

# Brief and Simple: Solution Focus in Organisations

**Natalie Polgar and Katalin Hankovsky (Eds)**

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*Review by Dr Alasdair Macdonald*

The first impression one has is of a substantial textbook. The work is divided into eight sections on different topics such as: One Swallow Makes a Summer; When Leaders Initiate Change; How to Change Solidified Structure; Large Scale Interventions; Generating Directions; Solution Focused Organizations; Modus Operandi; and Lessons Learnt. Each section contains five or six essays or case studies. This adds up to 46 contributions by 37 authors from across Europe. I have met some of these authors; among them are world authorities on the application of SF ideas in a wide range of settings. Katalin and Natalie have clearly put in a great deal of personal time in order to create this book. They have been contributors as well as editors. In their interviews with others they have brought out many points of interest by their questioning techniques. A similar book by McKergow and Clarke (Solution Focused Working 2007) used such methods to include many lessons about SF work in organisations.

In his Not-Foreword, Mark McKergow uses the analogy of an art gallery. There are many offerings from different artists and many points of difference and debate for practitioners to reflect upon. Given the range of topics covered, I have made myself a list so that I can return to view any particular piece of work.

These case studies cover a wide variety of contexts. Six are reported from IT departments (Tiger, Honegger, Hans Christiansen, Dierolf, Tegyi, Dierolf and Rendes), four from local government (Jesper Christiansen, Couvreur, Porpaczy, Kalmar), three from schools (Iveson, Kovacs/Furman, McGrath), one from the construction industry (Kalmar and

Levender), one from industrial automation (van Gogh), six from financial corporations or banks (Burgstaller, Csajtai, Gabor, Gonter, Muller-Demary and Peatey, Peter Szabó), one from central government (Moon) and one (Aoki) about the development of the SF network in Japan. Other studies describe successes with pharmaceutical companies (Smith and Agafitei, Terni), retail industries and various service industries, some multi-national.

An interesting feature of the content is the range of experience among the authors. You may compare the long experience and competence of Monika Houck with a view of her work by a relatively new member of the company, Henrietta Heiszmann. There are interviews with Chief Executives who are already solution-focused, knowingly or not, and interviews with senior managers who have never encountered these methods before. I am intrigued by the conversations about the use of language in coaching and team-building and the decision whether or not to mention SF theory and research within the process of making change to the organisations. Some of the authors refer to each other's work, yet there are differences between all the essays.

The motivators for the projects also cover a wide range of people. Four initiators are Chief Executives, with the power to influence the company at all levels. Others are heads of departments with only local influence. Sometimes the coaches have funding and time for lengthy projects within the company. In other cases they have two days or maybe only one three-hour workshop to provide all that they can. In at least one study higher management rejected the approach even though it was visibly successful in bringing about improvements.

Proofreading and reference style are a little untidy in places, diverting attention from the main ideas presented. In spite of the wide variety of writers, the editors have made the text easy to read and follow. Colour is used in some diagrams, which has a startling effect on a reader accustomed to the British style of textbook. However, the colour usually adds to the clarity of the message.

This book reminds me of a patchwork quilt. It is made up of

a wide variety of pieces of fabric from different backgrounds and organisations, taken from their original context and stitched into something which becomes new and diverting, not merely a collection of stories. It provides an overview of the field of SF management in Europe at this moment in time.

I can visualise this book being used as a work of reference for many consultants looking for possible methods to employ. However, it is not written as an academic text. The references to learned authority are few. The editors assume that readers will know which ideas come directly from SF practice. In my opinion, the role of SF ideas is negligible in a few of the case studies, even if the authors themselves have had experience of SF working. The lack of an index is a disadvantage because there is such a rich collection of ideas in the volume. The strength of the book is in its broad coverage of activities which draw on a common model of change. Then each project develops in its own way according to the choices of the consultant and the needs of the organisation. I am glad to have read this book and will consult it in the future.

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