

Case studies

Solution Focused Future Forum

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Abstract

Late in 2013, two good colleagues (Kati Hankovszky and Urs Limacher-Koechlin) and I had the unique opportunity of planning an event together. Unique because it created the opportunity for a team of practitioners, not just a solo agent, to reflect on the SF methodology we use in our work and particularly how the briefness in this methodology really stands out as a unique sign of quality.

The client was an institution for physically and mentally disabled people with 100 employees, work shops, drop-in centres, school, and living areas. This institution was facing a series of challenges, most importantly spending cuts, but also organisational challenges, conflicts between managers and employees and several long-term absentees owing to illness.

The institution wanted an event that would allow everyone space and opportunities for a more constructive and positive outlook on the challenges the employees and managers were facing, not only in the present, but also from a long-term perspective. It was important to the client that the event wouldn't end up in complaints and discussions about problems but instead bring focus to solutions originating among the employees themselves, and thus creating ownership of the process.

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Goal of the event

In designing the process it was important to us that the event was to be fun, intellectually stimulating and 100% SF. There had to be an atmosphere of ease for the participants, a “breathing space” that would allow open-minded conversations to take place.

The practical setting was already there: three-and-a-half hours from 5.00-8.30pm, including a light dinner and a break. If you are a facilitator or trainer yourself, you will know that this didn't leave much leeway. Add to this that people would be joining us after a long day at work.

Voluntarily based

It was essential for us that the management made it clear to employees that participation in the event was optional, and that nobody had to give reasons for not being there. There was hesitation as some found the situation far too serious to let attendance and participation be optional. However our argument was that, given the state of affairs, the organisation should not act in an authoritarian way towards its employees, but rather stress the fact that voluntarily participation enhances the chances of a better result.

Out of 100 employees, 20 had to be on duty in the living areas of the institution; about 60 showed up and about 20 chose not to come. Although no explanation was necessary for absence, 10 reported back that they had to cancel due to family logistical reasons.

As motivation for coming, those whom we had the time to talk to personally during the event mentioned curiosity, the fact that the future of the organisation was an important topic, and the opportunity to talk about work with colleagues across all departments and teams.

100% SF

As mentioned it was important to us that the process had to be completely SF in the way we would design the process and facilitate it. Therefore these principles were followed.

- Focus on what works. What is already being done well.
- Focus on a preferred future. What are the best hopes for the future.
- The content of the conversations between the employees has to be specific and action-oriented.
- The topics chosen by the employees are the right topics. We introduce – via our questions – a certain way to focus, but we are not deciding what the participants talk about.

An email was sent . . .

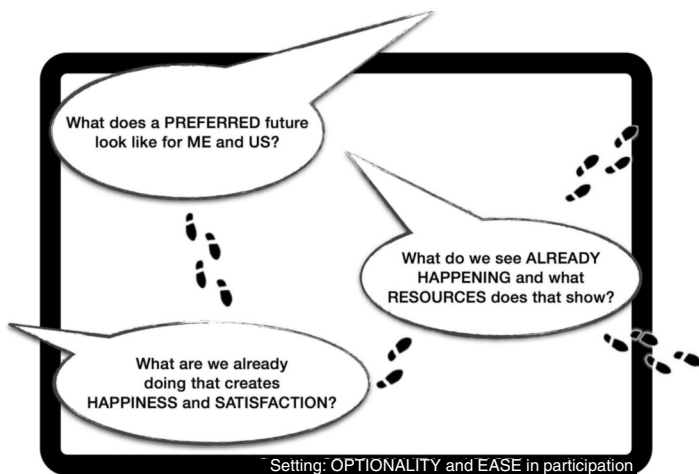
About a week and a half before the event we sent an email to employees. We wrote how much we looked forward to meeting them, and how excited we were about finding out what could possibly happen in a future forum like this. We also mentioned that the focus would be on what was working well and on issues that would concern the employees in the time to come. And we let them know that there was a significant risk that it was going to be fun.

The email ended with a little task: “We want to ask all of you from now on and until we meet, to observe what contributes to creating joy in your work. What do you and your colleagues do that you would like to continue or that you wish happened more often?”

We did this to create a “database” of positive experience by inviting the participants to focus on what was already working well in the organisation. In other words we asked them to bring specific everyday life experiences, not from “the good old days” but from a fresh, very recent past.

The Process

With such a short time available on the evening of the event itself, the main focus in the process became a future interview followed by a focus on what already happens with a built-in gossiping round.



I. Welcome exercises

The ease in the process was supported by games and exercises. It began straight away at the arrival of the participants with two short exercises. The first welcome exercise, “meet the resources,” took place in silence to bring the pulse down and mark a shift, signalling that now they were entering a different frame.

Welcome exercise 1: “Meet the resources”

Ask the participants to welcome each other in a special way by instructing them to walk around the room in silence. Whenever they meet someone else, stop and greet this person by looking into his or her eyes. At the same time, imagine what resources this person probably possesses. Let the exercise continue for several minutes, allowing people enough time to meet as many other participants as possible.

With sixty participants, we had the exercise last five minutes.

The second exercise was a more lively small game and deliberately chaotic. This served as an exemplification and embodiment of how strong and pervasive our habitual thinking is and how useful it can be when it comes to imagining the future. This was also emphasised right after the game finished.

Welcome exercise 2: “Sticky Names”

The goal is to greet as many people in the room as possible in the following way: you turn to a person, and both of you introduce yourselves with your first names. Then you greet more people, but... the first name of the last person always sticks to you! Example: Hi, I’m Jesper! Hi, I’m Kati. Jesper now meets Urs, who previously met Eva. Hi, I’m Kati, says Jesper. Hi, I’m Eva, says Urs. Jesper continues and meets Magnus, who just greeted Anne. Hi, I’m Eva, says Jesper. Hi, I’m Anne, says Magnus – and so forth.

People’s experiences of such exercises and games creates laughter, builds relations and supports the ease of the process.

2. Future interview

Employees were asked to pair up and in these pairs to interview other pairs. The task was to talk about successes, and what important differences these successes would make a year from now compared to tonight. All pairs both interviewed and were interviewed.

Pay attention to the sentence in the instruction: “What important difference does that success make for you?” Not only were they asked to describe a success. A success isn’t just to accomplish something, as in “we did it”, a success reveals something that wasn’t already there or something that there ought to be more of: “Now we can... because we chose to...”. The question helps to specify a success and makes it easier for the interviewer to ask, “How did you succeed with that? What helped you along the way, and what difference did

that make? The interview part also helped to place focus on actions through the simple yet thorough follow-up question “how did you manage that?” Not only did this question motivate the person interviewed to describe success, but also to take responsibility for what led to it.

3. Back from the future

After a dinner break as a natural transition from future to present, the employees gathered in their respective groups, departments and teams following a principle of no more than six people in each group. Here they shared their experiences from the future scenarios. What was interesting? What impressions had it left them with?

This is where their observation ‘pre’ task came into play. Leading up to this night, what had they observed that brought happiness and satisfaction in the workplace?

With reflections from the future scenario in one hand, and observations from every day life in the other, we asked this somewhat intricate question, “What shows you that things are already moving in a ‘future-like’ direction?”

The question enabled the employees to confirm to each other that some of what was already happening was a step in the direction of a desired future. That something specifically happening already is experienced as positive can support an optimistic attitude about further actions – an optimism that stems from the employees themselves rather than from management or facilitators.

4. Resource gossip

We cultivated and supported this optimism with resource gossip. Every time someone in the group had shared her observations from everyday life, this person turned her back on the group, letting the others gossip about her as if she wasn’t there:

- To me it sounds like she is really good at . . .
- I am impressed that she is capable of. . .
- I think she is someone who in a team would be good at . . .
- If I was able to do what she is able to, I would . . .

Now why spend precious time on this? Because ‘Resource Gossip’ has a partly hypothetical imperative in that we often have to speak about someone else based on a short statement and from there make positive hypotheses (assumptions) about the skills and competences of the person.

Using this exercise trains people in focusing on the potential of another person, also in a situation where this potential might not be immediately evident. By imagining positive skills and attributes in another person, this person’s spectrum of possible resources – and thereby also their palette of possible actions – is increased.

5. Knowledge sharing

To end the event, everyone was given a piece of coloured paper on which they were asked to write down one or two discoveries or insights from the evening. It had to be something their colleagues could benefit from knowing. The coloured pieces of paper were then used in a snowball game, so everyone ended up with someone else’s piece of paper.

Conclusion

During the session we tried to elucidate already existing resources (what is working already), to create an opportunity for setting attractive goals (positive future), and to strengthen a belief (create optimism) that it was possible to fulfil the desired goals (resource gossip).

In an SF context, we accept that what happens after the workshop is out of our hands.

However, the following week we sent an email to all the employees asking them to think about the following:

- What have you noticed in your day-to-day work that reminds you of the future you talked about in the future forum?
- What has changed in your day-to-day work, perhaps just slightly, that marks change in a desired direction?
- How has what you wrote on your paper-snowball at the end of the event manifested itself in your day-to-day work?

The purpose of the email was to let the participants recall their insights from the event, and to tie these insights to their everyday work life.

Four months later, I had an e-mail exchange with our client. The leader of the institution told me they were busy realising actions and projects, and that some of their initiatives were based on wishes for change that had been formulated in the dialogues of the Future Forum.

Time will tell how the institution will utilise this event in the future. I have many suggestions as to how this fruitful process could be carried forward, but ultimately their success will be theirs, not mine.

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