications

The SF Leadership stories cover a broad spectrum of applications. The interventions can be much shorter than SF coaching and also much longer. Many SF leaders portrayed SF Leadership as interventions with only a few SF questions or tools, e.g. in every day interactions, in leadership tools, and/or in meetings. Others on the other side mentioned longer settings, like one or more day workshops or even SF in long term management cycles. SF coaching is also part of SFL, but the success stories cover a much wider spectrum:
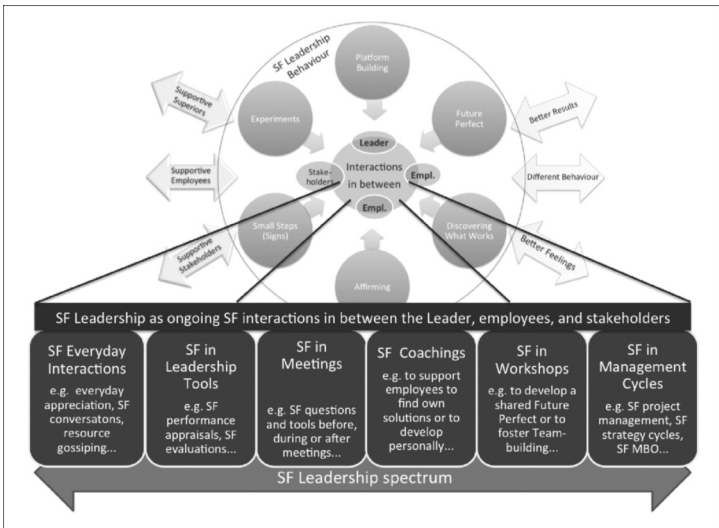

Figure 5 Wide spectrum of SF Leadership applications beyond SF Coaching

SF Everyday Interactions, e.g.

- **SF questions and comments in every day conversations with employees**
  "I would ask at least one SF question and or make a SF comment (affirmation, compliment) in every single conversation"

- **Short weekly conversations with employees**
  "I develop an employee (a very young one). I regularly make a 5 minute check once a week. I ask him about his success stories last week and how he can apply his strength and competencies this week. The focus is on strength and success. Result: he is able to define his own way, he develops a good feeling, which is important for him, his work and the company."
- **Observing each other in a SF way**
  "What went well and what should I keep for the next time?"
- **SF in performance appraisals**
  "She was happy to speak about the part she did really well but, somewhat surprisingly for me, she readily admitted that a significant chunk was subpar. In an ordinary appraisal situation that would be extremely difficult"
- **SF evaluation**
  "I decided to list my top five evaluation criteria (…) including a 1–10 scale for each criterion. Then I rated the achievement, listed everything that I liked…"
- **SF in recruiting interview**
  "I know their goals when they join the company, by being SF during the job interview (…) When interviewing the last candidates for a position and if you're convinced that a candidate is a possible fit, it's great to ask the miracle question."

SF in Meetings, e.g.
- **Starting a meeting with a few SF questions**
  "Of all the things we did last week what are we most satisfied with?"
- **Resource gossiping**
  "So we started with resource-gossip and after that trying to find more strengths already in the group. I did not expect that it would work so easily but people changed in their body."

- **Short SF conversations after a meeting**
  Example from an accounting department: "I asked only two questions: (1) What is the best year end closing for you this time? (2) What is it that you can contribute to that?"

SF in Workshops, e.g.
- **Starting workshops with a SF intervention**
  "I started the workshop by explaining that we are discussing green balls (= things that are working) and red question marks (= things that are not yet working) and that we would start on the green ones. (. . .) The green list was twice as long as the red one!"
- **Scaling in workshops**
  "I introduced a walking scale in the room. The window-side standing for the process being clear and very effective, the wall-side standing for the opposite of it. The people found their position and discussed with a partner what was already clear and effective – I just collected the excellent comments. Then they moved to where they want to be at the end of the day and discussed the difference, and finally we focused on the next little step. I put everything on a flip chart and we smoothly and energetically moved on to a really successful meeting. Finally we had an excellent solution and were even able to finish earlier."

SF in (longer term) Management Cycles, e.g.
- **SF in project management**
  "We used SF to solve an overwhelming problem (. . .). We used SF Tools, small steps and produced truly magical results in a sensationally short period of time."
- **SF vision and strategy process**
  "The first meeting aimed to create these norms and common vision of the perfect future." "I have a very clear vision and this permeates all communication. I always try to link things to the vision." "By openly asking/answering future perfect questions, by writing personal letters to ourselves, by visualising the preferred future in detail".

While the longer SFL interventions can cover most of the SF categories from "Platform Building", "Future Perfect", "Discovering What Works", "Affirming" to "Small Next Steps (Signs)" and "Experiments", the shorter ones mostly use a subset of these categories.

4. Fostering SF behaviour in between employees

Many SF leaders, furthermore, say that they try to create a culture with SF inside. They describe it as an "in-house coaching culture (...) by using SF tools" or "a learning organisation and a coaching culture (...) that supports SF", characterised by SF conversations between employees. SF leaders encourage their employees to "practise SF in their daily work" and "do it for each other". These interactions between employees can be stimulated by peer-affirmation. Recognition of success not only by the boss, but also by your peers is important. SF coaches, on the other hand, focus much more on the interactions between the coach and the client during the coaching. Although SF experiments after coaching can work in a similar way and can help to keep the focus of the client on useful SF interactions with others in the future, it's seldom pursued with the same aim of creating a SF culture in the client's world.

A good example of this fostering of SF behaviour in between is the "success bell": a ship's bell installed on the wall of an open-plan office. Whenever employees see a success by someone else or have experienced a success themselves they go to the bell and ring it. After ringing the bell, the employees tell the others what successes they have seen and how these were achieved. SF tools like that can help boost useful conversations in between employees. SF Leadership, therefore, is not only about direct interactions by the leader, but also about SF tools that foster SF interactions.

The ongoing SF interactions also seem to spread throughout companies quite often and quickly. In various success stories the SF leaders were amazed to find out after a certain amount of time that the employees were using SF questions, compli-

menting each other, or using SF tools. SF leaders seem to function as role models in spreading SF throughout the organisation:

- "I would ask at least one SF question and/or make a SF comment (affirmation, compliment) in every single conversation I had with every person while at work. A year and a half later I hear so many of the same questions and comments coming from others."
- "It was great to see that a simple set of questions could spread from person to person with positive results for them all."
- "What started out as scepticism is now turning into usage. I've been in two meetings where the staff, on their own initiative, used a solutions focus agenda. (. . .) We are slowly but surely becoming a more SF organisation."
- "My employees may think along SF lines without even knowing what SF is and that it is happening."

Conclusion

Even tough SF coaching and SFL belong to the same "elephant", the four distinctions show that SF Leadership is much more than just SF coaching in a leadership position. It can be described as a leadership style with ongoing SF interactions in between different actors: the leader, with his own interests at stake, the employees, and the stakeholders. The interactions focus on "Platform Building", "Future Perfect", "Discovering What Works", "Affirming", "Small Next Steps (Signs)", and "Experiments", either or all of them or a selected subset. SFL can be used in various settings and offers a wide range of possible applications, from everyday leadership interactions to SF management cycles. SF leaders, furthermore, foster SF interactions in between employees. This way SFL not only helps to achieve better results, to change behaviour of employees and stakeholders, or to feel better as a leader, but can also spread fast among employees.

They learn how to apply SF principles to their work and can achieve desired outcomes often faster and better. This way organisational change is fostered with SFL from the inside. Thus, SFL as a leadership style not only fosters good solutions and high employee engagement, but is also a promise for an organisation's success in a demanding, fast-changing and dynamic world. SF Leadership – a leadership style beyond coaching as a promise for the future.

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