

# Interview

From diagnosis to dialogue in Organisational Development

## **Interview with Susanne Burgstaller**

**Mark McKergow**

*Dr Susanne Burgstaller is a solution focused (SF) consultant and coach based in Austria, with 25 years of practice in the areas of organisational and HR development, strategy, team-building, and coaching. She leads consulting projects on strategy and organisational change, and coaches leaders and their teams. She is the author of Solution Focus in Organisations: Leading and Consulting from the Future (Carl-Auer Verlag, 2015, published in German only so far). Susanne is playing a leading role in connecting thoughtful and focused SF work with the desires of large organisations to develop themselves. The interview took place in the Emperor's Gardens, Vienna at the time of the EBTA conference 2015.*

### **How did you get involved in solution-focused work?**

**M**y first encounter was via the books of Steve de Shazer – *Clues* (de Shazer, 1988) in particular. A colleague mentioned brief therapy, I bought a book and read it, and I was hooked. I was even more hooked after seeing Steve in action in a seminar, but I thought “I can’t do it like he does”. Then I saw Insoo, who demonstrated a more accessible way for me to work. This was in the early 2000s.

### **What was your work at that time?**

I was in organisational development (OD), working as a consultant, a management trainer and a coach. I was trained in

process consulting, doing the classic stuff, more or less what I am doing now, only differently.

### **And what has SF added to your process consulting?**

It didn't so much add, it gradually replaced my practice. I was then looking for other books and I found *The Solutions Focus* (Jackson & McKergow, 2002), which gave me the idea I could use SF in contexts other than coaching. There is this supposed debate between dialogic and diagnostic OD, and it shifted that paradigm for me. Diagnostic OD was just not working for me – I was in a consulting group, and we had to 'diagnose the seven levels of the organisation' and so on. We had to interview people and do a feedback workshop to the client. It took several months just to finish the diagnosis, and all you had at the end was a lot of PowerPoint slides with a lot of critical comments which we had to feed back to management, who didn't want to hear them. Then we could try to sell them lots of nice products, but often they didn't follow on. There was so much time wasted on something that was not really useful.

My first step was to make the interviews I was doing into little coaching conversations, leading into a preferred future, what people wanted instead, small steps, and this produced a little more stuff you could work with. But the paradigm was still there – the expert consultant telling the sponsor what to do. In the end I had to let go of that, I couldn't work that way. I quit the consulting company, where I was a partner, in 2007 and founded usolvIt. Then I could do my own thing.

### **Tell us more about the development of your practice since then.**

I read your books, and there was a seminar you and Jenny did in Vienna on Simplicity – I was booked on it but was ill, but my cousin was there and took very good notes! I did the Reteaming certification and I worked a lot with that model, which worked well for me for a time, and I learnt a lot from

the SolutionSurfers when I did my ICF certification. I met Chris Iveson at the SOLWorld 2012 conference in Oxford and that was another paradigm shift, seeing how the BRIEF guys worked, making it even simpler, starting to focus on outcomes even before you sit down! “How can you start before you are ready” is something I am puzzling over and trying to apply with customers.

**Tell us about some of the work you’ve been doing recently.**

The Austrian Supreme Court of Justice is a very old institution, and they wanted to modernise their way of working. They wanted me to get the leaders on board – that was the initial brief. I remember doing the first workshop and doing my little trick of talking to people before the workshop, having small coaching conversations about preferred outcomes which helps to start at a different level when the team comes together. I also had some conversations with the President of the Supreme Court about his vision for the future and how to communicate it to his staff. I recommended that it be a dialogue, but he preferred to give a speech.

While he was giving his speech during the workshop there was a pinboard in the background and I was making a drawing of his vision, the preferred future, the treasures, the path there and so on. At the end of the meeting I was about to remove the drawing, and they said that they wanted to keep it. They took it back to the Supreme Court and it’s been hanging there ever since. They always brought it to the workshops – it became what Gervase Bushe or Kenneth Gergen might call a ‘generative image’ for them. The project finished a year early in 2014, and the President was using this drawing to talk about his vision. If I had known in advance that this would happen I would have taken some drawing lessons!

The interventions were quite minimal – I was coaching the President, doing a little bit of shadow consulting with the second-in-line, and three workshops with the leaders. There were two parts of the project – the ‘solution-focused’ part

about where we want to be, what's working, concrete steps and so on, and then they had 39 sub-projects about changing their ways of working – everything is done online now (they are the first institution in Austria to achieve this). And they are in a new building now.

In the many conflicts that resulted from such serious change sometimes our consultations produced only very small decisions, like shifting the housekeeping discussions to a different room from the high court decisions. Very minimal. But somehow this changed things well enough that the President felt able to carry on with his change initiative. And at the end of the project, last year, they brought my drawing again and wanted me to take a picture of them with it!

### **And you have been working with the Austrian parliament as well?**

I have been working with the civil servants of the parliament – a group of about 450 people. They had a new director, who had been in office for about a year, and he asked me to help with a strategy process. The previous director had started such a process, but only involving the top three managers. The new director could see that the organisation needed something different. I had conversations with people around 'how would they know the strategy had been implemented?' I was looking for concrete examples, they gave me very diverse replies – but not incompatible, so I thought that was good enough for me to start.

The most important thing for them was to engage with a wider group of people, who were divided both by working silos (*two branches and seven services*) and political party divides. The contracting process took me several months; this is both building the platform and looking at the preferred future, what's working already, what might be signs of progress, and where does this take us for our project. Then I had a series of summer workshops with the wider group (who didn't think they needed a strategy, in the civil service!). So that was the first part of year one. Then we formed a group of

workers from all levels and different departments – and organised a dialogue with all staff, presenting the results in visual form. It came down to four areas – more effective decision making, better communication between people, ‘one parliament’ and more unified leadership.

That was the first year. We had very good resonance from the staff –nearly 200 accepted the invitation and attended the meeting. We asked them for their best hopes, what that would look like, and we had dialogues facilitated by the leaders (to whom I gave some facilitation training). We used the voting cards like they use in the parliament, three different colours with questions printed on them: What are my best hopes from the parliament, what difference will that make to me, and what worries them. The last question was a concession to the customer who insisted we include it! We got a lot of material from the first two questions, which we used. The information from the third card was just there – they wanted it.

Out of that, we had a 45-person two-day leadership workshop, evaluated the information and made a list of what should happen in these four different areas. A lot of work was done by the task force and other people who volunteered to work on the different initiatives. We did another dialogue event as the first one went down well. In year two, one of the deputy directors insisted we do a mission/vision/values statement. I am not a great fan of these, so I thought we should do it in a way that was at least useful. Their existing mission/vision/values statement was 12 years old and a bit starchy, so we did something around our themes – not as broad a project as one might have done 15–20 years ago when everyone worked on it for two years! We concentrated the mission into five sentences, and then collected lots of quotes about how people interpreted each sentence – we had lots of speech bubbles and pictures to exemplify the ideas.

Also the ways of living the mission/vision/values will change as time goes along. The parliament will move location soon so that the old building can be renovated, and that will change how the key ideas are lived and exemplified. So we had another open session collecting ideas for the speech

bubbles, another dialogue event showing the nearly-finished version. Then my internal partner took over, and I led a session looking at the overall project to collect feedback, using scales, and all the outcomes had been achieved. I wanted to ensure that the managers took over the driving of the strategy. At the end one of the more laid-back managers said “we are the motors!” which was delightful.

Finally in June 2015 we had met all the desired outcomes within two years (six months early). I wanted to get this sense of “going out with a whisper” – not stealing away exactly, but not have a big ‘it’s over’ moment – more like ‘my part is over but it’s carrying on’. There is lots of work still to be done, of course.

**You wrote a lovely Metalog for InterAction (Burgstaller, 2014) – what inspired that?**

As I said at the start, I was trained in a very different discipline – process consulting and systemic organisational consulting, where you have to have an ‘organisational theory’ that you fall back on. This is really drilled into you – you NEED to have an organisational theory. I thought, what do I need this for? Also my much-admired systemic teacher Fritz Simon kept telling us that we needed the theory, but that we could do good consulting without it. So what’s the point? The metalog is my attempt to make sense of all that and gather some SF assumptions about organisations in the form of a conversation with my daughter.

Steve de Shazer said that he was not interested in the family-as-system, but the therapy situation-as-system. Similarly, I am interested not in the organisation-as-system but as the consulting situation-as-system. That’s my conclusion in the end. I want to have a set of assumptions about how to do the work well, but I think it’s counterproductive to have a set of assumptions about how organisations work well. Whatever we think – humanistic, democratic, participative, flat, non-hierarchical, whatever, it might be that a particular organisation is very hierarchical but that’s the best form for

that organisation and its purpose. I am happy to go with any form of organising that seems to work.

### **How would you like to see SF consulting developing?**

I have seen the BRIEF guys working in London, working together and commenting on each other's work. My dream is that we OD consultants somehow could manage to do more of that too. We are doing it to some extent in the SOLWorld community, which is a model for any kind of learning community. It would be excellent if we could get a set of people who work with whole organisations, to carry this joint development of a theory of practice of SF OD consulting even further. And maybe also working more together – another of my dreams is the swarm image, a swarm of SF consultants who might swarm together and take on bigger organisations like the European Commission or a central bank – we could really affect change in society. We are well equipped but perhaps not yet well enough positioned. It's important that we do work in the academic community and also in the customer community – to translate SF into the world of organisations so that it maintains its power and benefits.

**Thank you very much.**

### **References**

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