

Networking with an SF Outlook

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Based on a workshop designed and delivered together with Regina Reinhardt and Fabian Tschan.

Abstract:

This article explores networks from a participant's perspective. In particular, we have paid attention to the activities in global SF networking. The emerging ideas are primarily based on the results of a survey which, together with this paper, provided a backdrop for a workshop and discussion at the SOL International conference held in Bruges in May 2007.

SF pioneers Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer are reported to have been adamant that SF was an approach available to all, not something they owned or patented. Our study shows that, to this end, the community spirit of sharing and learning together is what many feel makes the SF community so special. The sharing concerns knowledge, resources, ideas, perspectives and experiences.

Key findings emerging from the survey and discussion at the workshop were that this SF network is both useful, stimulating, enjoyable and valued by participants. Reflecting the SF practice of 'asking the question' and seeing 'what emerges' in the network has provided ideas for further investigation. It appears as if the networks we researched are primarily used for learning and social support. There is openness and a generosity in sharing that appears to be unique to the SF networks. The network responses to e-mail enquiries issued on the list surpass expectations and enable thinking "outside the box", expanding the participants' frame of mind. Finally, the opportunity for discourse across a global range of professional approaches and applications, cultures and social norms provides the very challenge that most participants seem to value.

Networking through the SF community, as evidenced in our survey, enables individuals to cross boundaries, professionally as well as nationally, allowing one to "feel at home in the world".

Background

SF brief therapy was originally developed at the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee by Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg, and their associates (Berg, 1994; de Shazer, 1991; De Jong & Berg, 2002). In recent years, the approach has become increasingly popular in the context of organisations (Jackson & McKergow, 2002). In both frameworks, practitioners have developed networks around their practices.

Nets are essential tools for a fisherman – providing both food for the table and fish as a primary product for selling and trading – so too we find networks to be an indispensable instrument in the world of business. Through networks we learn, we get inspired, and we create opportunities. Networking, like fishing, is an activity. In this article we strive to explore how this activity is performed within the framework of SF. In analysing the results, we were curious to discover whether networking and the SF approach cross fertilise one another, and if so, how networking within the SF community mirrors the underpinning philosophy of the SF method. We raise some emerging issues for further reflection towards the end of this paper.

We invited participation from the on-line discussion group, the Solutions List (mainly based on the community of SOL conference participants – SOL standing for “Sharing and Building SF Practice in Organisations”) and from the SFT-L (the solution focused therapy mailing list and network) to share their experiences of their networks through a survey. We are aware that there are many more SF networks active around the globe, but due to the need to limit our study we turned to the ones most accessible to us as authors.

In order to get a broader perspective on networks as a phenomenon, we will discuss different aspects of networks and networking.

Reasons for networking

Networking is something people have always done. Maybe the purpose has changed over time; apart from socialising and exchanging experience, networking might have provided a means to improve hunting and gathering, as well as sharing some common interests. According to a new study from University College London Genetics, looking at how modern behaviour links to high density populations, it was found that complex skills learnt across generations can only be maintained when there is a critical level of interaction between people (Thomas, 2009). When innovating, connection is a success factor. The unique human capacity of using language is a condition for being able to network. Naturally animals can also communicate through signals of a different kind, but only concerning that which is present in their immediate surroundings (Gärdenfors, 2000, 2005). Being able to share information and communicate about things that are absent and even non-existent makes us human. We use that ability to learn and share across space and time, and one of the ways this is done is through networking.

The importance of socialising, and the social aspect of human learning, has been explored by Vygotsky (2006). His research shows that social interactions activate human development and psychological processes. We get together with people with whom we share an interest and build relationships. We look for security in a group surrounding, perhaps wanting to be part of something bigger than ourselves – combining personal resources to produce bigger results. In the context of working with clients, Insoo Kim Berg expressed the benefits of focusing on common threads rather than cultural differences when operating in cross cultural situations.

Improved connectivity offers a means of making businesses more effective and less hierarchical. However, research from London University College shows: “the central importance of relationships with others. When asked, almost everyone prefers to network and work together

through face-to-face meetings. Email is functional and practical, but face-to-face is what people want. Face-to-face makes greater trust possible” (Church, 2002).

So trust, being a central part of effective working life, can be built when people meet, for instance in conferences. One can postulate that the role that the SF list plays is one of the means of keeping the communication alive, and harvesting the fruits of the seeds planted during events like the SOL conference. Church also states that

Part of that trust-building work is done by the co-ordination function, in a constantly engaged process of knowing the members, facilitating their interaction, helping them to be in connection with one another. This work needs to be recognised as an explicit outcome of a network operating effectively (Church, 2002).

There are a number of people who have taken on a co-ordination role within the SOL community. An early pioneer, Mark McKergow started the Solutions list in 2000. Recognising the growing interest in the subject, the Bristol Solutions Group hosted the first conference, linking with international colleagues where the ideas of SF in organisations were also embraced. The co-ordinators of the SF list and networks reflect the SF philosophy in keeping things simple and using resources available.

Thanks to all the work of early adopters, the current network thrives in a variety of activities; international and local conferences, a summer university, regular group meetings and peer contacts, e-mail lists and open phone coaching sessions, to mention a few. One of the reasons for this growth might be that there are no “members“ of SOL – you can’t join it, you can only join in with it. Anyone can put on a SOL event as long as it has the support of the Steering Group, which is an open forum. The strap line “Sharing and building SF practice in organisations” is turned into reality through networking. So, we wonder, what are the driving forces and the benefits encouraging participants’ engagement?

Finally the positive psychology movement provides us with some clues worthy of consideration. We speculated whether 'happiness' might be a factor when it comes to answering the question why people network. According to Tal Ben-Shahar, a foremost exponent at Harvard University, happiness lies at the intersection between pleasure and meaning (2007). Whether at work or at home, the goal is to engage in activities that are both personally significant and enjoyable. We sought to discover in our survey how respondents rated the usefulness and enjoyment of the network.

Global networking

The enormous development of the travel and communication sector in recent decades has brought people from diverse cultures together. Travelling has become simple and increasingly affordable. The whole globe is accessible, enabling face to face meetings in conferences and other forums. The internet provides access to journals and articles, blogs and chats, where information is shared and new ideas can flourish. Virtual networking platforms, email, twitter and text messages, mobile phones and free internet calling bring people together in global communities.

The open access, speed and number of interactions provided through cyberspace offers unheralded potential for levels and intensity of co-operation. According to Church (2002) people participate through commitment to a shared purpose, joined together through shared values. Global networks mean participants undertake activities together, often simultaneously, often spread across geographical space and time zones. It is the linked nature of the work, and the quality of participation in the shared space of the network, that makes this kind of working important. Cultural diversity is a component in global networks. Considering this, it could be useful to have some knowledge and understanding of cultural background when networking around the world. The potential resource available is mind blowing with its capacity for global input to local solutions.

Empirical material

We invited participation from the Solutions list and SOL World conference attendees, as well as participants from the SFT-L (The SF therapy mailing list and network) to share their experiences of their networks through a survey.

The survey consisted of five questions posted on the two SF e-mail lists mentioned above. The majority of responses were anonymous; stating only which nation they were from – the aim of this being to identify any potential cultural differences and discover the range of global reach. The first question was formulated in order to identify any potential differences between networking in SF communities and in other contexts. The four subsequent questions aimed to illuminate what value the networking might have for participants. We wondered whether questions 3 and 4 might provide some link to Tal Ben-Shahar’s claim that happiness lies at the intersection between pleasure and meaning (2007). We chose to use the wording “enjoyable” and “useful” as more colloquial for this purpose.

1. In what way do you find the SF network to be different from other networks you have encountered?
2. What difference does being part of this network make for you?
3. How enjoyable is it for you to participate in this network on a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 means it is 100% enjoyable.
4. How personally significant (useful) is the participation to you on a scale from 1 to 10?
5. Any other comments?

We followed up the posting by sending personal e-mails with the same questions to some individuals we knew personally in the network. Altogether the frequency of responses was low, and we counted 29 responses over the internet. However, the answers had much in common, allowing some conclusions to be drawn. The global spread of respondents was impressive – they came from; UK, France, USA, Finland, Denmark, Belgium, Australia, Switzerland, South Africa, Canada, Germany, Singapore, Japan and Israel.

It is to be noted that the survey is not statistically valid and that no firm conclusions can be drawn from its results. Instead, the responses can be seen as an indication of what participants might experience as important themes when networking.

Results of survey

We did not set out to find hard statistical data but rather to provide some background material for further exploration. The following extracts from respondents are acknowledged as being limited in general validity though insightful for both the individual, the authors, and for the participants of the network.

The international diversity of responses mirrors the network and is in itself a key attribute. The opportunity for discourse across a global range of professional approaches and applications, cultures and social norms provides the very richness that many participants value.

We have selected some key recurring themes and specifically some individual comments and challenges posed by participants which are, in the authors' view, worthy of further exploration.

Comparison to other networks

In answering question 1, considering comparison to other, non-SF networks, the majority of the respondents perceived the SF networks to be more open and generous in sharing.

“The generosity of the SF network is what strikes me as the most important difference.” “People are more willing to share and are not so hung up on copyright etc.”

Respondents express that the SF networks they are part of are more personal and supportive, not dominated by “what’s in it for me”. “It is more open and there is more willingness to share unconditionally” which also means “open with problems”. “I find the SF networking primarily more accepting, more supporting and of course more positive than other networks”.

Participants seem to appreciate the absence of any particular leader, “mostly maintaining an ethos of inclusivity rather than an ‘in-crowd’”. It is also noted that “Even the pioneers in SF continue to contribute actively, which is really useful. There is no hierarchy, and people feel welcome to contribute.”

Finally, an SF approach is evident as participants practise “high respect towards each other – nobody has the attitude of knowing (as we all know that not-knowing is a virtue)”, which is different from other forums.

The difference this network makes

Taking first the threads from respondents that relate to their professional development and learning, we find that getting new ideas is a valued benefit for participants: “Simple and quick access to ideas”, “The speed at which solutions are put forward is breathtaking at times”. Beside speed, slowing down can also be rewarding; “Good ideas get me thinking and reflecting”. Another respondent formulates the role of the e-mail list in a very concrete way: “This is the place to go to whenever you are stuck.”

Many respondents put the professional diversity in focus as a “wider range of disciplines represented, makes for a richer dialogue”, “it makes me marvel at the different ways in which people use SF in their work”. Yet another respondent illuminates the professional diversity:

This is an inspiring exchange even if I have no urgent questions, and helpful in a multi-faceted way if someone has a concrete request for ideas and support – very special indeed! There's probably a myriad of other specialities: the mix of internationality and familiarity, the many levels of exchange and activities, the focus on positives. It continues to stimulate, challenge, stretch, and focus my thinking around solutions.

Learning, partly from changing perspectives, is essential: “It allows me to learn from others”, gaining new insights, “It (the mailing list) operates as a forum to keep me reflecting on my own practice, thus enhancing my capacity to learn from my clients and my practitioner experiences even when working alone”.

Participation in the e-mail lists also serves as a reminder of the SF approach in practice. Respondents express that it “keeps an SF approach in my mind” and “keeps me motivated to use and practise SF”. Networks are also market channels for SF as a method as new learning spreads like rings on water: “I am beginning to share with colleagues the insights I have gained from being part of the network.”

The idea of being able to effortlessly share ideas and experiences with practitioners on the other side of the globe is enthusiastically described: “I am amazed how people are helpful if you post a question or a request. Sometimes it's so fast that within some minutes people seem to start receiving the responses from all corners of the globe. That's amazing”.

Diversity is expressed to be important as it presents “challenge of different views and approaches.” “I particularly value the diversity of contexts / . . . / it is great to be exposed to areas of practice I might never otherwise encounter – there is only so much any one person can explore!!”

As the networks are international, they are not as prone to competition as local networks can be. “A great deal of sharing of what might otherwise be seen as ‘professional secrets’”.

Respondents also expressed some personal, rather than direct professional benefits. The networks appear to fill the role of a support group, providing a sense of security and

confidence “about the benefits of the SF approach”: “It’s a kind of ‘insurance’. I know I have access to a very wide resource of SF support whenever I need it”. Participation also breaks isolation for those who work alone, or are the only ones using an SF approach in their organisation, “A sense of being in touch with like-minded workers”.

It gives me a great reassurance that there so many people out in the world who trust this method. It gives me an expanded feeling since most of the members are from Europe and I am accessing from the other side of the globe.

So apart from the definite business value of the exchange of ideas, the main difference that this network makes for me is that it helps me to feel at home in the world.

Enjoyment and usefulness of the network

In answer to the scaling questions 3 & 4, the degree of enjoyment from network participation was rated slightly higher than the degree of usefulness. For almost all respondents (with few exceptions) the two were closely linked, enjoyment being one or two steps above usefulness.

Enjoyment | ————— | 10
7.8

Usefulness: | ————— | 10
7.2

Challenges and opportunities extracted from the comments section of the survey

Although the majority of respondents emphasised their positive experiences of networking within the context of SF, there are a number of challenges facing the networks in question: “I like the way people respond in a respectful SF way to each other. I like the humour although I don’t get the point because I don’t understand the language that well”.

This quote highlights the language barriers that some of

the responses pointed to. Maintaining a humorous and familiar tone at the same time as not excluding new comers by “in-jokes” is not always easy.

In order to keep the network active, it is vital to keep the pioneers’ interest by making sure that participation is intellectually rewarding for them too. The pioneers fill an important role as they are able to contribute with knowledge and experiences. The following statement can be seen in the light of the challenge it presents to maintain their interest: “Critical commentary and theoretical conversations that lead to discussion are absent. It needs to mature.”

Although some respondents in the survey report concrete business results from networking, another challenge would be to enhance the degree of actual business being initiated through networking activities: “the SF network is still young from the business point of view”.

Discussion and emerging ideas

In the following, we will discuss our findings, and also highlight some of the ideas that emerged when analysing the material behind this article. We explored how, and in what way, the SF network appeals to its participants. In this quest, we came to the conclusion that diversity – in combination with shared interest in the SF method – appears to be a fundamental part of the networks’ value. As one respondent pointed out, a success factor related to the diversity could be that international networks might not be as prone to competition as local networks can be.

There is openness and a generosity in sharing that appears to be special amongst SF networks. The networks are described as welcoming and friendly, and for almost all respondents the two scored highly and were closely linked, enjoyment being one or two steps above usefulness. These results lead us to further consider whether Tal-Ben Shahar’s claims around ‘happiness’ might have an influence on the use of the network. We did not ask specifically about the link between meaning, pleasure and happiness; however,

anecdotal responses from some of the participants in our workshop when discussing these responses suggested that a 'feel good' factor may come from the strong sense of meaning and pleasure they gain from the network. It would be interesting therefore to explore further how these interactions fit with the Tal-Ben Shazar approach and what, if any, relevance there might be for SF networking activity.

Humour appears to be an important ingredient as expressed by respondents, although at the same time it can present a challenge; friendly exchanges containing "in jokes" can be perceived as excluding newcomers. At times the intended humour can present difficulties where there are cultural misunderstandings and language barriers, as almost all communication on the lists is carried out in English.

It appears as if the networks we researched are primarily used for learning and social support. The socialising, being in touch with like-minded colleagues, appears to be specifically appreciated as many practitioners work alone. The learning aspect, also being important in a business context, is based both on refreshing and developing new tools, skills and specific applications in the SF method. It is perhaps most appreciated by those with less experience of working in an SF way, as they are able to tap into resources and share the knowledge of more experienced practitioners.

Our findings demonstrate the value of the non-hierarchical and informal format with no obvious leadership or dominating in-crowd. Curiosity and open-mindedness appear to be important aspects of the networks examined. "I don't know the question I have asked until I have heard the response" is a remark attributed to Steve de Shazer, based on work by Paul Watzlawick. Our empirical material shows that asking a simple question within the framework of an SF network can present ideas and create results the person issuing the question would never have thought of. The network responses surpass expectations and enable thinking "outside the box", expanding the participants' frame of mind. We believe that the diversity and international dimension of the network positively influence this experience. In the SF network it is

possible that more is gained from cultural diversity, if participants adopt the non-expert attitude in their interactions.

Through these networks, participants are linked with people from all over the world and from a wide variety of professional fields. In our study we were unable to detect any specific indications of cultural differences in networking possibly because our sample was too small. However, we wonder whether sometimes unexpected solutions emerge based on 'useful misunderstandings' arising from different cultural interpretations and participants' diverse backgrounds.

One gets a sense that the diversity present in these networking groups, with their strong international flavour and spirit of sharing, influences its way of working. The diversity of responses mirrors the network and is in itself a key attribute. The opportunity for discourse across a global range of professional approaches and applications, cultures and social norms provides the very challenge that participants value. We think this topic of diversity and its inherent resources has potential for further interesting research.

Looking back at our original question whether networking and the SF perspective cross fertilise one another, we have found some limited evidence to support the practice of participants modelling SF practices in their exchanges. The SF networks we have tapped into appear to be supportive, resource oriented and focusing on what works. The appreciative way colleagues respond, pose questions, adopt the non-expert stance, and ask for small steps reinforces the SF model, making an interesting record as written coaching dialogues between participants emerge on the network.

Interactions are a fundamental principle of SF work, and by its very nature an interactive network reflects this. There is a synchronicity between the way SF interventionists, coaches and consultants perform their own solution building when taking an active part in networking, and the way the SF method as such is designed (Jackson & McKergow, 2002, Cauffman, 2006). The synchronicity lies in the fact that participants are being coached in how to coach, SF questions

are often asked (instead of answers given) and resources highlighted in order to coach the person looking for help. Through this method of networking one can get to experience being both a resource and 'client' of the community. There is a continuous effort to improve one's own methods of applying SF in an organisational context. Thomas (2009) says: "Ironically, our finding that successful innovation depends less on how smart you are than how connected you are seems as relevant today as it was 90,000 years ago." In our understanding, being connected to peers all around the globe helps SF practitioners develop their practices in an innovative manner.

Networking in the context of SF appears to be growing in fertile ground, offering professional support and reassurance, as well as presenting challenges. Networking through the SF community, as evidenced in our survey, enables individuals to cross boundaries, professionally as well as nationally, allowing one to "feel at home in the world".

As authors of this article, our hope is to inspire others to enjoy the rewards of networking, and to pay tribute to the joy and the usefulness we have experienced through taking part in SF networks. We also hope to add some understanding of the benefits, value and challenges of the networks in question and in that way contribute to their further development. We would like to end this article with a quote from our colleague and workshop participant in SOL 2007, Kirsten Dierolf: "Let's waste some time together" – the results can no doubt be very fruitful!

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