57 SF Activities for Facilitators and Consultants

Peter Röhrig and Jenny Clarke (Eds.)

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Review by John Brooker

Before writing my review, I turned to Amazon to obtain some different perspectives on this book. One review begrudged it one star; the other review endowed it with five stars. Interesting. However we can learn some good points about the book from them.

The reviewer giving one star is an Organisation Development (OD) expert.

His headline comment, *"More social work / therapy orientated than organisation / business focused,"* baffled me. Every activity in the book is about workshops in organisations, as it clearly states on page 7.

He also states "*The content is very insular in style seeming only to draw on those in the solutions field* (sic)." The title of this book may explain my puzzled reaction.

The "five star" reviewer, by contrast, focuses on the benefits to trainers. Whilst the book is useful for trainers, it is not aimed at them (also stated on page 7), so five stars, whilst affirming, does seem a little enthusiastic.

So neither review really explains this book. Let me try.

57 Activities is written by many respected practitioners of Solutions Focus (SF) and is an excellent resource aimed firmly at SF facilitators and consultants. The editors specifically chose articles that demonstrate the use of SF tools and provide clues that the author works with an SF attitude and SF principles.

For the inexperienced and experienced, there are very useful activities, with practical instructions on how to use them.

However, as the author of the preface says, "*useful new forms of application for the SF approach will arise from changing the instructions*." This means if you are a confident and experienced practitioner, you have scope to adjust activities.

With regard to the preface, it does appear rather academic for what is such a practical book (there is a lot of discussion around Wittgenstein). However, the discussion serves a purpose and the chapter is a useful reminder that SF has a lot more depth that we can all explore.

Whilst the span of material is of great use to the reader, reviewing a book with 57 Activities is daunting. It is like starting 57 books, each with its own theme and much detail.

The average reader is more fortunate for two reasons. Firstly, you can dip in to the book to look for tips, with the title of most articles giving a good indication of their contents. Secondly, to aid your exploration, the editors have structured the materials so that the articles fall in to themed chapters.

Neatly, the editors have used two themes for structuring Chapters 2 to 11.

One theme is the natural flow of a workshop, from "*Before the session begins*" through to "*The next session*" (making the neat assumption that the client is so delighted, they will book a next session!) Of interest too is the large chapter on "*Taking learning back to the workplace*" and the somewhat smaller chapter "*How was it for you?*" on SF evaluation.

The second theme is SF tools (e.g. resources, future perfect, spotting progress, interaction etc.).

Chapter 12 is an excellent introduction or reminder of how to apply SF principles when using the activities. It is worth reading this chapter before consulting the articles.

One way you could use the book is to plan and structure a day's event, choosing from relevant articles. Alternatively, those of you who often work with the same clients will find it a good resource for fresh tools.

A question most people will ask before buying this book

is, "Will I be able to use the activities?" For me the answer is "mostly". Some do not suit my style, but will suit the style of other facilitators. However, I have used a number of them and could use many more, so the wide selection of material in this book adds real value.

I also wondered if culture may be an inhibitor to the use of some activities in a book written by people of many nationalities (most are from Northern and Central Europe, with a few others). For example, in a telephone discussion about one of the activities with other members of SFCT UK and Ireland, we suspected we would receive a robust response to certain questions in the corporate environment of the UK and Ireland.

In our call we agreed that we might not have the confidence to run the more complex activities in a client workshop. In some cases this might arise from the translation of instructions or a slip in editing (e.g. from another article: *". . .you can connect the pictures or the symbols on the boxes the topic of the workshop"*), though generally the translation and editing are fine.

Rather, we considered that our confidence would rise if we had more than the written instructions to rely on. We agreed that ideally we would be able to question the author or see the activity demonstrated on video. It would also be useful to try out the activities at informal or formal SF meetings or talk it through on a call with some other practitioners.

This issue is not specific to this book and I wonder if perhaps the ideal medium for these practical books is as an e-book with hyperlinks to other resources?

There are instances in the book of questions that are not SF. Whilst this is not unusual, I mix SF and non-SF approaches at times, it would be helpful for those who have less experience to point out that something is not SF and perhaps explain the reason for using it.

In conclusion, this book is a wonderful example of the sharing SF community, with respected practitioners passing on their experience for little more than their love of the topic and some peer recognition.

There is a large variety of very useful activities, many that will work for you whether you have much experience or not. You sense that the authors try hard to pass on the practical information in full, rather than the "I'll hold back just enough so you have to hire me" approach found in some business articles.

I would scale this book "7 out of 10" in terms of usefulness with "10" describing a multi media product. It has a useful structure, some great insights in to what SF is (beneath the tools) and, though not cheap, a value for money price. This leads me to ask a final question: "If this book were in your library, how much better might you be as an SF consultant or facilitator?"

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