

# Case

## Making It Happen With Your Team

**Paul Z Jackson and Colin Coombs**

### Abstract

*Tate hired 'The Solutions Focus' for a departmental team-building. This article follows the design, delivery and results of the assignment.*

### Meet the players

**T**he Art-Handling Technicians play a vital role at the Tate – they are responsible for care of the art when it is on the move and for installing and taking down exhibitions. The team had been through quite a lot of change recently and don't often meet together.

'The Solutions Focus' are consultants and facilitators; they design and deliver team workshops, applying the SF approach to give participants a positive experience of team work and good communications, in service of better results together.

Colin Coombs of the Tate commissioned and worked with Paul Z Jackson of 'The Solution Focus' to put together this team-building event to give the Art-Handling team an opportunity to share and build on good practice, contribute ideas and raise issues of mutual interest within the department.

### Resilience under tough conditions

We knew the Art-Handling team had already shown and would continue to need great resilience in delivering their

service under tough conditions (budgets, deadlines, shortage of personnel), and that they could increase their experience of happiness or at least enjoyment of their work by tapping into their proven passion for art, their specialist skills and through an enhanced sense of team-working – if the SF workshop could enable them to make positive choices regarding their future.

Colin Coombs, Learning & Development Manager at Tate, had previously identified a need for various team-building events and team strategy sessions within the Tate, and ‘The Solutions Focus’ provided a template for such events under the title *Making It Happen With Your Team*. With various customised adjustments, this serves as the basis for a facilitated one-day workshop for teams of 5–50 people.

In this instance it meant the application of SF ideas to a geographically-fragmented team, involving the outside consultant, the HR manager and the team manager, as well as the team members themselves.

### **Original proposal for team-building events**

Here’s the original proposal:

#### *Making It Happen With Your Team*

A one-day SF workshop that will help your team to get beyond the frustrations involved in getting things done.

The session is designed to build the personal confidence of each individual and a collective confidence between colleagues so that you can achieve outstanding results in enjoyable and productive ways.

You’ll be engaged in an involving, multi-layered process that builds the team at the same time as:

- clarifying goals
- assessing strengths
- building cohesion
- improving communications and
- deciding on pertinent actions.

Whether you are an ad-hoc team gathered for a particular project or event, or an on-going group with functional responsibilities, you can benefit from finding better ways of working together, and more effective means of achieving your aims.

### **Outcomes**

- Greater commitment as all members of the team have a stake from the start
- Greater clarity of individual roles and contributions
- Greater cohesion as communication improves
- Greater support as colleagues learn your needs and how they can help.

### **Outline**

The event will generate plenty of tips, techniques and principles which will be useful on an everyday basis to each participant. It is also time-out for stressed and overworked staff, a chance to revitalise and think through what you are aiming to achieve together.

### **The course offers**

- An opportunity to review your aims as a team
- Practical development of next steps for the team
- A series of team communication activities.

### **Timetable**

Welcomes + big picture

What we want from the day

Clarifying the platform – what's the project

Future Perfect activity – a team in transition

Strengths and experience

Measure and monitor – scales

Maintaining positive energy

Affirming what's working  
Taking small steps – in the right direction.

### **Meeting the team leader**

A meeting between Colin, Paul and Ruth, the team leader, generated this list of additional desired outcomes:

- An opportunity to share current good practice
- To discuss possible improvements to work practice
- To value the experience of the team
- To hear the opinions of the team – and let them know what will happen to their ideas; some to implement themselves, others to be taken forward
- An opportunity to raise issues of interest to team members
- A chance to discuss how people feel about the old and new mentoring systems.

At the same meeting, we decided the event should be held off-site so as to include an element of reward and celebration of successes. We wanted good refreshments and perhaps somewhere intrinsically interesting. This turned out to be Wallacepace, an elegant, well-lit building in central London, near Covent Garden.

Other ideas to emerge from this meeting were to communicate in advance with two groups of people – the participants themselves, and a selection of department representatives for whom they provided a service.

We asked the representatives these questions about their perceptions of the Art-Handling Technicians:

- What do you think of the Art-Handling Technicians (in one sentence)?
- What are their best qualities?
- What one thing could they do to make your life better or easier?

And we asked these questions in the invitation to the team members:

- What can we do to make this workshop as useful to you as possible?
- What will indicate to you that the event has been a success?
- What else is it important for us to know about you or your team?

### **What we learned in advance**

These were the replies we received from participants before the workshop:

*To make this workshop as useful as possible, I would like to see clear aims for the day set out in advance. I believe we as a department already have a very clear idea of what each other does and communicate to a very effective level, having worked closely together anyway. The involvement of other departments (photography, registrars, curatorial etc.) would be very beneficial as we don't have such a clear idea of their roles and responsibilities, or how efficiency could be increased due to inter-departmental communication. I also think it would be beneficial to involve the senior technicians. I would also like to discuss ways in which we could work towards feeling more valued by the Tate as a whole, as I think many within the department feel we are viewed as a somewhat expendable resource.*

*I will judge the event to have been a success if there is a genuine improvement in how the department works together, and some clear goals for team progression have been set.*

*To reiterate my earlier point, I believe we are quite a close knit team who communicate effectively already. Possibly the opportunity to take a step back and see how others perceive us would be useful.*

*To be honest I feel that our team really work well together so I am dubious that there is a need for this day, however it would be nice if some people's negativity about their work was dispelled I guess.*

*To be a success I think it just needs to be a fun day out for us. Our team work very closely together and we are a real mixed bunch. A lot of us are artists before art-handlers and the job is simply a way to get the money in (this doesn't apply to me).*

And these were the responses from other departments:

- 1 What do you think of the Art-Handling Technicians (in one sentence)? They are helpful, professional, highly skilled and hard working.*
- 2 What are their best qualities? Real team players.*
- 3 What one thing could they do to make your life better or easier? Employ more art-handlers.*

- 1 Though I am loathe to generalise, the Art-Handling Technicians are a skilled, mostly very motivated and good-natured group of under-valued professionals.*
- 2 Best qualities: for the most part, the technicians are imaginative and resourceful, good-humoured, dedicated, intelligent and thorough.*
- 3 In some cases a tendency towards inflexibility can still be discerned.*

- 1 The technicians are one of the most important parts of our collections care strategy, they are hardworking and dedicated and their high standards reflect very well on Tate when they handle artworks loaned in, especially when couriers are present.*
- 2 Accuracy, thoroughness, carefulness, patience, experience, logic*
- 3 The one thing: keep on with plenty of open and honest communication and dialogue with conservation.*

- 1 The Art Handling Technicians physically deliver our years and months of complicated exhibition planning, in ever shorter time periods, their high standards are exemplary across the art world, we often are able to*

*forego couriers and associated expenses from other institutions because of their impressive and often remarked on performance.*

- 2 Empathy with the objects they handle and install, with a reassuring quiet and reliable commitment to professionalism. Many other institutions I work with across the world have huge managerial problems with their technicians, where we don't. I feel they connect to Curators', Registrars' and Conservators' needs in a healthy, constructive style which is a pleasure to work with and often attracts comments from other institutions.*
- 3 I honestly cannot think of one, rather I feel something should be factored in to make their life easier, they are so loyal and committed to Tate and yet seem to be unrecognised in their pay and conditions which sadly is reflected in their increasing dissatisfaction and high staff turnover, yet nevertheless still deliver high standards. Tate trains them up and other institutions go on to reap the benefit, while we lose valuable experience. The recent 'Effective Tate' savings on pay and conditions is a short-sighted quick financial win solution in my opinion!*

*Clearly there are some art-handlers who are better than others but the above sentences are my overwhelming sentiments for them as a group. I hope you have a successful day with them.*

## **Context**

Ruth had a realistic view of the context in which the day was placed and knew that it would not necessarily all be straightforward. She pointed out that 'the culture has changed at Tate along with the demographic of the team.' Everyone used to come from a specifically art-based background but now they were as likely to come from industry. There had been a lot of change for the team recently and within the last 18 months they had lost six posts (not back-filled) as part of a Tate-wide review.

In addition, the demands of the job have been changing to reflect new working patterns and technology as well as a

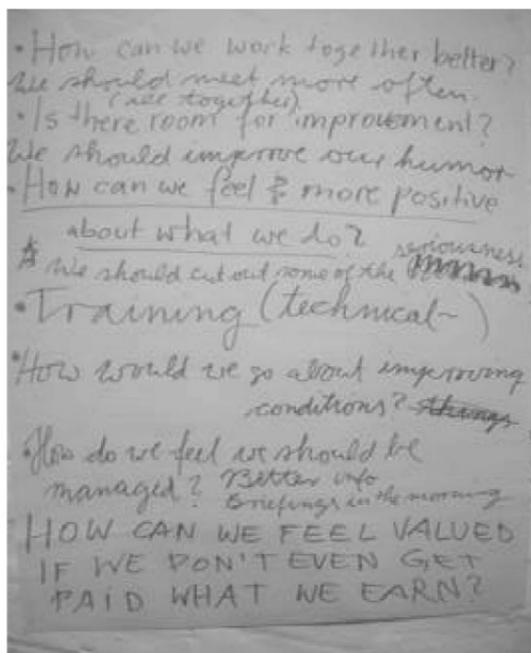
wider view of what 'art' is. 'It reflects the commercial word much more now-there's much more AV [audio visual], it's not just about hanging Turners anymore. All of this reflects a shift in the external environment.'

### The day of the workshop

The workshop itself followed the outline included above.

The atmosphere was a little cagey to begin, understandably as the team had not been together in this kind of a session for several years, and the style of event was new to most of the participants. Everyone sat where they wanted, around three tables. Colin introduced Ruth, the team leader, who spoke about the context of the event, then handed over to Paul, who lead a series of activities.

After a round of introductions, we asked participants to list the most important questions facing them as a department. They produced posters of questions. Here's one example:

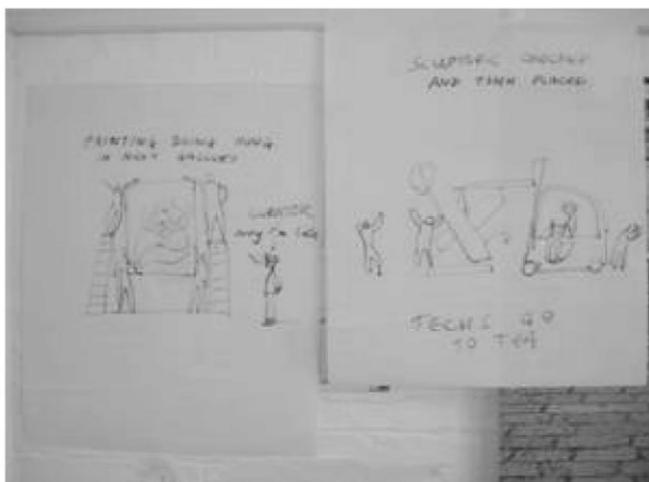


We asked them to guess what the other departments had to say about them, and compared their answers with the responses we'd received. Their guesses were pretty accurate, with perhaps a slightly pessimistic view of how they would be regarded.

A bonus for the event was a one-hour session with Chris, the divisional director. Each table group prepared a set of questions for Chris, which he answered fully and frankly. The session enabled members of the team to air their feelings about changes they'd experienced. Chris, who had taken up his post after most of these changes, was able to hear their views and promise to continue a dialogue with the team.

The team prepared a series of storyboards to illustrate their Future Perfect. Here are a couple of examples.





They then scaled each picture between 0 and 10 to indicate the current state of affairs (10 being best) and prepared evidence to show how come they were rated that high up the scale.

After a round of positive gossip – in which two team members spoke favourably about a third, as if the third were out of earshot – each team member decided what actions they would take as a result of the day.

### **Since the workshop**

We have followed up with the participants via evaluation forms, sent about a week after the event and by talking at length to Ruth, the manager.

The feedback from the participants was honest and interesting, with a wide range of views and a lot on specific points we could follow up with the individuals. Some people enjoyed it and thought they'd benefited while others struggled to see any learning and thought that they were an effective team anyway.

Ruth was very upbeat about the day, believing that it helped just to get the whole team together (in a venue away from Tate) and give them a chance to have their say. 'I wanted an

opportunity to regroup and do things together. Anything else would have been too complicated. You have to recognise the limits of what you can do’.

She felt that it was particularly helpful to get the views of ‘client’ departments, seeing this as confirmation for the team and for her of strengths that already exist. Ruth also thought that the picturing (Future Perfect exercise) worked well: ‘they have a strong group mentality, they rarely work on their own’, she said. ‘There was cohesion and excellent communication during that exercise’. This reflects how they work on the job – teamwork and commitment to getting the job done takes over.

Another, perhaps unexpected, outcome for Ruth was the realisation that some quite simple aspects of the job, such as timesheet recording, are not well understood and that misconceptions abound. This came up in discussion, so she was able to deal with it there and then.

When asked to pick one highlight of the day, Ruth actually came up with three:

- getting everyone in the room
- the discussion with the Divisional Director
- the opportunity to get input and views from the whole group at once.

Ruth has noticed a more positive outlook in the team since the workshop, while accepting that individual feedback varied; ‘lots of people said they enjoyed it, others weren’t so sure’. Nevertheless, she is convinced that it helped improve relationships within the team. For example, she has noticed that individual art-handlers are now talking to each other more about projects they are involved in.

### **Next steps**

As far as next steps are concerned, Ruth thinks that the day will provide an excellent starting point for discussions with individuals as part of the performance review process. She

also wants to set up a further meeting with Chris and run the agenda for this past the team beforehand. She also wants to use the positive outcome of the team day to provide a starting point for realising their departmental plan.

Paul Z Jackson – co-author of *The Solutions Focus: Making Coaching and Change SIMPLE* – is an inspirational consultant and coach.

His expertise in improvisation, accelerated learning and the SF approach has attracted corporate clients and public organisations, ranging from Cranfield Business School to Procter & Gamble, from local authorities to top five accountants and Greenpeace UK. paul@thesolutionsfocus.co.uk, www.thesolutionsfocus.co.uk

Colin Coombs splits his time between the Tate Gallery, where he focuses on management development and leadership, and freelance SF coaching and consultancy.