

Interview

An African perspective on Solution Focused Coaching: Interview with Lilliane Iculet

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Lilliane Iculet works in human resources for the Ugandan parliament. In this interview she gives us insight into the passion she shares with others for developing coaching as a new approach to improving performance in organisations in Uganda. The interview exemplifies her love for her country and her desire to use SF to transform society in alignment with its own VISION 2040.

Can you tell us a little bit about how you came across SF?

I came across SF in 2010. A few Ugandans realised there was a vacuum in professional coaching. My country is the kind which would like to base itself on some kind of professionalism, some kind of paper to show evidence of one's skills. Coaches were not really recognised; the first question was "where did you train?" A few individuals who had been facing such a challenge looked at courses abroad, as we don't have any training institutes here, and it was costly. Although we had a few coaches here who had done some type of training with the British Council, or very short courses elsewhere, only one of our colleagues, Norah, had formal certification. The option was to bring in a trainer. I believe they did an internet search. The first and/or second person contacted did not respond to the emails. They then happened to land on Peter Szabó's name so they sent him an email and he responded and was willing to come to over to Africa for the very first time and we were privileged he would be coming to Uganda as his first African continent country. The team set out to look for 24

people to attend the training through the platform of the HR Association in Uganda and that's how I came to be part of that group. Peter came in August 2010 and took us through his 3 stages: Brief Coaching, Pure Coaching and Pro. This was perhaps the first ever comprehensive coaching training for a big group of people in my country. Out of the initial 24, 13 completed all three training stages.

We are intrigued by you saying this was the first detailed coaching in the country. Can you explain a bit more about that?

When you say "I am a coach" in my country the first thing someone thinks of is sports, or academic coaching. We have to keep explaining what coaching is. We don't have any institution, not even in the universities, where there is a coaching curriculum. The question was: how do we build capacity? We had organisations looking for coaches – for example at one point World Vision, and a USAID partnership programme – but these organisations needed to be sure the coaches they get were professionally trained; and yet we had that gap in the country.

Are you saying organisations want coaches and they don't exist or organisations in Uganda aren't used to the concept of coaching?

A blend of both. What we decided to do (post training with Peter) was to set up a coaching community in Uganda and that way we would build capacity. We heard that organisations get frustrated when people claim they are coaches but do not really deliver what the organisations perhaps expected. It's corporate organisations that are interested in coaching (or seem to understand it) and they know that coaching can deliver something that formal 'class-like' training cannot. For instance some companies may require a group of coaches because maybe the whole company is restructuring or transforming and perhaps want you to take the employees through

a change process facilitated by a coaching approach. Now that we have a community, if someone wants a coach, a facilitator or a consultant we have provided a place to start from. Informally, through the coaching community we have become a 'go-to database'. Some may even offer pro bono services, because most of us are in formal employment

We get the impression that you didn't necessarily look for SF coaching in the beginning, it just so happened that Peter is the one who turned up.

Yes, that's correct. We just thought we need a trainer and that is the methodology he [Peter] brought to us; and we couldn't have asked for anything better (she says with a dreamy sigh in her voice!)

So someone turns up doing this surprising form of training that you didn't expect. We are really curious: what it was like to be faced with an SF coach and have that experience of being introduced into SF?

It was like indeed WOW. Here was someone teaching us from a different angle: you don't have to look at things from the point of view of "what is *not* there"; because there is a part of us that thinks if you are good at one thing why aren't you good at the other? It was really a whole change of mind-set. There was a lot we had to unlearn. We kept on looking at ourselves and thinking why hadn't we ever thought of that, or considered what is there instead of what is not there? That was a completely new focus, a torch to a new direction. It is what has shifted my personal outlook. I think of things from a very different angle, I may not dwell so much on what is not there, or what is not working; I instead look at what is there now and what I can do with that now and what steps to take from there. So I think that SF training is what has formed and bonded that coaching network/community and now, since we started the world café meetings, we run it that SF way.

Some people after training in SF say it's very new but it resonates with something that has been in me for a long time. Did you find that?

Ah no, I want to believe in Uganda no one had ever heard of the approach. So teaching us to get out of thinking first of problems was one of those things which if it could just have a ripple effect would change a lot. The 'problem mode' is what we have known right from our school education, to our homes, to the culture, to our debates; in everything, we look at what is not working. We've taken it a step at a time. I am really sure this SF 'discovery' is something which would work very well for us as individuals and as a country at large.

So can you tell us about when you go to those meetings what are the steps that you report?

When we go to our café meetings we first of all have a monthly schedule where each one is assigned to lead/coordinate the meeting. We usually share insights, discoveries, CPD events, share new things we have learnt, or a dilemma one may have or even have a person with a real coaching need – anything. We get 4-8 people and welcome new coaches from other types of training – to make a 'conglomerate' community. We usually lean towards the reflective team approach, which was one of the gems I got from the SF training. We listen to the 'client issue' and all share what we think or let one person present their issue, then talk about what we liked about his/her idea . . . yes and what can one add, or what can be picked out of it and then we come up with a solution. We in the end leave knowing what we want to achieve, how we want to achieve it and what the steps are to achieve that, and also how we will measure our progress so we can see the difference. We usually 'scale' ourselves when reporting on "progress so far" – then coach ourselves through the next small steps.

When you are using this at work are people noticing?

Sometimes it makes me laugh . . . , maybe someone has said “this is not working, that is not working, this is wrong . . .” and in your turn to speak you say “OK, what is working, what is there now which we can use?” It’s usually the same reaction; they turn and look at you as if saying “You mean I can offer a solution?” It dawns on you that up to that point he/she had not even thought that they had a solution to something. They so far have said what is *not* there, and then you overturn their thoughts and ask “OK, so for us to move forward with this document/project, how should we do it?” It opens up their minds, reveals to them that what they have to say can be valued as opposed to sitting through a meeting where the secretary will take the minutes and that so and so will take such and such action. This way the ‘Action by’ column now has a ‘solution/idea proposed by’ entry that says what we are going to do and this is how it is going to be reported. You get to have more fruitful meetings if I may say.

Are they noticing that you’re doing something different?

In my HR department there’s 8 people handling the HR/people management function. I get many ‘referrals’. Sometimes when they come to you with a grievance or having been ‘accused’, it may be sad that you are doing damage control, but I quickly refocus that it’s never too late to reassure someone they are good at something and address them by their resources. So perhaps they have noticed that there is a certain handling ‘unique’ to Lilliane. Just recently somebody was being told how his document was badly done. I happened to be in the room so I pitched, “ok, what do you like about this document and what do you think he can do differently?”, and the supervisor addressed those directly to the subordinate – giving him useful feedback. So this person (intern) came to me later to say “help me; how can I make this even better” and that was a beginning of a useful SF conversation. To me it’s that visibility that we are trying to scheme for

– even for the country. So if I apply SF right where I am and in sharing spread it out, that will really be putting SF in the limelight.

You really want to spread SF in the country – is that what you are saying?

Yeah, yeah, yeah, we really, really, really need it, because we are “whiners” by culture. We take to talk shows, town hall debates etc. to lament what is wrong about our country. So if we can start seeing and discussing things differently – preferred future, future perfect, ‘miracles and dreams’ – we could be a less stressed people . It would be one of my best hopes to see that in this country because we really need it.

What is your most sparkling moment in using SF in your work?

So many . . . In many organisations HR people are the ‘most hated’ – when something goes wrong it’s HR! So one of my most sparkling moments is when you can paint a different picture. For instance, when it comes to handling grievances or discipline issues, the person coming to meet HR is already glum. From every point of view he or she is being told he has a problem or is struggling with something. So my most rewarding moment is when I can converse with them, to that point when I can ask how would you have wanted us to do it better? This way, I am not the one telling anymore – I ask the questions; and what is generally great is that the discussion is helping us to get to help the ‘aggrieved’ through their own options. Those are the moments when I can genuinely be there as a witness to see someone change their mind-set and start acting like “OK at least I got heard and I offered a solution”. Then when we (as HR) repackage somebody’s suggestion, forward and present it to the decision makers, see that it has been taken up, and this person’s ‘dream’ has been recognised, – documenting the improvement is the reward. In my work, that stands out very much as a sparkling encounter.

You have huge energy to bring this to your country in many ways. How are you channelling this energy and how do you balance it with not being solution-forced?

It's a team effort. We are now relying so much on the community. We had research done on how many coaches there are in Uganda and it was about 50; though when it came to how many had formal training or were certified and practising, the number dropped. Our challenge has been that we don't have many who are certified yet, so we are trying to come together to do what we call "tandem partnering" in our quest for certification. We are tracking each other, documenting how many coach-specific hours we clocked in / logged so that we can apply for ICF certification. We actually wanted to start an ICF chapter in Uganda, but were given a condition that we had to have a certain number of certified coaches before we can have a chapter. Actually Peter had pledged that if we make the required number, he will subscribe to be a member of 'our ICF-Uganda chapter; so that the pressure is on. Our neighbours in Kenya are more 'aggressive' than we are and are closer to getting there. So we are changing strategy – now trying to have an East African Chapter, so that the few in Uganda can join up with those in Kenya and then we can penetrate the Tanzanian and maybe Rwandan market so that we can spread coaching. Considering the fact that East Africa is now a confederation, this way it will be even easier to get regional contracts. Also, we realised organisations are looking for solutions but perhaps believe the solutions only lie in formal coaching training from abroad. We watch them fund an individual to go abroad to have that gap addressed – and it costs so much, yet that cost could have been spread out on a group kind of intervention benefitting more people locally. So we are trying to repackage ourselves so that 'if we can't beat them, we'll join them'; if they want papers let us go and get papers. With hindsight, in our very last training with Peter this was one of the items in our action plan – that we would be certified; our vision was to penetrate the East African market and since we are now a confederation, our 'miracle' is on its way. There is so much we want to do. Our country has a national vision, VISION 2040, which concedes that there is so

much we want to achieve through transformation into a prosperous nation, and that this transformation will not take place unless there is a mindset shift in the people. So we want to get to that point where our SF community can be part of the think tank that sets progress for the national agenda. That's the future we are looking for.

How is coming to SOLWORLD conferences useful to you and is there anything else SOL can do to support you?

We were used to trainings where you sit behind your desk and wait to be spoken to (to make a contribution). One of the first things we did with Peter was sit in a circle. We played games, we talked to each other in groups, he wanted us to talk about our successes, it was so different. Then he told us there is a bigger community which does this and more. So one of us then went to the SOL event in Hungary and when he returned he said, "you guys really need to be there; these people are so warm and they are so willing to share". I have been to these events three times so far. One thing I cherish in these events is that people share with you readily and even offer to post more on-line, keep in touch, and assure you that if you need more information "I am available". That was so new; it was a culture shock almost, people are so open and warm. So my initial motivation was "let me go and see what it is like" (which was in Oxford in 2012) . . . and I experienced it myself, when people come up to you wanting to know about your work and how you do it, and are genuinely wowed . . . etc. So SF conferences are a big part of my SF/coaching journey. One thing we realised is that there are a lot of resources out there as well as support. The support we need is really to keep us in the loop and link our community to other SF sites and resources so we can share insights, and probably when we get to the point where we want to document our work we can contact SFCT and have it reviewed. I am really comforted to know that when I want to check whether we are on the right track there is a network of people who can be of help.

Thank you very much