

Book Reviews

Handbook of Solution-Focused Conflict Management

Fredrike Bannink

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Review by Antoinette Oglethorpe

Fredrike Bannink sums up what her book is all about in the first chapter when she says “Solution-focused (SF) conflict management no longer focuses on the conflict itself but on what clients want to change in their lives and how to make that happen. It is about their “best case scenario”, or even their “good enough case scenario”, instead of their “worst case scenario”. SF conflict management – focusing on hope, optimism, self-efficacy, resilience, competencies and possibilities – offers new ways to form or strengthen relationships, encouraging trust and respect or alternatively to end relationships in as pleasant a manner as possible. SF conflict management, sometimes called SF mediation, is applicable in all settings where there is a conflict and people decide to do something about it, from divorce conflicts, family and neighbour conflicts, team and labour conflicts, personal injury conflicts to international conflicts.

This book then goes on to “teach” readers how to take an SF approach to mediating a conflict and how to apply such an approach to the varied settings mentioned above.

For those with an interest in theories, one of the early chapters introduces and discusses four theoretical issues that are connected with SF conflict management and which

provide a strong psychological foundation and underpinning to the SF approach. These links are:

1. focusing as soon as possible on developing a win-win situation (game theory)
2. focusing on positive goals (quantum mechanics and neuroscience)
3. focusing on hope and what difference it would make if the things hoped for would become a reality (hope theory)
4. focusing on positive emotions (broaden-and-build theory).

Fredrike has clearly carried out an amazing amount of research and the book is liberally peppered with references that give strength and credibility to her proposed approaches. While I'm not normally a great one for theories I found the references fascinating and will find them a valuable resource for explaining the approach to others of a more academic mindset. For me, the real value of the book lies in the practical, step by step processes that are outlined together with the practical guidance and SF questions that any reader can immediately start using to put this approach into practice.

For those who are not familiar with SF, the book gives a good foundation of basic knowledge starting with an overview of SF Interviewing and SF Conflict Management. It then outlines four basic SF questions (questions about hope; questions about differences; questions about what is already working and questions about the next step or sign of progress) before progressing to more sophisticated, creative SF questions. These new ways of using scaling and looking at the conflict from a number of perspectives will form a valuable addition to any SF practitioner's toolkit. I particularly liked the Interactional Matrix provided as an Appendix, which serves as a valuable aid and reminder to ask questions that help individuals see the situation through a number of lenses.

One of the main concerns for anyone challenged with helping resolve conflict is what they do if one or both of the

parties involved isn't a customer for change. Fredrike's chapter on "Working Alliances and Motivation to Change" discusses methods for assessing individuals' motivation to change and categorising them in terms of their relationship to the conflict as visitor, complainant or customer. She then goes on to outline practical strategies and questioning techniques to help visitors and complainants become customers.

Another key concern for anyone in a mediation role is how to control negative emotions. Again, the book devotes a chapter on how to focus on positive emotions, as well as other SF tools that the mediator can use. I particularly liked the advice of allowing each party one chance to "say what definitely needs to be said", having recently facilitated an informal mediation with a dysfunctional team where the repeated plaintive cry was "things need to be said".

A number of chapters look at how to apply an SF approach to a specific conflict situation – Divorce, Neighbour Conflict, Teams, Family, Personal Injury, Victim-Offender. As is the case throughout the book, these situations are illustrated and brought to life with the use of real case studies. Fredrike uses stories in a wonderful way to reinforce key concepts and bring an element of lightness to what could otherwise be a dark subject.

The book is written from a mediator's perspective and includes some useful comparisons to other mediation models as well as practical tools for the mediator to use to reflect on and evaluate their effectiveness, including how to deal with "failures". However, it is equally valuable to anyone who is not formally trained as a mediator but finds himself in the role of helping resolve conflict between others.

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