Achieve Tough Targets: John Pelton on using Solution Focus to achieve a tough target and resolve a difficult challenge at HS2

John Brooker

Abstract

This is the transcript of an interview with John Pelton, MBE, of CH2M HILL Consultants. John is now the Programme Partner Director of the Crossrail Project in London. In this interview, we discuss with John the benefits of using the Solution Focus (SF) approach on the HS2 Efficiency Challenge Programme. This Programme had the aim of saving £1.5 billion from the projected budget of HS2, through innovative working practices. HS2 will be Europe's largest construction project once it has received final approval.

Yes! And facilitated thirteen workshops for John and his Programme Team, using a SF approach. The workshops involved people from all levels (senior leaders through to engineers) within governmental organisations, engineering consultancies and engineering companies, may of whom were in direct competition with each other. Each workshop had a different purpose and outcome and covered different aspects of the programme construction.

John Brooker (interviewer): John, what was the target you had to achieve on your programme?

John Pelton: HS2 set up the Efficiency Challenge Programme in September 2012, with the aim of finding £1.5 billion savings from the first phase of HS2 from London to Birmingham. The target was £1.5 billion, but implicit in that was a degree of culture and behaviour change. It was a quite explicit statement that they wanted the output from the programme to act as a signpost for change in the rail and infrastructure construction industry.

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What made the programme challenging?

Well, £1.5 billion is quite an eye-watering target to start with, but actually, if you save a lot of small amounts, it's surprising how quickly you can generate large savings on a big programme. In the programme itself, we started with £16 billion, so the scale of the money shouldn't be over-awing.

I think what was really challenging was the fact that the team that I was part of, and the team that I led, knew how resistant the construction industry, the engineering industry and the infrastructure industry can be to change ... How resistant they can be to new ideas, and how difficult it can be to overcome both change aversion, but also risk aversion.

This is an industry where if something collapses, falls down, or doesn't work, large numbers of people can die. So the tendency is to add a bit because it makes you safer, but also the tendency is not to save because it might be more efficient.

So aversion to risk, aversion to change and aversion to anything new – innovation, anything like that – is rife. So really the challenge, if you like, was the mindset, the behaviours, of people that were involved in the construction.

What led you to pursue the SF approach in workshops?

Well, it's fair to say that we did try a number of ways of tackling this. It was very clear to us from the start that we had to do something different; we couldn't just sit round the table eyeballing each other with arms folded in the grumpy way that many engineers and their ilk often do in these sorts of situations. That simply wasn't going to work.

We also had to engage – I say had to engage, we decided to engage – very widely. So we didn't just stick to the HS2 team, we pulled in people from across government, from across the industry, from across the not-for-profit organisations, from across all the interest groups, and spent the first three months just getting people together, and garnering their views, their opinions, their ideas, and their commitment.

So, we needed a vehicle that would allow us to do that in a way that didn't make anyone feel uncomfortable, or that they were being oppressed, or overly influenced. It had to be open, and it had to be collaborative.

So we tried a number of what I suppose you'd loosely bracket as creative thinking techniques and, to be honest, some of them worked quite well, some of them not so well. But the one that consistently worked better was anything done with SF, and we opted to use it more systematically through the rest of the programme.

What value did the SF approach provide? What was the essence of its value?

The first aspect, which was very attractive actually, is that almost all of the normal ways that people in this industry get together to think about things start with, "so what's the problem?" And sometimes they do a gap analysis, and if you do a gap analysis and ask what's the problem on something as big as HS2, you end up with a very big problem – an enormous gap. In some of the workshops, you could physically see people being overcome by the enormity of what it was they were facing, and it was just simply not delivering the right answers.

So the beauty of SF is, it starts with "what are you trying to deliver?", and it made people think very positively about where they were going and the stage they were at. HS2 is a very visionary piece of infrastructure; it has to be by its very nature. You will have the fastest trains in the world on it, so the problems are enormous. You can`t just do it the way the last one was done; you've got to do something different. So the visionary and the "future perfect" state was a great place to start.

The next thing was that in the way that the SF process works it's very good at breaking barriers. Everyone brings their baggage to the workshop, or to the discussion, or to the meeting or forum, whatever it is. Everyone expects to put their baggage on the table and build the defensive position behind it.

Actually, the way that SF works, it doesn't really matter if they're carrying their baggage or not, because you very quickly forget about it, and look beyond it and into something different, and work back from the future state. It meant that people, despite some really desperate attempts to keep the baggage in the game, weren't able to do it, so it was a great leveller. That was very valuable, not just for dealing with the people inside HS2, but for bringing people in from other parts of the industry. So the benefits for collaboration were significant.

The other aspect was that we used SF in a particular way; we tried to engage people early in a particular line of thought, or a line of analysis, and used SF in the beginning to set the conditions and get as many people involved at the beginning as possible. Of course the benefit and value of that was that when they then came to doing the work that had to follow, they'd pretty much done it. And so they go away and do their writing, or their drawing, or their design, whatever it was, and nobody really critiqued it too viciously, because they'd all been there at the beginning to design it. They were all supporting each other and working with each other. So another value that we really probably hadn't expected is that it speeded the thing up, and we went through some really quite tricky, difficult areas faster than I had expected.

Did you see any benefit in terms of your team, because you had a small team of consultants?

All of them of course were drawn from the industry, so we had varying degrees of engagement, commitment, support or understanding. I think I'd like to be able to say that they went through a life transition, and they came out of it different afterwards. The reality is that they pretty much brought the set of characteristics in that they took away in the end. What was interesting was that not one of them backed out or refused; they all went with it, they played the game; they, I think, could see the value. There were still some philistines, and I guess if you drew a curve showing age against extent of being

a philistine, the older were more reluctant. And you got this sort of challenge of, "Well, I got to where I am because I did it the way it was done before; now you want me to do something different, and you want me to tell you it's better." That's not an easy game to play.

What was interesting was that afterwards, when the dust had settled and everything had finished, because it was different, because we were seen as doing things differently, we almost generated a "Stockholm complex" around it. And so the team pulled together, and still a couple of them will catch me for a coffee, and talk about how much they enjoyed doing it. Now, I don't know how often other people from other teams got together later, and said how much they enjoyed doing it, but it was due to the fact that it was different, refreshing and challenging, that they did pull through. Not all, you know, one notable exception still isn't really convinced, and still prefers to do it the way he did it before; you can't change all the people all the time.

Absolutely. So quite a difficult question, but did any aspect of the SF workshop surprise you?

I think the thing that always surprised me about some of these things, but particularly SF and the way it was done, was just how willing, engaged and collaborative people were when they did it. And you could hardly hear yourself think. The noise, the enthusiasm, the buzz, was brilliant. So I think that surprised me. The outputs, the outcomes, etcetera would not have surprised me, because I think I'm convinced. What surprised me was how much people picked it up and ran with it once they'd been introduced to it.

Thank you. Was it worth the cost and time that your team invested?

That's a very difficult question. There's a harder question, which is, "did we actually meet the target we'd been set? And the answer is, "sort of."

What we did was produce a whole list of ways you could make savings, and then because there was a sort of confidence element to it, we ran a Monte Carlo model, and associated two probabilities: one, the difficulty of the thing, and the other was whether people would cross the line and actually do it. We called it the probability of adoption. If you make the probabilities of adoption all 100%, so everyone would take it up and do everything we'd said, then the actual total savings potential was 1.9 billion. So we were clear. But if you then applied a pragmatic probability, it dropped to about 1.3, 1.4 billion, although it was rising as people began to become convinced.

So the answer is yes, we achieved the target. Was the value of the SF worth it? I think it was. I mean, I alluded earlier to the fact that it saved time. We were right up against the stocks; our final report was being written during the final 48 hours of the 18 months that we had, and we worked pretty flat out throughout that period. For the scale of project, you'd probably not be surprised by that. So it was very, very busy. We couldn't afford to mess around. We had to get a lot of people involved very quickly from a standing start, who had not all worked together before, and generate output. It worked.

I suppose the example that illustrates it was the vision and strategic themes piece. The vision, we got the executive committee to set; that was a leadership issue and after a bit of discussion they agreed on a vision, and that was great. What we then did was we used the SF technique, which was worked up by us as amateurs in the team, and then complemented by the professionals, John Brooker and his team, who came in later to add some shine to the thing.

We got people involved from the tea boy and the people at the bottom of the organisational pile, right up to the senior executives, sometimes in the same group. And we used SF through a series of workshops to build up their views on what the strategic themes should be for HS2 Phase One. We came out of the end with eight themes, in about three months; add another month for it to go past the Department of Transport to be approved, and it actually hit the Secretary of State's table at the end of that month. And he said, "Yes", so that was kind of nice.

When we compared the same activity on the Olympics, who used a very similar programme architecture, it took nearly eight months, and we know that they also workshopped, but we know that they did it in a more traditional way. It meant we had activities like that done really very quickly, people were very engaged, and of course everyone in the organisation was involved, so they all knew about them (the strategic themes). So when it came to the communication strategy (it was simpler) they already knew. So it doubled up. I think the value is manifest; it was really worth doing. And actually, we persuaded a lot of other people that SF was a good way of thinking, too, so hopefully that value will spread.

Finally, will you continue with the SF approach on future projects?

No question, no question. I mean, I enjoy it, and I can see so many potential uses for it. I think the only limitation is that every time I seem to come up against it, I have to persuade another crowd of people that it's the right thing to do. And you know, even chief executives, who you might think are broad minded, and there are some very good ones around, who are prepared to run with innovation strategies, and goodness knows what else, still think in problem focused terms, and it's quite difficult to get them to change. I will certainly continue to practice it and to use it. I think it's a fantastic technique.

John Brooker is a professional meeting facilitator and innovator, working with teams internationally. He encourages teams to think innovatively using his own Inn8 Approach and SF so that they can achieve difficult targets, tackle complex challenges and maximise major opportunities. He is the author of Innovate to Learn, Don't Learn to Innovate. A Board Member of the International Association for Quality Development of Solution Focused Consultants and Trainers, John has worked with SF since 2004.

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