

# Discussion paper

Responses to the article by Christine Kuch and Susanne Burgstaller in *InterAction* Volume 3, number 2, pages 42–56

Invitation: *“To discuss and reflect on our concepts of organisation as SF organisational developers in the future.”*

Response by Jenny Clarke

The case studies presented in this article make good reading and I would describe them as recognisable pieces of SF work. However, the introduction and conclusion confuse me, especially as I read the article with Occam’s Razor close at hand. I do not understand the importance the authors give to the distinction between the organisation and the people in it – nor what implications they see for SF organisational developers in the future.

Perhaps this goes to the heart of what is radical about the SF way of thinking, stemming from the interactional view pioneered by Gregory Bateson, John Weakland and the Mental Research Institute.

In keeping with the interactional view, I challenge the premise that the organisation is “in part independent of the people who are working in it ... People are relevant for the organisation not only as specific individuals, but also as representatives of their specific roles. The consequence of this description is that individuals are interchangeable.” In

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SF-land, we take the position that every case is different – and so is every Finance Director! Introducing the idea of the organisation as a separate entity adds an unnecessary element of complexity to our work, one that can be shaved away with benefit to clients and practitioners. People and the way they act and interact ARE the organisation, and the procedures and processes people have devised to further their aims can be changed when they are no longer effective or efficient.

The literature now contains many cases and descriptions of OD work using SF – see for example previous editions of *InterAction*, *Solution-Focused Management* edited by Günter Lueger and Hans-Peter Korn, Daniel Meier’s book *Team Coaching with the SolutionCircle* and *Solution Focus Working* edited by Mark McKergow and me.

In the cases presented by Christine Kuch and Susanne Burgstaller, the authors were asked to help their clients with mediation or conflict resolution. What characterises the SF consultants’ approach is to turn the focus away from what is wrong (interpersonal conflict in these cases) towards what is wanted. Naturally the participants are preoccupied with what is wrong and the shift in focus can take time. This is the art of platform building, an often overlooked tool in the SF tool box, as described in my article in *Solution-Focused Management* (Lueger & Korn, (2006), p. 357–362).

In the first case, what was wanted was revealed in the second workshop as better preparation of the core meeting; in the second case, the focus was shifted to the task: what are we trying to do here, and how could that be achieved in an ideal world?

The question “what are we trying to achieve?” is often a good starting point in building a secure platform, especially in mature organisations which tend to take the answer to that question for granted, without regularly checking that it is still relevant and widely understood within the organisation. SF consultants know that time spent in this phase is well spent: it gives clients confidence that they have been listened to and their concerns taken seriously AND that they have some idea of the direction they want to go and the benefits of setting off

in that direction. As well as choosing the next small steps in the desired direction, we might spend some time casting back a step or two from the Future Perfect to ask “what do we need to have in place in order to support this?” This is an elegant way of looking at the processes and interfaces as described in the two case studies which does not require any OD “expertise”.

In summary, I cannot see the added benefit of viewing organisations as somehow separate and different from the people working within them – a distinction which seems to me to be contrary to the SF tradition and, at the very best, redundant in the task of making progress in a desirable direction.

## References

- Lueger, G., & Korn, H-P. (2006). *Solution-Focused Management*. Munich: Rainer Hampp Verlag.
- McKergow, M., & Clarke, J. (2007). *Solutions Focus Working*. Cheltenham: Solutions Books.
- Meier, D. (2005). *Team Coaching with the SolutionCircle*. Cheltenham: Solutions Books.

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## Response by Marika Tammeaid

Thank you to Christine and Susanne for bringing up an important issue!

It is indeed crucial for SF practitioners working with organisations to ask how the work differs from the clinical approach. I agree that organisational discussion premises, as stated in the discussion paper (I am used to using simply the word “structures”), are important to take into consideration and that may lead to asking “different” questions.

In my understanding, the key issue still is who produces the topics to the conversation. Although the consultant might anticipate that structures are important in this particular case or in every organisation, they appear in coaching/consulting conversation only when the participants refer to structures, rules, expectations or the effect of them. After that the SF practitioner can explore more what is already working well with structures and what could be done better. This is maybe the main difference between SF and other approaches, which willingly state that in every organisation or situation certain things have to be in place in order to get good results. We as SF people know that even in the oddest circumstances good results can be achieved if the existing resources are used well.

In my experience, an SF practitioner in an organisation can make a huge difference by pointing out that the structures and procedures in organisations are also manmade and originally with good purpose. This insight leads to a broader view and willingness to take action in changing the rules if necessary - or what is even more important: the way rules are adapted. Especially when working with the public sector, it is common to hear complaints about the only possible way of doing things in this job or service. Still, the fact is that also in strictly law and regulation based functions the procedures differ from one working place to another. Even when working for the same mission, the team

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has often more possibilities to make a difference than they think in the first place.

Understanding that organisational structures or rules can also be an asset relates to the main “headache” of every manager and organisational consultant: how to form common goals, how to unite individual goals with an organisation’s goals and how to help people see through each other’s eyes. In these cases it is a great help, as stated in the discussion paper, to bring the discussion towards more abstract level by asking for examples of common forums and structures that are helpful in the work and can increase common understanding of shared goals.

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## Response to the responses by Susanne Burgstaller

Thank you very much, Jenny and Marika, for your interesting and informative responses.

Marika mentioned the fact that it is important to keep asking how the work with organisations differs from the clinical approach. That is exactly what we were trying to do and stimulate thinking about. We sometimes find that colleagues coming from the therapeutic context find it difficult trying to enter the world of organisational consulting.

In our view the beauty of the SF approach is that you can apply it anywhere with good results. Jenny is right when she claims that much can be “shaved away” – many things are not essential to the SF approach.

We have found in our own practice, however, that you can become much more efficient when you add knowledge of the context to the basic SF toolset.

Especially when working with larger organisational entities we have found concepts and tools derived from post-modern systemic organisational theory, as expressed in the works of Karl Weick, Niklas Luhmann, Dirk Baecker or Fritz Simon, helpful. In our view they provide another relevant “frame” to help us refine our informed practice. Post-modern systemic organisational theory is a practical theory, one that observes and describes rather than prescribes. With one of the founding fathers of systems thinking, Gregory Bateson, as the founding father of SF, we believe we are in the same family of thoughts.

Of course we have our own good canon of pioneers in SF OD practitioners whom Jenny mentioned (and there seem to be many more out there when I read *InterAction!*), who are translating SF successfully from the therapeutic to the management, or organisational, context.

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With our discussion paper we wanted to continue this tradition and to possibly add new aspects since we firmly believe that as an intellectual movement SF should remain more open rather than closed, and use neighbouring disciplines as resources.

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