

## Monika Houck: Applying SF in Lufthansa Systems Kft

### Interview by Alan Kay

*Monika Houck was the CEO of Lufthansa Systems Kft in Budapest from 2007 to 2012. In the last 25 years Monika has been both a manager and a coach within different companies of the Lufthansa group. As a leader, she was responsible for global sales and key account management, and led production and operations in various roles including line manager and project manager. She studies and applies systemic and SF coaching and is an active member of SOLWorld, EMCC, ICF (PCC) and other networks. She recently moved from Budapest to Wiesbaden.*

### **What three things please you most about the Lufthansa Systems Kft organisation's transformation through Solution Focus?**

The happiness of people pleases me most. Our customers like the dedication of the engineers working in Budapest. Our partners are very satisfied with the quality and efficiency of our cooperation, and our experts and managers love to be respected and listened to.

### **These are great outcomes. Can you point to one SF approach or tool that set the ball rolling to enable the beginnings of this current situation?**

The first surprise everyone experienced was my strong belief in the talents of people in Budapest. As I knew none of them personally it was a bit of a shock to them. Nevertheless, I fully trusted in the company's potential. Within middle management and among the experts, scepticism and doubts were high about our ability to change the work-on-order situation and take responsibility. It could have felt like a mission impossible.

In the first weeks and months, the dialogue with our customers, partners and my own team was focused on the discovery of expertise, intelligence, skills, commitment and resources in an SF way. And this created the first steps in moving jointly forward. We built on these steps.

**You oversaw 500 employees in a commercial operation plus partners. What were a couple of the barriers to success for SF among your people?**

The company was dedicated to customer service and solving difficulties quickly – that was the nature of the business. This is especially true for first class services to global passengers – where time and keeping promises matters most. The focus on solutions was not new, the difference was just how to get there.

The belief in many areas of the corporate world is that “problems first” leads to better solutions. Quickly moving to defining the preferred future is a huge step when you are used to a culture of “removing barriers” and wasting time with the never-ending collection of problems instead of solving them efficiently in creative ways.

**SF is a very powerful tool when it’s used with other management practices such as strategy, culture etc. How did you integrate SF in those key elements?**

We simply involved our key customers, partners and our own talents into creating a tangible and coloured picture of the future. For example: within the process of defining our company strategy, a big and very important airline customer used the metaphor of a big ocean ship – reliable, but slow. They asked us to become like them – a sailing boat – flying quickly over the waters with the winds.

Frankly speaking, it was never my purpose to apply SF. What I wanted was a company that serves our customers and their needs best. I also wanted a good place for people to work – where their creativity and talents are highly appreciated. The SF approach serves this purpose best.

**Engineers are trained to be problem focused. What was the one thing that you did using SF that helped them transform?**

Engineers love efficiency and use their time to create innovative solutions. Reducing the time wasted for developing non-solutions based on not really understanding customers' needs, on emergencies, on superfluous forms of traditional control mechanisms and increasing everyone's responsibilities – this is the change that convinced them. Creating the belief in their own abilities and learning how they could raise their voice in a global corporate world made the paradigm shift attractive.

This is a process that takes a company some years – years of trial and error - in which one by one you grow in responsibility shared by everyone. You need the inspiring people you work with – like Peter Szabó, Kirsten Dierolf and Enikő Tegyi. And you need a group of dedicated leaders, key experts and project managers who act as catalysts within the company.

**If I was one of the engineers ... how did I learn to do things differently using SF? Was it in the classroom, workshops, online training, observing others, etc.?**

I recently talked to some of them. They said what convinced them most was the openness in listening to them – taking their views and recommendations seriously. What then really changed life was the experience that the clear focus on creating solutions made life easier. People said “We started to be respected and suddenly had fun in gaining speed in delivering solutions to customers.” Joint workshops and solution-surfing trainings were felt as support – especially as experts were encouraged to decide themselves on the value of the approach.

**People are sometimes sceptical of SF. What did you do to help overcome that scepticism?**

Just create a company where people love to go every day – where you get a smile in the morning and work with others you can rely on if it gets difficult.

**What did the engineers see the leader doing personally to help them emerge in this purposeful SF way?**

The leaders moved from a ‘body-lease’ approach of recruiting people for tasks defined in Germany to taking full responsibility for their own area of competence: creating interesting jobs and enabling engineers to take the huge responsibility of designing and running global operations for worldwide airlines.

**SF helped grow this sort of culture, but it can’t take all the credit. What other complementary approaches / tools were used?**

We used everything that proved to be useful. We developed project management skills, leadership capabilities (like the models of situation-based leadership, 5th level leadership, Starfish Sweet Spot), communication skills, self-awareness, balance and resilience. We applied Open Space, World Café and improvisation methodologies as well as flow practices.

For more than 2 years, the focus of the company has been on leadership and expert education, on increasing efficiency through an SF version of Lean. We are working with Agile and Scrum in software development, which fits nicely with SF thinking.

**Software engineers use tools like agile, etc. How did they fit SF in with their various existing tools?**

Excellently. The more software engineering methodologies focus on creating solutions within an intense cooperation with customers, the better the SF skills of intelligent listening work.

**What visible and measurable elements show that SF has made a difference in the organisation?**

The company has been growing in responsibility, in significantly delivering quality according to defined KPIs. For example the number of major outages for customers was cut by 50% and commercial results have been overachieved every year.

**If you were repeating the programme, what one thing would you do differently?**

Hungary is a country of very proud and talented people – out of high respect for the intelligence of my team, I was applying SF methods in the beginning mostly in an appreciative form. Doing it again I would use more speed in openly addressing differences of culture.

**Your group has to align themselves with and serve within a larger corporate entity. What would the corporate entity tell us they notice is useful because of SF?**

The purpose of our company is serving airline customers best – that's what they would be talking about. The difference they felt in the last 5 years has been in taking full responsibility for our customers and delivering better services for less money.

And they would be talking about how much they like our efficient and very professional form of working and appreciate the culture of listening to our customers and quickly fulfilling their needs – that is what they like a lot and feel is a major change.

**What would your board or your boss tell me was the personal contribution that you made to have this project become a success?**

Bringing the company close to customers and their needs. And creating a company everyone likes to work in and work with.

**There are different styles of organisational leadership. What advice would you give leaders about applying SF in the organisation?**

Be strong in applying SF yourself and be open-minded in listening to everyone and learning from everyone. Don't impose the approach – just do it, and it will spread. Find a good balance between acknowledging what works already and changing what has to be done differently – and have the courage to distinguish between both.

**In what way has SF helped your personal / professional growth?**

I started to trust myself more and more in moving forward and in taking risks.

**It seems to be a law of the universe that when a new CEO comes along, they change things. What tells you that the new CEO will embrace SF as it is?**

The new CEO – a young, very talented Hungarian manager – started taking over my role two months ago. I am very proud that the Board trusts in someone from the Hungarian management team as CEO. As the new CEO personally experienced the value of SF ways of working within our company for close to 3 years, I guess he might consider continuing on this way.

**Thank you very much.**