

Cases

Beyond SF coaching: John Laing Integrated Services – an SF organisation

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Abstract

In 2008, John Laing Integrated Services (JLIS) embarked on an SF coaching programme with The Solutions Focus (TSF). The partnership was underpinned by a simple philosophy: if we view conversation as the fundamental unit of change, then it follows that “(...) if you change the conversation then there’s every chance you’ll change everything that surrounds it.” (Jackson & Waldman, 2010, p. 7). Since then, TSF has worked with JLIS to grow and evolve the programme, with significant results: Staff are using solutions-focused (SF) tools and techniques in ways that go far beyond coaching, and SF is now an intrinsic part of what JLIS calls ‘the JLIS way’, with managers applying SF to their teams, meetings, client projects, performance management processes, 360 appraisals, strategic planning and more.

This two-part case looks at how this change has come about and what impact it has had. The first part focuses on the most recent phase of the programme (Phase 4, 2011), where accelerated results were achieved through just a few significant alterations to the design. The second part shows how SF evaluation captured the real grass-roots impact of the programme on the business and how the evaluation became, by the very nature of SF, part of the intervention as a whole.

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Context and business issue

John Laing Integrated Services (JLIS) is a leading support service and facilities management business, delivering a full suite of operational services to a wide range of public sector clients, including local authorities, education, rail, police, fire and rescue, health and cultural services, with direct provision of library services.

Now employing over 1,000 people, the company was established in 2000 to support parent company John Laing plc in the private and public partnership market. It has experienced rapid growth in recent years, with turnover increasing 400 per cent in the four years up to 2008, accompanied by a rise in staff numbers and significant expansion of the management team. Since then, the business has continued to grow, despite the economic climate, doubling both its size and turnover. By 2013, the organisation expects to be employing over 1,500 people.

JLIS operates in a tough market with demanding clients, tight timescales and challenging performance measures. Back in 2008, Tim Grier, Managing Director, recognised that as the business was expanding, managers' jobs were getting more complex and diverse and they needed greater support to help them achieve targets and deliver what clients wanted.

There was already a strong emphasis on management development and continuous improvement within the business. Grier wanted a development approach, which would raise the bar and have a profound, long-lasting impact on how the company did business. *"We had to find a way to raise capability and performance within the business – and we wanted to ensure that the approach we chose would be sustainable and would support our plans for continued growth."*

Grier began to look for a development intervention that would help the management team step away from the day-to-day operational issues and take a more consistent and strategic approach to their role. In particular, he wanted to equip managers with tools and skills to delegate effectively,

pro-actively develop their teams and make better quality decisions.

Solutions Focus Coaching Programme: Phases 1 to 3

The JLIS senior management team were already converts to the idea of using coaching as a development tool. One of the directors had come across the SF approach to coaching and felt it would help engender a more positive, co-operative and collaborative culture within the business.

The company turned to The Solutions Focus (TSF) to deliver a programme, which included training and supervision (four days), coaching support for participants and encouragement for those attending the course to coach others.

Phase 1 was very well received, with participants reporting they were seeing immediate results from their application of SF coaching.

“When you apply this approach it means that there is no negativity and everything is regarded in a positive light – which really changes people’s behaviour,” said JLIS HR Director Justine Brown. “From a personal perspective, I am learning to delegate and coach my staff, rather than taking things from them and doing it myself. If staff speak to me about an issue then I will use the techniques I have learnt in the coaching course to help them see how they can progress the issue.”

The programme continued to make an impact during Phase 2, when SF conversations began to take place in all corners of the business. Participants reported feeling more confident in their management abilities and said they were finding it much easier to concentrate on the strategic aspects of their role and communicate clearly with their teams.

By 2011, after three phases, 40 managers had been through the programme and there was a pool of internal coaches. Programme evaluation had been carried out throughout (Kirkpatrick, 2009) and while the company had not formally evaluated direct, bottom-line benefits, it estimated it had made significant savings through more productive working practices.

Phase 4 – ‘Making use of what’s there’ to shift the programme emphasis

By Phase 4, three key drivers – namely tightening budgets, a strong desire from both TSF and JLIS to formally measure the direct impact of the programme and greater internal coaching capability (as a direct result of the earlier phases) – meant that a few alterations were needed in the design, based on the SF principle of ‘making use of what’s there’.

With continuing rapid growth and the drive for managers not just to attain but to exceed their targets, Phase 4 was, like those before it, designed to maximise managers’ potential and optimise their personal and professional performance in the workplace.

Instead of professional coaches coming in from TSF to support the programme, participants were offered coaching as and when they needed it from internal coaches. In addition, rather than being required to coach others, as they had in previous phases, they were tasked with identifying an SF coaching project.

Whilst still using OSKAR (the SF coaching model of Jackson & McKergow) as the backbone of the programme, Phase 4 placed even more emphasis on specific tools, Just a Minute sessions (adapted from Michel Hjerth’s micro tools) and performance conversations that participants could instantly use on a day-to-day basis as they motivated and led their teams, through constructive conversation, towards ever more challenging business objectives.

The four-month programme comprised:

- *An initial two-day SF coaching workshop*, building leadership, management and coaching skills through an SF approach;
- *Two half-day skill building and review sessions* where participants shared their experiences and progress, received guidance from their peers and the facilitator and developed their coaching skills around constructive conversations and collaborative and effective performance conversations;

- *An SF coaching project* in between sessions, giving managers the opportunity to use their newly-acquired SF tools and techniques in their day-to-day work;
- *A one-day workshop* consisting of formal SF coaching project presentations to other members of the group and the senior management team, a review of the programme and identification of next steps.

SF Coaching projects: applying the learning and sharing the impact

The projects had specific criteria. Since the last thing anybody wanted was to increase the workload of already busy people, participants were invited to choose something they would be working on as part of their day-to-day job, and to apply SF to it. They were also invited to make a formal presentation about the project, 6–8 weeks after the final skill building session, to colleagues, Tim Grier and other members of the Senior Management Team (SMT).

As the participants gave their presentations, those present instantly saw the qualitative and quantitative benefits of the programme. Having Tim and other members of the SMT there meant that participants got instant feedback about their work, and any recommendations they made were discussed, and in some instances implemented into the business straight away.

Below is an extract from the first author's blog, giving a useful insight into the kinds of projects presented and the value of these to the business.

James, a contract manager, presents first. He calmly shares with us how he is now saving £K each month on penalty fees by having more collaborative and creative conversations with his team. Following this, Andrea,* another contract manager, reports having saved £K in three months on one contract by using SF techniques to delegate more effectively and helping her team to 'think outside the box'.*

As I look around the room, I notice the MD and the rest of the senior team appear to be listening intently.

Next up, John, who runs a flagship project and is known to have a 'very demanding' client, explains how he has been using SF techniques to enhance this relationship. We listen as John shares in detail how he had done this. Having skilfully found out what the client wanted and what signs would tell him that this was indeed happening, John then asked, "On a scale of 1-10, where 1 is absolutely terrible and 10 is the best you could hope for, where would you rate our current performance?"*

The client replied "4". John, who was putting all his SF tools to work, then inquired, "So how come it's 4 rather than 1?" This marked the beginning of a fruitful conversation, which ended with John going away to make some small changes that had a big impact. John completes his presentation by telling us that his client is no longer 'difficult'; in fact they are getting on so well that instead of getting stuck on everyday problems, they are now having conversations about the future – which includes the opportunity to be invited to tender for more work.

*Names have been changed and exact figures omitted for reasons of confidentiality.

SF evaluation: capturing and demonstrating impact

Following the SF coaching project presentations, the second author was commissioned by TSF to conduct an independent, SF evaluation of Phase 4 in the context of the programme as a whole. This part of the case looks in more detail at the evaluation work, which built on outcomes from the presentations and was designed to capture and *demonstrate* the impact of the programme, not only on some of the managers involved but also on the business itself.

What is SF evaluation?

SF evaluation can be described as a way of working with individual clients, through active observation and respectful interviewing, to uncover and capture their stories of learning,

perceptions of progress and potential for future progress. The SF approach lends itself very well to this kind of work, enabling clients to understand and explore the impact of their learning, not only on themselves as individuals but on their teams, organisations, customers and others further afield.

From tiny signs to sparkling moments... why does SF lend itself so well to this kind of evaluation work?

- *'More than just a happy sheet'*. . . Experience has shown that this type of one-to-one evaluation work can be an intervention in itself. Asking people questions about the progress they think they have made (even tiny signs) and the progress they expect to be telling you about in a few months' time tends to increase the likelihood that it will happen.
- *Client-friendly*. The approach is simple, easily understood and requires no preparatory work, other than inviting clients to reflect on a short set of questions ahead of the interview. No homework! Probably the best kind of formula to present to senior leaders with full diaries and busy lives.
- *Behind the stories*. . . Respectful conversation and curious, 'at your best' questioning help clients to reveal powerful examples of impact and can turn the seemingly unremarkable into rich stories of personal growth and development.

Key elements of the SF evaluation delivered for JLIS

- *Establishing best hopes for the work* through meetings and conversations with TSF and JLIS.
- *Establishing trust and building a picture of the context* through similar, pre-evaluation meetings.
- *SF interviewing*. . . capturing 'sparkling moments' and rich examples through confidential conversations with individual JLIS managers about their perceptions of progress, potential for future growth and the impact this

had had at various levels. ‘SF’ – because the underpinning principle here is that we are looking and listening for instances of success: ‘What worked well? How did you do that? What did you do differently to make that happen?’

- *Post-evaluation invitation to the client* to hear observations and impressions from a different, outside perspective.

SF evaluation outcomes

As a series of SF coaching conversations, the SF evaluation became part of the intervention as a whole. While it is too early to report specific outcomes, participants gave positive feedback about the process, saying how useful they had found it. A few months down the line, we would expect the SF interviews to have helped reawaken the reflective process that clients say they find so beneficial.

The main tangible of the evaluation work was a detailed report presenting key findings and rich case studies that clearly demonstrated the difference the programme had made to managers in their everyday roles. The report explored the significant impact that SF coaching has had on managers at a personal level on the way they approach their day-to-day roles and on their everyday interactions with clients. Critically for JLIS, it also showed what a difference this very positive approach to coaching is making to the business itself.

Key findings

While the programme clearly benefitted managers in a number of different ways, three areas stood out in particular:

- the value of SF as a lifelong approach (and for life in general);
- the common language and terminology that are at the heart of SF; and
- the potential it brings for developing leadership and management skills.

Coupled with earlier evidence of impact (i.e. the project presentations), the resounding message of the SF evaluation was that the most recent phase of the coaching programme had produced a cohort of managers who, having firmly embraced the SF approach, were significantly more confident about their leadership and management skills and who were using a common – and positive – language at every turn.

Being an ‘SF organisation’ means, by definition, that SF is embedded within it. What came through from conversations with senior managers during the evaluation work was the impact the SF approach was having on the way they set goals and attain targets to deliver results for JLIS and its clients. This manifested itself: in their positive, ‘can do’ attitude; in practical skills that enabled them to increase their day-to-day efficiency in areas like time management and project management (e.g. rapid response); and in their coaching and leadership skills as they delegated more and empowered their teams to think more creatively.

What has this meant for JLIS as a company, and for its stakeholders? Two key areas of impact stand out: organisational culture and results.

Bringing SF into the organisation by taking so many senior managers through an SF coaching programme has resulted in a consistent, *solutions*-focused way of thinking and communicating, right across the board. “We want to make sure that all of our contracts are talking the same language,” says Tim Grier.

JLIS HR Director Justine Brown agrees. “Getting the

terminology right helps to cement the culture of an organisation,” she says. “Everybody needs to be thinking and moving in the same way.”

Having a common terminology in place across an organisation is one thing, but the evaluation findings suggest it’s the shift towards more a *positive* common language that has really started to make a difference. SF is becoming embedded in contract rollout and mobilisation, and conversations between managers are also starting to become SF.

“SF has allowed us to keep pace with the changing market,” says Grier. “The economy is struggling, yet we’ve seen long-term contracts, our business is continually pushing, and client requests for savings don’t bring around doom and gloom scenarios because we’ve already been working on future solutions. We’ve got an idea of what ‘really good’ looks like and we’re working towards it.”

Conclusions

JLIS is an inspirational company. They have worked with the SF approach for four years and have really ‘stuck with it’, evolving the programme with TSF as the business has changed and making sure they ‘walk the talk’, embracing the ideas and applying them consistently throughout the organisation to help them reach – and plan beyond – their targets.

The long-term impact of the SF coaching programme is best captured by one of the senior contract managers, who said, “For me, the best thing about the programme is having that little SF toolbox, and the sayings and phrases that you can just dip into. I’m sure I’ll still be using them in five or ten years’ time. I’ll always be grateful for that.”

So, what next? “People just look to the future,” says Tim Grier. “We’re talking about growing turnover by a further 20% next year and our staff aren’t fazed by that. Using an SF approach has made them feel confident that we have – and therefore we will – continue to grow the business.

“People just look to the future.” What better way to end than that?

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