

Interview

Adopting the language of the business:
An interview with John Brooker

Interview by Carey Glass

John Brooker is a professional meeting facilitator and innovator, working with teams on a truly international basis, across Western and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. He encourages teams to think innovatively using his own Inn8 Approach and Solution Focus, so that they can achieve difficult targets, tackle complex challenges and maximise major opportunities. He is the author of Innovate to Learn, Don't Learn to Innovate. The Inn8 Approach detailed in the book has recently been licensed by Unipart for internal use.

John, it's a delight to interview you on the business uses of SF. First off, do you find that you use it in a different way to how therapists or coaches might use it?

Yes, I think there are differences when using SF in business. The first thing that comes to mind is language – that we have to adopt the language of the business. We have to adapt ourselves to what they are trying to do without destroying the essence of SF. So if they were to ask me, “right, we want to find the root causes of problems,” I’m not going to do that. But if they want talk about “objectives” or “aims” or “goals” rather than future perfect, I’m not going to argue with them.

You're suggesting businesses automatically talk about goals and objectives, which is interesting, because in therapy people may not. So what does that mean about the differences in the clientele?

My feeling is that in therapy, unless you are sent, you don't have anyone dictating to you how things must be. In a business, you have your annual appraisal, and they will talk about targets or "key performance indicators", or whatever it is, and that's what we have to adjust to.

Okay, so one difference is that when you walk into a business, the aim of working to a goal is already present?

Most successful people set their goals. So they say, "Oh, my goal is this". But if we were to ask someone in SF what goal means, I'm not sure we would describe it this way.

We'd have people who might say that a goal limits possibilities, and the focus would be better on progress, and looking at the territory.

Yeah. But sadly businesses aren't like that, even though they do look at the territory. I'm thinking back to one session I ran with a Dutch company. They wanted a session on a "must win battle". The thing that we absolutely have to work on if we are to succeed. So I just went along with that. It was what they needed in their moment. That was their terminology. They had this very military metaphor and therefore I used their language.

What difference did it make for them doing this?

Well, they had come up with a future perfect and about six critical success factors (what I call "Key Enablers"), and they then wanted to narrow down to one of those, and choose it as the "must win battle". They narrowed it down to software testing. If we do nothing else this year, we've got to sort our

testing out. And so what we did was we took that “must win battle”, and I said okay, what does testing look like if you succeed in a year’s time? We repeated the SF process on this topic, not just with this management team, but also with the testing teams.

When we’re working on key enablers, groups can come up with more than eight, which can dilute their focus. In that case we do an exercise to reduce them down. And in that you often see hierarchies of thinking in which one thing is a subset of another. I find this out by asking “why do this? Is it because you want to do this?” This exercise helps you find the key enabler. I might also ask “is this enabler so important that even if it is a sub enabler, you can’t lose it, yes? Keep it!”

That’s also really interesting because what you’re describing is that when we take SF into businesses you need to work with structures more.

Businesses like to have a model, a structure that they can walk out with, and that’s what I give them. I will give them an Excel spreadsheet that states the future perfect, our key enablers, a description of ten for each key enabler on a scale of one to ten, a rating and what got them up to that rating. And then under that we record what they think would move them to seven rather than six. I’m a very active person, and I find businesses are very active as well. They want actions. They want to do things; they don’t want to philosophise. So we record sprint actions. “What’s the thing that you guarantee to do to move this forward? And that is a very structured model, yet it’s all SF in my view.”

So what else are you adapting to client needs?

Well, SF is a way of thinking and it is a tool. So if we look at my work with the high-speed rail company, I facilitated using an SF philosophy – getting everyone in the room working and interacting together, looking for strengths, not looking for weaknesses, and asking SF type questions, from the very start.

At the same time we had to use tools that were very largely based around the construction industry: risk analysis and things like that. When that was the case, I didn't say, "you can't say risk, we've got to use a different term". What I simply did was take what they had and did it in an SF way.

Can you describe that a little bit?

My view is that this is where facilitation and SF merge. I facilitate in an SF way. If we talked about SF clues, you'd be spotting them everywhere! If we take the rail project as an example, we had a lot of industry experts, professors, very senior managers in very large organisations, and diverse opinions. The client said his fear was that it was going to descend into clashes, arguments, defense and attack, etc. But by using an SF philosophy and approach every time, we overcame those kinds of issues.

It wasn't down to "let's use this SF tool now", though I did use SF tools; it was about, "what question can we ask here in an SF way?" So rather than saying we've got to find the root cause of the problem I would just say to them, "I want you to draw a picture of when this is all working really well, what's happening?" We have to approach everything that we do in businesses with an SF mindset, but not allow our tools to overtake the tools they use. If they've got a good tool that they use, and it's industry-accepted, and that's what they have to use, then let's use that, but let's use it with an SF hat on.

So could we take an example of a tool that a lot of people know, which is a SWOT analysis? So when they want to do the threats – or weaknesses – how do you turn that around?

Words have an emotion to them, and "weakness" and "threat" have a lot of emotion to me. The minute you can start talking about internal weaknesses in the organisation people start to get defensive. One of the things we do as SF practitioners is avoid defensiveness. We get people to the point where they're

happy to contribute, and don't feel they're being attacked, and that's part of what I do as well.

I had a discussion with Alan Kay once when somebody said they wanted to do the SWOT analysis. And I said to him, "I'm not very happy about the weaknesses," and his view was questions – ask different questions.

So we should look on questions as tools, they just haven't got a label as tools. I mean if we come back to SWOT, you can build a SWOT analysis with four different questions. It's not, "what are our strengths, what are our weaknesses, what are the opportunities and threats?" It's more like, "what are we doing well, what might we do better, what can we see happening in the future, and what do we have to counter?" If you think about the Constructive Rant tool, which gets people to rant about all of their concerns; after the rant we ask, "so what is it you want?" People want to get those threats off of their chest, just as they want to get problems off their chest. Let's not pretend that threats don't exist, or weaknesses don't exist, but it's how we deal with it, the language we use to make people feel comfortable – that they are not being attacked.

So when you're in a business, what sort of things are you doing at the beginning to set that atmosphere that makes everyone comfortable to participate?

If I only have a short time, I will always, always get them talking. That's the first thing I do. And I will simply ask a question like, "what's the most positive thing that's happened to you in the last two years? Talk for one minute with your colleague about that".

What difference does that make?

It gets them thinking in a positive way. I do it in a very structured way, so they each have one minute uninterrupted to talk about the most positive thing that's happened. What I'm trying to do there is to get them to forget what's happening outside

the room, for example, the really bad email they might have just received, and get them thinking positively. So we start to build that climate.

Then the next thing we ask is “what are your hopes for this workshop as an individual?” Ideally we do it in threes if there’s more time so they’re interacting again. People come into these workshops a little nervous, thinking “what if I say something wrong? Who am I to talk? Am I allowed to talk? Is it only the bosses?” So by getting interaction going, that starts to break down the barriers. They’re actually giving their viewpoint on something very positive in their lives, there’s usually lots of humour and smiles. So the point is we’re building a climate where people start to trust.

With HS2, we’d often only have a three hour window to work, so it would literally be, “talk about the most interesting innovation that you’ve seen on the railways”, just so it was on topic, so people aren’t saying, “oh, I’m wasting my time here”. Then we encourage continuous interaction in small teams and move people around, which is a standard facilitation technique, but also very SF, because you’re promoting interaction; you’re getting more and more conversation.

What you described there was an understanding of businesses that you’ve brought into the room – that there are hierarchies, and that people don’t necessarily talk to each other. So what other understandings of businesses are you bringing into the room?

I bring an understanding of meetings and a confidence into the room, which is, “I know what I’m doing, and you’re going to be okay with me”. You’ve got to build the trust in you as well. What I’m also bringing into the room is my knowledge of facilitation, and what works. For example if people want to hear everybody’s viewpoint in a large group, that will take an hour and a half, and everybody will be asleep by the time the third person’s spoken in a normal situation. I know that from business.

So in those large groups, which are very different to families, or individuals, or coaching, what are the elements of the structure of communicating that works?

What work's is to ensure everyone's voice is heard but also within short business time frames. So I find small teams within the group works best to achieve both of those things. However, if I'm asked to do a whole group exercise I often say, "go away for ten minutes and think, and then come back, and you will each have one minute to talk". I learned that from a chairman of a major multinational who had 27 managing directors. He said to them, "you've all got one minute to say your piece, and then we're going to vote." I sat down and thought wow, that was a great learning, because he just went, "time, cut" if someone went over the minute. Time was effectively used and the hierarchy was neutralised as everyone spoke.

One of the big problems with communication is the dominant person. I respect the fact that they may be very knowledgeable, but I want diverse opinions expressed. I use teams of threes to get this. I then bring them back together as a whole group, and do feedback on their findings.

Another issue is the reticent person. Small teams work for them too. It's really difficult not to talk when you go for a walk with someone, and your task is to talk about a given topic. You just can't get out of it. So it's really creating a structure in which people talk. So what I bring to the room is a structure of communicating that works and promotes interaction, which is what makes it SF.

I suspect people are curious how you then bring things together if choices have to be made when there is great diversity?

Well, what we're looking for is, "where is there agreement?" In the second part of the Constructive Rant, I have the group place their "wants" on a board and tell me what's similar. The big learning, the lesson from that is "wow, look how much agreement we've got already about what people want". Normally that is the case.

And then if we have to make a decision on what is the most important, I give them a bunch of dots to choose the important things that we think we need to take forward. But often I don't bother, especially with the platform. I'll say something like, "are you all agreed that you've got pretty much the same viewpoint on where you're trying to get to? Yep. Okay, well let's leave it there". But if the future perfect is completely diverse, then the question you have to put is, "this is an ideal future. Is there enough agreement here that we can move towards this future?" And if there is, then great, let's just start talking about what's going to enable us to get to this future?

If these enablers are completely different, then I might suggest to them, "should we vote on what you want to do? Or do you want to do another exercise to talk more about this?" It rarely happens, but when it does we have to address it. "Okay, let's take a break. Give me five minutes to think." I'll often grab the client, and say, "right, okay, what do you think? Where do you see this going, etcetera, etcetera?"

So what you're saying is another important factor in business is that you actually have a sponsor – the person who's brought you in to do the work. How does that make the work different?

One of the things I learned when I was leading teams myself was that I wanted to get my team's opinion, but that I ultimately made the decision. So what I'm doing with the client is saying, "you know you've got different viewpoints here on moving forward. Personally, I would tell the team that they have given you really useful information; we're not going to make a decision here, but you're going to take it away, and make your decision on that".

So that's one way you can do it. But if you've got the rest of the day to work, then you say to the client, "which of these things is what you want to work on?" The client is not the whole team; the client is this person who leads it. They have the right to say which of these ways forward is the way forward.

Most people just want the opportunity to give their opinion,

to be heard. Junior people often feel that senior management never listen to them. So we're giving people a chance to do this in a team. Once they've given their opinion, most of them are very happy if you say, "you know what, that's great, we've heard all these different viewpoints, but this is the way the client wants to move forward". Most people will accept that.

So in that sense, as a person consulting in business, you are doing what your client has asked you to do, and therefore keeping them happy, which is actually what you're paid to do, as well as involve the others.

Yes. Where it can go wrong is where you get the kind of client who is just bringing you in, and wants you to manipulate the group.

So you also have to create a contract with your client regarding expectations?

Well, to build the contract, what I do is I ask them 20 questions – the same 20 questions every time. My total focus is "what is your outcome?" We know the purpose of the meeting. When we walk out of this room, what have the team agreed on? Agreeing up front is a really important part of the success of the meeting. Sometimes they haven't got a clue what they're trying to achieve. That's my job. In advance, and that's different to therapy, I am agreeing what are the outcomes that you will be happy with. So I do it in an SF way. You know, imagine it's the end of the meeting, what are the outcomes that would make you most happy? And then "what are the outputs that will make you most happy? Is it a list of actions? Is it some kind of five point strategy?" Etc. That way they're very clear on what success is as they walk out. We then brief the team on those outcomes in advance and they have the chance to object, which rarely happens. But the number one rule for my success, and it doesn't matter whether you're using SF or something else, is what are the outcomes

that are going to make you happy? If you haven't absolutely nailed those, you're unlikely to be successful.

Okay, so it's a bit like Princess Diana; the difference in business is that there are three in the marriage, and one of them is you?

Yeah, I mean the worst thing is when you've got a client, and a super client, and the team. So the super client delegated it to someone else, and you're working with that person on the outcomes that they want. They then go to the boss and say, "here are the outcomes that I've agreed with John" and the boss says, "no, that's not what I want". At least that's positive in a way, because everybody's starting to learn, and realise what they want out of it.

So you get the outcomes and the outputs, and tell the participants about them before they come into the room?

Yeah, so I send them a brief, saying we're running this workshop, its purpose, and say here are the outcomes that we expect to have, here are the outputs we expect, the team will have such and such etc. At the bottom, there are two questions: what will make this meeting really successful for you, and what is your biggest hope for this meeting? Now we don't always get the time to get the answers back to those questions, but at least it's getting them thinking about it.

So why are you choosing to do all of that before you've got anyone in the room?

Because it's practical. As a business you've only got a certain amount of time. Also, if you work out the outcomes on the day of the workshop the risk is that you start to have disagreements about them. When it comes to facilitating, I think that if you understand the outcomes as you go in, if things change you can too. I tell teams is this is a script, but I'm not a slave to

this process; we are working with something that's the best we can think of at the beginning for this group.

If things change, I say "hey guys, this isn't what we were going to talk about, but let's spend the next 30 minutes doing this instead; come back with your answers, and then we'll get back onto the agenda again". I've had times at the end of day one when the client has said, "you know what, this isn't the best thing we could do with our time tomorrow. Here's the best thing". "Okay, what outcomes do you want?" Just start again, and then we tell the team how we've changed the agenda.

There is one more question that I would like to ask. Because philosophically SF comes from a completely different paradigm, it can make sense not to muddy the water in the way it is used. I'm wondering how we think about that in business terms, and whether it is important, and/or feasible, and what it would mean to maintain its purity in a business.

I think we have to separate what we mean by purity. I think we have to stick to the philosophy of SF, that we don't look at the problems, we do all these different things that are in the clues. That's where we have to be purists. But when we come to working with business, if we say that there are tools, like SWOT, that are not SF, if we use an SF philosophy with them then is that wrong? We're still using pure SF, but we just happen to be using the philosophy of SF, rather than the tools of SF. And who says what the tools are? Are the original tools the only tools that we'll ever have?

Is there a midpoint here that gets us out of this confusion in business? When someone is in therapy or coaching, they have a particular language. In business the language is different, because it includes business tools. So if we don't use that language, we are rejecting the language of the client. Is the midpoint that in businesses you have to take this extra language of tools, and processes, and HR processes, and whatever, and use them in an SF way, rather than reject them?

I would agree 100% with that. It's not saying "you are wrong, and we are right"; it's saying, "that's interesting, how might we find a blended way of doing that which is more SF?" One other factor that we have to bring in is that there are many people in the room, so we have to accept that we have to use different ways of working to use the SF tools. It's simpler to run through the tools in coaching, you're one on one. But when you've got many different people in the room, you're getting different viewpoints, getting different scalings, different interpretations of what ten is, different future perfects. They want different things. That's a big factor.

That's a very important thing to understand because it means you have to learn to facilitate. If you want to work with business, there's no use saying, "well, I know SF, so I can go and run these meetings."

You've got to know how to facilitate them, and how to work with groups of people. And that's one of the issues around, because a lot of people call themselves facilitators, but actually have not really learned how to do that. They may be good trainers or consultants, but they're not facilitators.

What is it about facilitating that is critical?

My view on facilitating with business is you've got to respect that they haven't got a lot of time, and therefore it is critical to balance outcomes and efficiency. SF is actually a very efficient approach. That's one of the things I love about it. We can do things with SF in half a day that take a day with other methods. A client in Austria just said to me, "wow, I've never

seen this team produce so much in two days. This is fantastic”.

So, SF is a fantastic approach, yet we can't be too precious about SF. We can't stand on the high ground, and say, “this isn't an SF tool, because it is not in the book”. SF would become fossilised. But having said that, equally we cannot allow it to be diluted so that people are looking at problems with an occasional SF question. That's crazy. So we've got to use the philosophy, but we can be flexible with the tools. Focus on the outcomes and always be looking for what the most efficient way that we can achieve this is. And that really is what I would say to anyone facilitating in business with an SF approach.

I appreciate some people might not agree with my views. I think, though, we can all learn from having conversations about these topics.

Thank you very much.