

J-Sol One: Tokyo, 27 April 2008

By Mark McKergow, Centre for Solutions Focus at Work (UK)

The first SOLWorld event in Asia took place in Tokyo on 27 April 2008. Well over a hundred managers, coaches, trainers and consultants converged on the UDX conference centre in the high-tech Akihabara district for a day packed with meeting, sharing and learning at J-SOL ONE.

The event had, in true SOLWorld tradition, got off to a flying start with the J-SOL cabaret at the NoaNoa music bar in Shinjuku. Kimono-wearing MC Ponta-san introduced a varied programme of music including traditional Japanese Koto (harp), flute, guitar, karaoke (this being Japan!), piano and clarinet. Food and drink was laid on, and Ito-san was a splendidly attentive host.



We arrived at UDX to find the room decorated with flowers in yellow and orange, and a willing team of helpers welcoming us. The meeting itself was opened by lead organiser Yasuteru Aoki, with help from MCs Yuji Kojima and Ms Teruko Watanabe and occasional interjections from Ponta-san (who by now was sporting a SOLWorld

orange jacket). The audience featured a number of quite senior managers, as well as some coaches and trainers. I was honoured to give the keynote address and outlined the history and charter of SOLWorld, as well as positioning SF as distinctively progress-focused rather than explanation-focused.



The morning continued with a case presentation by Mr Eishi Fuyama, the manager of a factory making packaging materials. The plant was rescued from administration by Fujimori Industry, and Mr Fuyama was sent in to turn things around. This he had done to great effect, as the title of the session, 'SF is a lifesaver', showed. I

was very struck by the many different ways in which SF was used in this turnaround. Some were large - Mr Fuyama's opening speech to the workforce asked them to let him and each other know when they saw something good happening, as this would help him to do even more of what worked.



Miracle questioning had led to many changes, including the opening of a satellite sales office at the instigation of a young salesperson, which had then led to many more improvements. Mr Fuyama clearly knew the importance of small but highly visible signs of change, and he gave great attention to letting people know that things were moving – for example by reinstating a small shrine on the site which was valued by the workforce and by wringing money out of head office to repaint the dingy factory. He stressed the emergent nature of all this – encouraging us to accept and enjoy chaos when progress was slow. This was a really first-rate case – Mr Fuyama had not simply carried out an SF process, but had used SF ideas in many ways over many months to transform the situation.



The SOLWorld tradition of trailer presentations was well-used, as the afternoon's dozen workshops were previewed. After lunch we split into six rooms for two sets of workshops, which all showed great applications of SF in organisations, many of them by managers rather than consultants. The workshops were:

"SF Empower Meeting made a successful workplace leader in 3 months!"
Mr Shinichiro Kobayashi

"How to make a group of young people with no experience of sales into a highly motivated sales force."
Mr Shoji Sakurai

"Theory and practice of SFM (Solution Focused Management)"
Mr Yasutaka Tsuji

"Evolution of coaching: Ask what are the challenges after the miracle happened"
Mr Yuji Kojima

"Only 8 hours of group SF sessions made huge differences in 7 women's lives"
Ms Teruko Watanabe

"Getting ISO qualification in 6 months with SF communication"
Mr Hideki Shimizu

"Work Assistance Window: 45 minutes to re-valuing oneself"
Mr Yoshifumi Kakizono

"SF Health Promotion in local communities"
Mr Kazuaki Tsuboi

"Positive Future born out of problems"
Ms Koto Cho

"SF Career Consultation: Possibilities in 'young kids nowadays'"
Mr Masashi Ishikawa

"Switching among three modes of perspective makes SF easier and more effective"
Mr Eishi Fuyama

"Future possibilities of SF in public sectors"
Mr. Makoto Mizuno & Ms. Hiromi Toyota

Jenny Clarke and I managed between us to drop in on all of these workshops, and we were impressed by the ways in which people were using SF ideas simply and effectively, really matching the application to the situation. Koto Cho's work was particularly striking – she has been introducing SF to companies like Mitsubishi, Sharp and Toyota (known as the home of excellent and problem-focused quality management). Her statement that 'people think that if they can't help something, it can't be helped' was very intriguing. Masa Ishikawa's work on career counselling has already produced a useful booklet which he hopes to bring to SOLWorld 2008 in Cologne.



Ms Teruko Watanabe was using the SF Reflecting Team with groups of women. She brought along one of the clients to tell her story and also used the idea in presenting her workshop. It was very moving for me as one of the people who was around when this idea was developed in Bristol over ten years ago to see it bringing hope and change to people on the other side of the world. I was also able to demonstrate the ancient art of catching a

Koosh ball on the back of the neck for Yuji Kojima, an activity which seems to have made its way into the Japanese SF coach trainers' repertoire.

We regathered for a plenary session and panel discussion on the possibility of the 'SF Organisation'. Aoki-san started off with his idea of 'SF Inside', an echo of the Intel Inside marketing campaign. People wanted effective organisations, and they didn't much care how they worked.



However, SF could be used to generate the effectiveness. The panellists, Shinichiro Kobayashi, Eishi Fuyama, Yuji Kojima and Yasutaka Tsuji, developed this idea and gave their own viewpoints. Mr Fuyama said that elegance would be one hallmark of SF Inside. We were also shown new brain research results from the Japanese National Institute for Physiological Sciences, which showed that the same part of the brain was implicated in receiving praise and receiving money.



All too soon the meeting was drawing to a close, and we gave the J-SOL steering group a huge round of applause for an event which had been impeccably organised and packed with great ideas and learning. I signed many copies of *The Solutions Focus* (which is now available in Japanese and seems to be in every bookshop, including the airport) and noticed that some people also had copies of Peter Szabo's *Brief Coaching* book, also in Japanese.

The steering group adjourned to a Korean barbecue restaurant, where we ate delicious beef cooked over charcoal at the table, drank Korean rice wine and talked about what had made J-SOL One such a success and how it might be at J-SOL Two. I was reminded of the very first SOLWorld steering group meeting in the Waterfront pub in Bristol in 2002. The Japanese group is already bigger than we were then, and are intent on continuing to develop SF in organisations in their part of the world. Japan alone has 127 million people and is the world's second largest economy, and there is clearly much potential there. We are lucky that Aoki-san and his merry men and women are spreading the SF word with such energy, commitment and integrity.

