

Interview

SF at the Kitchen Table. An interview with Alan Kay

Interview by Anton Stellamans

Alan Kay is an SF change consultant supporting clients in areas such as facilitating strategic planning, stakeholder consultation and customer co-creation strategy. He serves a wide variety of organisations in Canada, the US and Europe. Alan is a founding member of SFCT and an active member of SOLWorld. An experienced facilitator, he is an enthusiastic advocate of Kitchen Table roundtable discussions. In this capacity, he brings together executives and professionals from different fields, enabling them to share their knowledge and ideas over a wide range of complex business issues. A former senior executive in the advertising and marketing communications industry, Alan was Managing Director of a high profile Toronto unit of McCann Erickson Advertising. Alan Kay is author of *Fry The Monkeys Create A Solution* and an interesting range of SF-based blog posts.

How did you get involved with the SF model?

A colleague, Rick Wolfe (father of the Kitchen Table conversation model), and I were collaborating as independents. We had left the advertising business where we had both led campaigns for famous brands and managed agency businesses with bottom-line responsibility. We were looking for something that would improve our client's work. So we attended a Solution Focus Brief Therapy training at the Hincks-Dellcrest Centre in Toronto. After two days' introductory training in a family therapy model, we each went to client

meetings and started asking better questions from which we (and our clients) saw immediate improvements in both the conversation and the outcomes of the work.

That must have been a very useful introduction in SF?

I was hooked! Over the next few years I went back for more training (and I still go for refreshers). I also started connecting with other SF practitioners (I couldn't find any in Toronto) like Jenny Clarke and Mark McKergow, and attended the first of many SOLWorld events.

Meanwhile, Rick expanded the dynamic of the roundtable work we had done by making it applicable across a wide range of situations where smart dialogue made a significant difference for client outcomes. In no time, clients like IBM were asking for what had become the 'Kitchen Table' approach in Europe, Asia, the US, and Canada.

Our clients started expressing their appreciation for the work by extending many projects over a lengthy period – one bank kept us engaged in delivering customer experience projects for nearly nine years.

I began integrating SF into all of our joint work. My task was to develop applications that enhanced and/or supplemented the projects, e.g., at a client kitchen table with customers and staff in the room we'd ask the staff, "*... despite the customer issue we are here to address, what's working that we don't have to change?*" We'd also close the session with some small steps action planning by asking, "*... suppose the customer was to notice a difference in our (cross-functional) work over the next few weeks ...*"

Interestingly, I only occasionally mentioned that the work was based on SF. Few had heard of it, and explaining that it was a family therapy model would cause their eyes to glaze over.

What keeps you interested in SF rather than any other approach?

I try not to be one of the zealots that Ben Furman rightly abhors, but over 18 years of applying SF to a wide range of client situations, some of them very complicated (some would say, downright nasty), I have found the SF set of tools proves very flexible and situationally adept to whatever comes up. The tools allow me to serve the client in ways that help make them the expert in what they want to be better.

I'm not sure where the instinct came from, but I had the feeling that if I used some other change models but integrated SF, then it would make it easier for my clients to interpret – we'd be talking the same language. For example, when a client liked the SWOT model, I'd enthusiastically adapt SWOT using SF. Nobody objected because they quickly saw the model they were familiar with provide magically better results.

I then took to stealing wholesale ideas from people like the folks at Everest Group (on outsourcing), or Prosci Change Management. By simply modifying their language, their free on-line tools became even better. Average artists borrow; great artists steal. SF allows you to steal and help your clients become even better.

While I have a passion for teaching people and organisations the SF approach, I don't see myself as so much a teacher, but an advocate for a model which they can learn to become passionate about, either in most of what they do, or as a tool to plug into their work when required.

You are well-known for your Kitchen Table stakeholder approach, can you tell us some more about this?

I'm fortunate to have worked with some great people – Jim Duval who taught me the foundational aspects of SF, and with Rick Wolfe, who brought the notion of better dialogue from his years directing and writing plays, from working in Japan, and other influences. Rick researched and practised a great many

aspects of letting people engage in dialogue at many new levels – from the water-cooler to the boardroom table. He noticed something about kitchen table conversations that would make sense to anyone who knows SF: The Kitchen Table model works because people are good at conversation. It asks people to bring their personal conversation skills to the question at hand. And it provides the easiest of all ways for people to blend their strengths with everyone else's. I simply added more layers of SF into the practice. I believe that Rick's notion of the kitchen table as a place where hospitality, sharing knowledge, having a rambunctious conversation, and encouraging disagreement, plus a few laughs, frames the opportunity for people to be creative in ways they do not expect. SF merely adds some juice, and fortifies it with action orientation. After all, in family life, the kitchen table is often the place where action is agreed upon and managed. In our work together, Rick and I found that the action orientation I brought to the kitchen table from SF was a good fit and a needed dimension.

You stress the importance of cross-silo work in organisations ... Why is that so important?

First, silos are not a bad thing. They are created by pools of expertise and are probably essential, for example, in regulated and compliance-driven businesses like nuclear power plants and in banks. Silos are bad – very bad – for the rest of the organisation and the end customer when the silos hide behind their expertise, hoard power and lack expertise in collaboration. They also encourage passivity among the silos that perceive they lack power or influence.

I have witnessed SF be a significant contributor to de-siloed collaboration. As one manager said after several customer kitchen tables, *“We now never start a meeting, especially with other departments without asking, “How will this discussion be useful to the customer?””*

How do you manage to embed SF into the daily interactions in a client organisation?

Well, I definitely do not force SF into the daily interactions with a client. I think I embed SF by bringing a variety of SF tools, plus the experience of using them in many organisations. The applications then become valuable to the client e.g., strategic planning, stakeholder consultation, kitchen table dialogue, etc. You open up the possibilities for them to build on strengths and find the future they want. But, it's fundamentally critical that you sell the client on the project opportunity they want (planning, etc.). You can't impose the SF approach. So, I sometimes find myself saying during a client session, *"I'm taking off my SF hat and going to suggest what I have seen others do, etcetera,"* then say, *"Now, back to my SF role in supporting you!"*

Your passion, leadership and willingness to work the way the client wants the project to work can be instrumental in supporting purposeful change in an organisation.

Also, letting go to the extent of not wanting the business helps clients who are sometimes sceptical about the possibilities of SF. Always start a new business briefing with, *"When you faced this situation before, what worked?"* By demonstrating the model right away, you win their trust. And, if they remain sceptical, thank them for their time and go meet with another client.

What are your best experiences with SF?

Where to begin! There are quite a few where the senior client came to me at the end of a session and said, *"How the (expletive) did you that? Today, I came expecting a near disaster and instead we have not only a plan, we have agreement on moving forward."* To which I always respond, *"Actually, your team did it. I just asked better questions."*

SF also gives me the confidence to ask questions some would say are unthinkable. In a case where two parents whose children had been removed into safekeeping I asked, *"What*

worked by having your kids taken from the family?” and “What advice would you give the child-protection agency about being helpful to other folks in your position?”

One more that sticks out is a client who said of a lengthy and complex sector consultation on government policy, “*We have understanding, if not agreement.*” The apparent modesty of the statement belies a powerful change experience for the angry sector we worked with.

Perhaps the greatest satisfaction comes from 18 years of continually asking better questions that helped many people, teams and organisations make progress when they felt stuck.

What would help to grow the understanding and use of SF in organisations?

Maybe if it wouldn't be seen as a coaching tool. It has so many potential applications. We see interest in SF with agile, mentoring, project management, leadership development, sales, and so on. I am sometimes briefly dismayed when people tell me that they are enthusiastic about SF, but wonder how to apply it in their organisation. I tell them to think outcomes first and work back to the applications such as planning, etc., and go apply the principles and tools of SF in as many daring ways as they can . . . and to remember that, at first, people may look at you as though you are a stupid dog.

I only get mildly upset when the occasional SF expert says, “I'm not interested in attaching SF to business goals, etc.!” Purists have their place, but probably not in organisations.

In the meantime, a deep, deep bow to Insoo and Steve!

References

Kay, A. (2010). *Fry The Monkeys Create A Solution. The Solutions Facilitator's Handbook*. Toronto: The Glasgow Group.

Online resources

Alan Kay's website (<http://glasgrp.com>)

Alan Kay's blog (<http://frymonkeys.com/category/blog/>)

Everest Group Research: USA (<http://www.everestgrp.com>).

Hincks-Dellcrest Centre, Brief Therapy Training Centres-International, Toronto, Canada (<http://www.hincksdellcrest.org>).

Prosci Change Management: USA (<http://www.prosci.com>).

Rick Wolfe: PostStone Inc, Toronto Canada
(<http://www.poststone.com>).