

The Sustainably Solution Focused Organisation

Margaret Eaton, Alan Kay and Haesun Moon

Abstract

The ABC Canada Life Literacy organisation demonstrates and validates one way in which solution focus (SF) can be utilised strategically to assist organisational development and growth. It shows how SF practice and behaviour in a small organisation of eight people helped enhance strategic planning and human resources. It should encourage organizations to boost their performance by using SF.

After summarising the results, we show how ABC met SF through the strategic planning process, why they chose SF team coaching training (SF-TCT), what they did to plan and deliver SF-TCT, how staff responded, and how its internal application has also contributed to ABC's external relations.

"If you invest early on, pay-offs are greater and turn-arounds are much faster."

ABC Canada's outcomes using SF for strategic planning and team coaching training demonstrate that when applied to a larger strategy, training and new practices can be effective well beyond using SF as an intervention or situational tool. The ABC team has achieved growth not only within the organisation's internal culture, but the work has also helped to refresh ABC's external stakeholder relationships. It is a substantive example of an organisation becoming focused on solutions in key aspects of its approach.

ABC – a small organisation with a big job

ABC Canada Literacy Foundation has for twenty years successfully promoted the literacy cause and raised Canadians'

Address for correspondence: 179 Douglas Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, M5M 1G7, Canada

awareness of literacy issues. ABC envisions a Canada where everyone has the literacy skills they need to live a fully engaged life. Under the leadership of a new president in 2006, the group of eight not-for-profit business professionals at ABC initially undertook a major strategic change. Having previously created awareness about low literacy among adults, families and children, a change in focus toward adult and, especially, workplace literacy awareness required significant adjustments to the strategy and a change in the team's operating style. The 2007 strategic plan had raised the bar considerably.

Of note, ABC was successful because it understood its role in influencing many diverse stakeholder groups. Despite their outstanding skill at implementing awareness programmes, the team knew that the task of influencing a new group of stakeholders would be even more complex: the decision-makers and the communication channels were now less visible than before.

The ABC team and their opportunity

ABC President Margaret Eaton recalls:

"When I arrived at ABC Canada, the board charged me with the task of returning the organisation to its original mission of serving the cause of adult literacy after a decade of well-intentioned but clear mission drift and a focus on children's literacy issues. As part of that goal I was to initiate and implement a new strategic plan for the organisation. Having already been trained in SF by Dr Mark McKergow, I was very lucky to have a fellow SF enthusiast, Alan Kay, sitting on our board, who offered to help me lead the strategic planning process and to do this using the tools of SF."

"ABC then developed an outstanding, creative, smart team that was to lead us in our new strategic direction. Alan and I then began to consider how we could deploy the SF team coaching model for the staff. The only question was, how soon could we make it happen and also see results?"

SF was already applied to strategic planning at ABC

Prior to the training outlined in this case, ABC had undergone the strategic planning processes facilitated externally and guided by the principles and techniques of SF. It was again used for the 2010 planning effort. In both of these processes, the SF “Future Perfect” tool was the centrepiece of ABC’s planning. This was especially useful at ABC Canada because it meant that there was not an exaggerated emphasis on what was going wrong or on problem-solving areas of activity that would no longer fit into ABC’s future perfect anyway. As so often happens in strategic planning, especially a process based around a traditional SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats), a great deal of time can be placed on weaknesses and threats or on problem-solving techniques. For example, ABC could have spent a great deal of time fine-tuning its children’s programmes, but by starting with the future perfect, ABC set a goal to eliminate those programmes as soon as possible. The Future Perfect exercise helped the organisation define and plan for the place ABC wanted to be in three years.

The strategic planning process also helped focus on a positive and inspiring future. The Future Perfect drove ABC’s strategic planning sessions with staff, board and key stakeholders participating in a day of imagining a new future—a powerful future for the organisation where ABC could make a real impact on the lives of adults with low literacy. SF provided the positive framework that helps create the energy and action that drives change. The Strategic Plan that was crafted has been a powerful tool to direct action, keep staff and board focused on their mission, and create a very concrete vision of what the future could look like.

By the time staff approached the second strategic plan, ABC’s thinking had shifted again. ABC’s facilitator urged them to define the Future Perfect in terms of ABC’s key stakeholders: what impact did ABC want to have on adult learners, on the media, on government, on employers, on the public? This then became the framework for ABC’s strategic

goals. In the first plan, ABC's strategic goals focused on key areas of expertise that really needed to be defined—ABC had drifted into becoming an organisation that existed to fulfill the goals of corporate sponsors. The scope of ABC's work needed more definition and ABC's strategic goals focused on those key activities: communications, advocacy and convening. ABC was urged to view its work through the lens of the change ABC wanted to make, and the benefit ABC wanted to provide to key stakeholders. ABC's Future Perfect was directed towards what ABC could do for others, and how to best do that to create a positive vision for the future.

The strategic planning processes provided a forum for staff to experience SF in action.

Why SF and team coaching?

It was understood that SF-TCT would offer a number of benefits to the staff at ABC. The President was already using some of the techniques of SF with staff and wanted them to share the common vocabulary and techniques of SF. Staff training in SF-TCT would allow everyone to be on the same page quickly so that words like “scaling” (de Shazer, 1994) and “future perfect” (Jackson & McKergow, 2007) could become part of a regular and ongoing discourse. Staff would all speak the same language, creating a shared shorthand to get ABC where they wanted it to go better and faster.

SF-TCT was seen as an empowering technique, giving staff a new set of tools and a new way of thinking about their work. The President wanted to have a staff team with SF-TCT training and background as a way of up-skilling the staff as they implemented the new strategy:

“Many of the staff were new to ABC and the training also provided a way to bring staff together and bond over training. The benefits of the SF process to team-building should not be underestimated.”

“ABC is all about adult learning and its benefits. The SF coaching would provide staff with a powerful benefit not just for the workplace, but also for personal growth and development.”

Finally, there does seem to be a kind of personality which is drawn to SF: humanists, for lack of a better word. Those who feel empathy for others, who are interested in making a difference and helping others, seem to be drawn to the world of SF. The staff of ABC was recruited with this quality of compassion in mind. They seemed to be candidates for the approaches of SF and would see the value and utility of SF practice.”

The team coaching training

In late 2008 staff began an SF-TCT learning experience. The training was to be aligned with ABC's organisational goals and strengths. As the training got under way in early 2009, staff made it clear that they wanted to be able to implement the learned practices immediately – the training had to blend theory with practising the tools. It was agreed that the learning would be applied to current ABC projects and be based on leveraging ABC's resources for growth and change.

Beyond simple interventions

Prior to the training, the team was conscious of both the opportunities and limitations of most training efforts. It was recognised that while classroom learning could be stimulating, it was often difficult afterwards to apply the learning in any depth. The President was also aware of the impact that SF-TCT could have at the strategic and particularly the situational level. SF-TCT was seen as one of the tools that would help make ABC Canada stronger. The 2006 strategy had also identified clear and measurable goals for the first time. The questions about the training were:

- How could the SF-TCT not only help personal development of individuals, but contribute to the organisation as a whole?
- How could it enhance the organisational development goals that were already beginning to bear fruit?
- How would it strengthen ABC's already carefully nurtured culture?

Steps and tools to building an SF culture through SF-TCT

The consultant first met with the team to brief them on the approach to training and seek their input on goals and methodology. They were to be a part of developing the training goals and aligning them with ABC's vision and strategy. This not only aligned but also cemented their buy-in to the importance and opportunity of the project.

"The pre-work was quite simple but useful in getting us to really think about our current situation as well as where we would like to be. It was a great opportunity for us to listen to one another's perspective.' (4)

A subsequent planning session looked at the strengths of the team and individuals, what they were already doing successfully for stakeholders, and finally what the ABC team would be doing even more successfully, post-training. Part of the discussion focused on how the effort would ultimately be helpful to the stakeholders and how that, in turn, would be of benefit to ABC. One of the key opportunities was to recognise and leverage ABC's challenge: it could not tell stakeholders what to do, but instead how to influence them by example and by asking better questions.

Training based on learning and doing

The team had agreed to the training in three stages: 1) goal-setting and design, 2) two days of training and 3) one day of follow-up evaluation. The training and evaluation sessions were separated by at least two weeks to enable real-world applications.

As the team of six staff, which included the President, undertook the learning, care was taken to highlight existing strengths of the group and individuals. The team quickly found themselves in ABC's lobby using scaling questions in measuring their personal resources. The team were about to meet and practise a variety of SF tools: Affirmation,

Solution Moments, the Miracle Question, Scaling, SF Performance Rating and many more.

During the training, each theory discussion and application practice was clearly linked to ABC's current activities, particularly those projects involving stakeholders. One notable activity was an application practice around the forthcoming Family Literacy Day post-evaluation.

"The training involved rotating teams to ensure all staff had a chance to work together and thus provided an excellent opportunity for individuals who may not normally work together to actually find solutions together. While a variety of skills was learned, one of the greatest benefits was the camaraderie that was created." (5)

Positive outcomes for the team and the stakeholders

SF-TCT has made a difference in how staff approach issues and how they devise and implement ABC's strategic and operations plans.

Of interest were the responses of two individuals who received the coaching. Anthony Alfred, Director of Communications, had come from a series of increasingly senior communications roles in sports to ABC. He seemed to grasp the concept immediately and was eager to apply his new knowledge in the workplace and at home.

"It's been by far the most valuable learning that I can apply to a number of situations with my teams, personal situations ..." "There's a growing openness in our dialogue as a team." "The SF model is really built on efficiency." "I would match this up with any other tools in the market right now, and if you want to see deep impact and change on any level (CEO, staff, stakeholders), this is the one." (5)

Rina Khosla, Director of Marketing and Partnerships, had been trained in Total Quality Management and was herself a trainer at the Japanese auto manufacturer where she had spent several years prior to her arrival at ABC. It was harder

for Rina to immediately see the value of SF-TCT as she came from a tradition that was based on problem solving. Rina's scepticism was a useful part of the coaching process—as she questioned aspects of the methodology, staff could also consider their own questions and the trainer could directly address the differences in approach between traditional methods and SF-TCT. Rina, being a sceptic who is open to new ideas, had a powerful response to the methodology when she tried it herself outside the work environment. Her turnaround to see the value of SF-TCT was a dramatic testimony to its efficacy. Rina is now, like Anthony, one of the biggest proponents of SF-TCT in the team.

"It is an attitudinal shift." "Our meetings are more efficient . . . No more long meetings! We get the most out of our meetings in shorter time." "People are more positive in general as everyone looks at the goal. If you invest early on, pay-offs are greater and turn-arounds are much faster. In our current economy, SF helps you maximise resources." (5)

Evidence of sustainable impact of SF training on the organisation

The concepts of SF have since permeated ABC's organisation, with staff referring to the concepts as an aid in managing towards ABC's strategic outcomes. In meeting planning, staff often use the concept of "platform" (Jackson & McKergow, 2007) to ensure all parties involved are clear on the issue being addressed, and can then focus on the "future perfect" outcome. The staff all use the concept of "scaling" in order to gauge progress, staff perception of progress, or staff perception of another's progress on an issue.

"Scaling is the best way to put things in perspective." (5)

Affirmations have also become an acknowledged part of staff behaviour. Staff practise affirmations and are encouraged to affirm each other, the stakeholders, suppliers and volunteers with whom they deal on a daily basis.

“(Affirmation) is a powerful tool. When it’s used genuinely, it’s even more powerful.” (4)

“... affirmations played a very strong role in changing the attitude of staff from focusing on the negative to the positive.” (5)

External successes

ABC is a small organisation which relies on others in order to do some of its work—the organisation could not function without its partners. Maintaining good relations with partners includes acknowledging and honouring their contribution to ABC’s success. Affirmations of all kinds—large and small—have made a difference in turning around difficult partnerships, increasing the number of partnerships and shoring up relationships which in the past had been taken for granted.

“We’ve developed a real open relationship with our service providers (website) and the end-product is so different.” (4)

“Communication has opened up by engaging them (external stakeholders) as our partners and getting their feedback early on. Using SF helped our partnership.” (5)

“... helped me to become a more strategic thinker, working backwards from the final result.” (6)

Sustain and grow: next steps

ABC President Margaret Eaton concludes:

“Having seen how our focus on being strategic, developing our stakeholder relationships and our team, and how SF team coaching has strengthened the organisation, I am looking at how we can sustain and grow on all fronts. My vision for SF is that it becomes embedded in the culture such that it will endure over time. It has been a powerful tool to help build on our successes and I personally don’t want it simply to be the tool that becomes last year’s situational change effort.

I see us learning new SF applications such as leadership. I see us learning how to on-board new staff using SF as one of the tools to accelerate their development. I see us thinking of our organisational development using SF as a means to help staff enjoy a rewarding time with the organisation.

I look forward to hearing from our stakeholders in the future that ABC is a strong organisation with a unique and effective culture, and SF has helped us on the journey to getting there.”

ABC staff quotation references:

- (4) Anthony Alfred, Director of Communications, ABC Canada Literacy
- (5) Rina Khosla, Director of Marketing and Partnerships, ABC Canada Literacy
- (6) Ashley Tilley, Communications Coordinator, ABC Canada Literacy

References

- de Shazer, S. (1994). *Words Were Originally Magic*. New York: W. W. Norton.
Jackson, P. Z., & McKergow, M. (2007). *The Solutions Focus: Making coaching and change SIMPLE* (2nd ed.). London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Margaret Eaton is President of ABC Life Literacy Canada.
meaton@abclifeliteracy.ca

Alan Kay of The Glasgow Group works with a range of companies to help their executives gain insights from the customers' perspective, and transform the organisation's behaviour towards them. akay@glasgrp.com

Haesun Moon is an experienced educator and a practising coach who provides corporate training including the Power of Perspective Series and an SF coaching program (www.solution-focused.ca). haesunmoon@gmail.com