

## Change is in the eye of the beholder

Improving job satisfaction in Sweden

**Björn Johansson, Eva Persson, Mark McKergow and Jenny Clarke**  
**Organisation: Lund employment office (Arbetsförmedlingen), Sweden**

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*A heavy workload, increased stress at work, rifts in the relationship between staff and management, increased sickness absence. This sounds like a workplace with problems and low morale. The fundamental strengths, competences and commitments that keep the workplace going are not obvious at first glance. But these are the very qualities that provide the foundation and the potential to create a better workplace in the future. In this case, Björn Johansson and Eva Persson from Center för Lösningfokuserad Utveckling (CLUES) used solution focused coaching to bring hope back to an employment office that had been experiencing difficulties for several years.*

In 2000, four small employment offices were merged into one in Lund, in Skåne, the southernmost province of Sweden. Staffan Hällö, an experienced manager who had been in charge of one of the four, took on the role of manager of the new office. About 50 people worked there, advising both employed and unemployed people about rehabilitation, education and work.

Staffan explains: *“There were four different cultures in the office and I wanted to create just one”*. Pointing his hand in a heroic gesture, he continues: *“I showed the way and kept a tight rein. This was difficult for many of the staff who were used to making their own decisions and so as time went on, I*

*relaxed my directive style. However, after a couple of years, the employee survey was still showing bad results – there may have been one culture, but they still saw me as a dictator. This really made me think. I thought I had changed my way of leading the office, but if they hadn't noticed, then I hadn't.*

### **Comment Box**

#### **The action is in the interaction**

Ludwig Wittgenstein said "An 'inner process' is in need of outward criteria". (Philosophical Investigations 580). SF is part of the post-structural tradition, holding that qualities like leadership are not intrinsic to individuals but emerge as part of the interaction between individuals. All change comes from an observer's point of view; if change is not visible in the world, then there is no change. This is one reason why SF practitioners are so interested in the perceptions of the various participants in a situation.

Ongoing workplace evaluations also showed that there were specific areas where improvements were desirable, including leadership style, the work environment, project and developmental issues, and customers' needs and demands. Staffan knew that it was time to do something about the situation and sought advice from his boss. She wasn't as concerned as Staffan himself – the Lund office wasn't bottom of the heap – but appreciating his desire to do better, she recommended Björn and Eva. It was important to Staffan that the majority wanted to do something about the situation:

*"I asked them if they would agree to involve someone from outside – and they did".*

In the spring of 2005, Björn and Eva were contacted by Staffan and given the task of developing a plan with the staff for a better workplace. They were given a day with all the staff, a half-day follow-up six weeks later and another follow-up after six months.

They had a further half-day session with the staff a year later after the next annual workplace evaluation. Between these meetings, the staff took responsibility to follow up the work, identifying progress, making adjustments and agreeing on further steps. Björn and Eva made this a condition of their involvement in the work.

### **Preparations and setting expectations**

Björn and Eva wrote to all the employees introducing themselves, inviting them to the workshop and giving details of the plan for the day. They also asked everyone to answer four questions in confidence before the first meeting:

- What is our view of the situation today?
- What do you need to see happen during the day together, to make participating worthwhile for you?
- What do you think your workplace's strengths and qualities are in the face of change?
- Is there anything else you think we should know?

The answers were revealing. Many thought that nothing had changed and some thought that things had got worse – more stress, a bit chaotic, not enough structure. To make the day worthwhile, people wanted an open atmosphere, to listen to each other, to do things they had agreed to do and to look ahead. They saw their strengths as competence, professionalism, pride in their work and humour.

### **The first meeting**

Coaching 50 people at the same time needs a clear structure from the coaches. Björn and Eva like to keep full group discussions to a minimum and instead give time for reflection, working with clear questions and limited time frames for each activity. They use a wide range of different methods of interacting, reflecting, summarising and developing ideas. They change group formats so that people work with different

colleagues during the day in a variety of constellations. They say that engaging in serious work in this way gives people immediate and visible results of their own contribution:

*“When some employees were later asked how they were able to sustain this way of working, one of them answered: ‘It was easy to keep the structure of working in small groups, since we have done it before and we know that it is effective’. It showed the importance of not only talking about how to do things, but of doing them together.”*

Staffan was keen to be seen as a participant in the day, joining in the exercises like everyone else. Björn and Eva started with an overview of the day, acknowledging that the participants were the experts in their own workplace and that their own role was to help them develop their ideas to create a better workplace. They recognised the tough situation by reading a summary of the e-mailed responses to their questions. The participants were able to reflect, comment and add to the list.

### **Comment box**

#### **Start by building a firm platform**

Time spent building a platform is usually time spent well. Björn and Eva do this in the pre-meeting invitation and in the way they start the day. They acknowledge the difficulties, show respect for the participants' own knowledge and expertise and give compliments for the strengths and qualities.

The participants were invited to set up norms for how they should behave during the day to make it feel safe, respectful and meaningful. Impressed by how they had described their ability to cope, Björn and Eva explored how they had been able to carry on in spite of their difficulties. In smaller groups, participants described the strengths, qualities and approaches that

had been helpful and sometimes vital in coping. This is another part of platform building and as Eva points out:

*“This kind of activity encourages engagement and participation and focuses on participants’ own abilities as well as their responsibility to make things go well.”*

In order to clarify their personal goals for the project, the participants continued to work in groups of three asking each other the following questions:

- Of all the things you do at work, what are you most pleased with?
- What else?
- So in view of that, and everything else you do, what are you most interested to develop, within the frame of creating a better workplace?
- What will be the first sign telling you that you have come one tiny step forward?

Everyone was then instructed to show appreciation and give compliments for what they heard their colleagues say in this exercise.

### **Comment box**

#### **Who are ‘customers for change’?**

This is still part of the platform building – engaging everyone as a ‘customer for change’. In SF terms, a ‘customer for change’ is someone who thinks change is desirable AND is prepared to do something about it. This second component of customer-hood is important; often people recognise that change is needed, but think that it’s not their responsibility or not in their spheres of influence to effect the changes. By helping the participants to answer the question ‘what’s in this for me?’, Björn and Eva enhance their motivation and energy.

Looking back to this part of the first session, Lil – who works at the Lund office – says:

*“I didn’t feel very good when I arrived at the meeting, but Björn and Eva asked what we do at work that’s good and it was great to see such a long list. Since we have learned about the methods they use, we spend more time finding what works and doing more of it instead of looking at the problem and its whole history. We tell each other what’s going well!”*

### **The future perspective – stage 1**

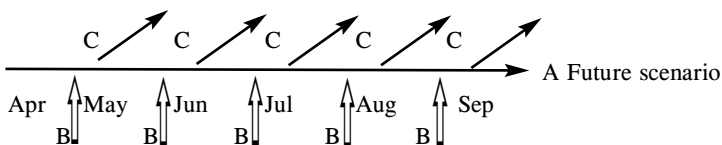
There were two parts to the work of building a future scenario for a better workplace, with associated projects and concrete action plans. The first was designed to give a clear and detailed picture of the future visualised along a WWYSH-line (What Would You See Happen). The detail was fleshed out by listing what they already knew about what was going to happen (facts, meetings, activities etc.) and then by exploring what progress they would like to be able to report along the way, what they would see developing and growing over the period.

*“Imagine it is six months from now . . .and that during this period, things here have developed surprisingly well . . . You find yourself right in the middle of things happening as a result of progress and improvements. It’s not perfect yet, but as far as you are concerned, . . . things are going surprisingly well . . . How do you know. . .? What are the signs telling you things have changed? What are you and your colleagues doing differently now? How do your customers know. . .?”*

Björn explains:

*“Our intention with this kind of future-oriented question is to expand the frame of reference set by current resources and conditions. It provides a very rich picture, full of nuances, which is realistic but also positively surprising.”*

## WWYSH (What would you see happening ...)



**Note:** A shows what “a better workplace” looks like; B captures known future counters; C represents signs of progress along the way.

In this stage, eight relevant projects were generated. They included how the internal work should be done, interaction between different units, use of competence profiles, how to run effective meetings, activities with customers and the organisation of certain units. Everyone including Staffan said which project they thought they best could contribute to, leading to the establishment of new project teams.

Choosing to join working groups gave people the opportunity to work with different colleagues from different parts of the organisation. Lil says:

*“We worked with different people than we usually did. I had not worked with these people before and after a couple of hours we really worked well together. Then I was able to see the problems from another perspective than just my own.”*

### **Comment box**

#### **Trust people to choose the most important topics**

Offering choice like this is a good way to maintain ‘customership’ and helps sustain engagement and ownership. Whether people choose a project because it strikes them as most important, most interesting, where they can best make a contribution, or for any other reason, their motivation and involvement is likely to be much higher than if they had been told which project group to join.

## *The future perspective – stage 2*

Björn and Eva have devised a Multiple Organisational Projects (MOP) scale for use in cases like this, where many projects form part of the progress towards the Future Perfect (see box at the end of the chapter).

Each project team worked with a scale where 10 meant that their project had developed as well as it possibly could in the next three months and 0 meant that nothing had happened at all. They were asked:

- Imagine you are at 10. How do you know? What are you doing differently? What else?
- Where would you say you are today? (x)
- Of the things that happen at 10, what do you do already, getting you to x?
- Which of the things you are doing already can you do more of to bring you up on the scale?

Björn and Eva's experience is that up to ten project teams can be coached in parallel, making for efficient and effective working with large groups. When each team had worked through the questions about their own scale, the whole group was brought back together for the final steps in this stage:

- Reflection and anchoring where each team reported on their ideas and answered any questions. Other teams were invited to comment and add their views.
- A concrete action plan for the following two weeks.
- Is this enough? If not, what else is needed?

By the end of the day, the eight different teams had worked out concrete action plans, primarily directed towards what they would do over the next couple of weeks. Most of the participants had some action to do within their project team. Björn and Eva gave them only two instructions before they left: to notice when things that they wanted to see more of actually happened; and to take small steps in the right direction rather than tackling more than they were sure they could cope with.



## **Comment Box**

### **Notice what's better and build on it**

Once again, we see Björn and Eva trusting the people to get on with things themselves and leaving responsibility for making progress – and noticing it – where it belongs. Notice that their instructions were not “Make sure you all do your actions” but “Notice what's better and build on that”.

### **Six-week follow up**

Björn and Eva think that follow-up meetings are a less well-developed part of SF working and one that merits more attention. They say:

*“This is when some of the crucial qualities for sustainability and continued positive development are found. There is always a range of parallel processes and activities emerging from what has happened and these are often impossible to foresee. The solutions focused approach, asking questions like ‘What is better?’ allows us to follow up unforeseen improvements and events as well as planned steps, revealing more useful information than simply going through an action list to check if actions have been done as promised.”*

When they met the Lund group again six weeks after the first session, they were primarily interested in what progress had been made, what they done differently and what behaviours they had done more or less of. This gave a base from which to see what further steps might look like, how sustainability could be secured and what, if any, new issues might affect the forthcoming work. The follow-up meeting was an opportunity to make adjustments to existing projects if necessary. Open questions like “what is better?” drew attention to unforeseen events, actions and effects developed throughout the process. Björn and Eva call this “emerged progress”.

Remember that Staffan had been concerned at the very beginning of the project about how he was perceived as a leader (“*I thought I had changed my way of leading the office, but if they did not think so, then I hadn’t.*”). Interestingly, several employees reported that they had noticed how the style of leadership had changed in many ways. This happened even though there wasn’t any specific action plan about what Staffan should do differently. The clearest connection to leadership was the agreement to change routines at workplace meetings, but this focused on the routines themselves rather than the manager’s role. Several employees expressed their astonishment over this effect.

### **Comment box**

#### **Look out for the ‘ripple effect’**

Here we see that the question of leadership style is resolved, but it happens indirectly, as part of a whole host of changes in the workplace which emerged over the period. The ‘ripple effect’ cannot be designed or predicted – but the question “what’s better?” helps us notice it and gives even more to build on.

Participants identified 39 examples of progress and times when things were better. For example:

- Colleagues show an interest and ask questions
- People talk to each other more and exchange information
- Meetings are better prepared. The teams prepare the agenda and send it out in advance
- Meetings are more systematic; there is a chairman and small group discussions
- People participate all through
- People are more visible to each other and give more feedback and affirmation
- Working with small steps has been different

- People are more relaxed at work, do one thing at a time and get more done
- There's more laughter
- We talk to each other more.

In summary, they reported better routines for meetings and workplace issues, more initiatives from employees, optimism, pleasure in work, better service to customers and increased results. They had discovered that working in small groups in different constellations worked well for them. They had continued to use this approach, letting people choose their projects, with the dual benefits of using motivation, experience and competence to the full and increasing interactions between colleagues.

Staffan was really pleased by the results and says:

*"I had heard of the Solutions Focus approach before, but I work in a very hierarchical organisation and I couldn't see how to introduce it to my small part of it. But what I learned from Björn and Eva is the importance of small steps – you can't do everything at once and you have to start somewhere. The frame we work in may not be negotiable but what happens inside the frame is. We have changed the way we communicate – we used to get everyone together at the same time and the most angry shouted the loudest! Now we ask people to discuss things in small groups for 10 minutes before summarising what they talked about for the larger group."*

Another member of the group, Ann Louise, comments that:

*"Working in small teams within the big group gives everyone a voice. We listen to each other better and try to understand each other. This gives the place a family spirit: we're nicer and friendlier and know that we can face the tough times."*

## Six-month follow-up

When Björn and Eva went back to the Lund office six months later, things were going well. There were several small working groups, tackling projects which they themselves had identified and chosen – for example, bullying and sexual harassment in the workplace. Staffan comments:

*“The ‘ah-ha’ for everyone was that small steps get you there; for each project we agreed the target and the first step, but not the rest of the journey.”*

Lil agrees. She says:

*“Focusing on small steps and not the whole job makes things much easier. We take pleasure in our work and laugh more than we used to.”*

Her colleague Stig explains how they decided that a group’s work was done:

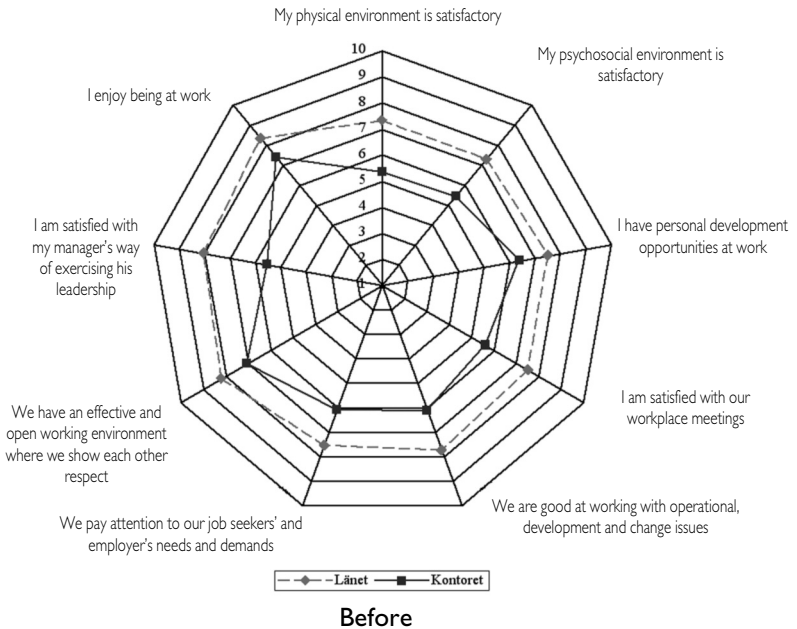
*“We present our findings to the whole office. They listen, make suggestions and decide if anything is missing or if the project is finished. New constellations were composed . . . like circles in the water. The methods Björn and Eva showed us have given us confidence in our own ability to deal with problems.”*

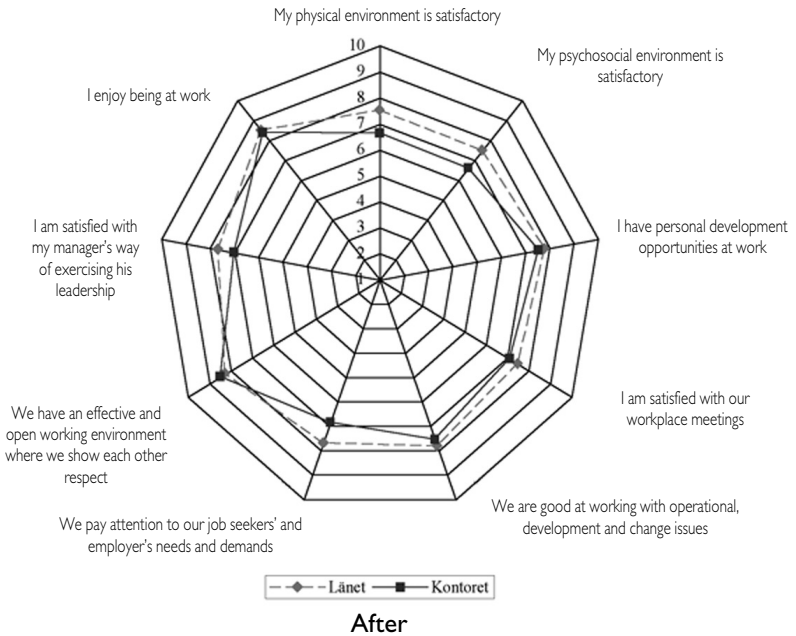
## Results

Six months after the first workshop, perceptions of Staffan’s leadership style were very different, even though there were no specific action plans focusing on how he should behave. The power of affirmation and appreciation may be relevant here. Asked about times when something unexpected but useful had happened, Ann Louise recalled such an occasion:

*“I remember a time when we said good things to Staffan. We could see that it was very important to him and that he was very moved – and he reciprocated!”*

As well as a better work environment, the Lund office now had better results. About a year after Björn and Eva first met them, a new workplace evaluation was carried out. It showed an impressive change with improvement in every measured area. In the first diagram the blue line shows Lund office in comparison with the average for their region (dotted line) against a number of criteria. The second diagram shows the situation a year later, after the work with Björn and Eva.I





These are impressive results – against every parameter, the Lund office had improved its performance, pulling itself up from well below average to at or very near average in each case.

Björn and Eva point to three elements of this work as major contributors to its success:

### **Platform building**

*“The invitation to everyone to express their views in confidence beforehand enabled us to start the first meeting with a summary built on their own words and descriptions. This let us show that we have recognised and listened to their views. We have learnt over the years that this gives us credibility and saves time talking about what how bad the situation is.”*

### **The importance of follow-ups**

*“The internal follow-ups were a powerful learning forum which built participation, efficiency and a platform for decision making. Whether they were discussing improvements or examples of ‘counters’, both seemed to be helpful learning tools in developing their ideas of how to proceed with each topic.”*

### **Focusing on what’s wanted**

*“If you start by trying to solve problems, you are already trapped in a limited field of possibilities. A wider frame like ‘a better workplace’ expands this field, is more inviting to participants and is hard to resist. This gives the group a common project. Individual goals and interests – ‘what’s in it for me?’ – are addressed and engaged very early on in the project as part of the platform building process before the first meeting.”*

**Björn Johansson and Eva Persson** are coaches and trainers who have been running CLUES – the Center för Lösningsofokuserad Utveckling – since 2000. They have been in the front line of developing SF work in organisations for several years.

Lösningsofokuserad Utveckling, Box 4034, 650 04 Karlstad, Sweden.

[www.clues.se](http://www.clues.se)

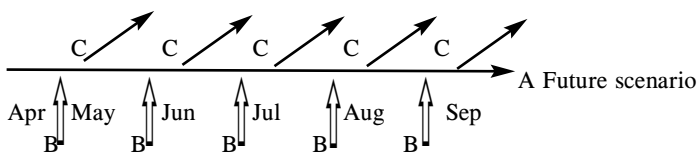
Björn Johansson [bjorn@solutionwork.com](mailto:bjorn@solutionwork.com)

Eva Persson [eva@solutionwork.com](mailto:eva@solutionwork.com)

### Here Björn and Eva discuss the MOP scale

We have found it very useful to work in two stages when we are working with larger groups. In the first stage, projects are identified using the WWYSH line, and in the second stage, self-selected groups work on the project where they are best able to contribute.

**Figure 1: WWYSH**



**Note:** A shows what “a better workplace” looks like; B captures known future counters; C represents signs of progress along the way.

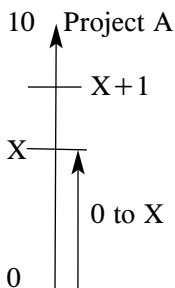
Every example of progress (C fig. 1) is directly connected to the overarching future scenario of what a better workplace will look like (A fig. 1). From the outset, the project is based in context, looking at what is wanted, not what isn't. Useful things which are already known about are acknowledged. These are counters from



the future – known contributors to the effective implementation of ideas and plans. Our experience is that this approach creates momentum and security for the employees, without the need to formulate traditional goals or stepping stones to goals.

Projects generated in the first stage are dealt with thoroughly in the second stage, each with a more appropriate and detailed future scenario. This leads to questions about what they are already doing that is useful (how they got to X on the scale in fig. 2) and what they can do to build upon that to lead to more progress (X + 1 on the scale). We have found that in approximately 80-90% of these cases, it is enough just to do more of what is already being done.

**Figure 2:**



Coaching in parallel sessions is efficient and effective. Each part of the process is given clear time limits and explicit instructions to keep things on track.

The reflection phase involving the whole group can be an interactive and creative period where each group gets feedback, questions can be raised and ideas developed. This part also gives the people interested in several projects the chance to contribute valuable views.