

Cases

Finding the First Small Steps Forward: Managing Change in a Small Team Setting at a Canadian Not-For-Profit Organisation

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Abstract

This case study explores the contribution a Solution Focus (SF) process can make to the design of a workshop to help a team to manage through a stressful period of change more effectively by developing an alternative achievable reality. In addition, it examines specifically the impact the SF process had on the team leader's feeling of autonomy and the team's ability to establish priorities.

Background

Lossing team members, preparing for an office move, and reorganisation around a new mission presented an acutely stressful situation for a small team in Toronto, Canada. The team is part of a national not-for-profit organisation. The organisation's work is focused on helping individuals suffering from one of the four priority Non-Communicable Diseases to lead healthy lives and finding a cure for the disease. The team consists of five individuals: the team leader, three co-ordinators, and one person who had just joined the team.

During the initial phone conversation with the team leader, information was shared about the team's current situation. She

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expressed her wish that the session would cover what each of the team members, including herself, could do to improve the situation. We arranged to do a three-and-a-half-hour workshop for the team to help them manage this period of change more effectively. Because of the limited amount of time during this workshop, it was critical to do some pre-work in order to understand beforehand what the goals and outcomes of a successful session might look like.

The conversations with the team leader and the pre-work not only reflected the elevated levels of stress, but more importantly also what the team would like to be different in the future.

Rather than feeling stressed and confused, the team leader wanted:

- a clear plan of action – everyone will be on the same page in terms of who we are as a team and what we should and should not be doing,
- to become better at prioritising and working more efficiently, focusing our limited resources and energy towards initiatives that will help us to further our mission and vision, and
- to improve our project planning – no more late nights and last minute scrambling.

From the other team members' pre-work and my observations on the morning of the workshop, I could tell that this was a highly committed, responsive and responsible team.

The workshop

Ice breaker

During the pre-work I asked the team members to identify their top 3 resources which helped them to cope with this stressful time. The ice-breaker asked them to talk about where they had demonstrated one of their strengths recently. I used strengths cards matching the ones they identified in the pre-work.

Goal setting

The pre-work already gave us an idea of some draft goals and outcomes. In the session, the goal-setting component would focus on making sure these goals were SMART and the outcomes clear and relevant to their needs that day. The team members expressed a desire to leave the session with:

- a clear plan of action,
- the ability to manage competing demands more strongly, and
- a knowledge of when to say no.

Scaling

Knowing how overwhelmed everyone was feeling and noting their desire to really identify priorities and start acting on them, I felt scaling would allow the team to set forward steps that they believed were achievable. The scaling exercise allowed them to determine where they were at that point in time and where they would like to be in the future. Referring back to their strengths, I asked them to think about how they would be useful in moving up the scale.

Action plan

The team action plan generated a discussion about what was truly important to this team, what was achievable, and how to deliver on it. There were specific action items with individuals assigned to them.

In addition, there was a lot of discussion about how to address the 3 key issues which the team deemed important for their health: (1) work-life balance, (2) communication with the Regional Director, and (3) inventorying in preparation for the move.

The team discussed the need to debrief on the action plan in early December (one month after the workshop). The questions in the action plan which stimulated the discussion around clarifying priorities asked them to first identify the 3

most useful points from the session; choose one and think about the outcome for staff and clients; support and resources needed; and how they would keep track of and communicate success. This allowed the team to think about how they would sustain the changes they committed to that day.

Impact on the team

The immediate post-session feedback confirmed that the team members left the workshop knowing their priorities. One team member in her session evaluation form listed focusing on priorities as one of the most useful aspects of the workshop. In addition, this same team member stated that she left the session feeling that managing was possible. Another individual said that she now knew what needed to be done and how to achieve it.

Impact on the team leader

The team leader came into the workshop knowing exactly what was not working in her team and what she wanted to be different in the future. What the session enabled her to do was to take ownership of her role and responsibilities, and make the commitment to act on them. In the pre-work she expressed a diminished sense of autonomy and she did not have an idea how to proceed. The Self-Determination Theory (Visser, 2010) identifies several factors which support autonomy such as: providing choice, following an individual's unique approach and encouraging self-initiative, in addition to providing a meaningful rationale for suggestions.

As we were defining the preferred future, I witnessed that the team leader identified which actions she needed to take to make this new future a reality for the team. For instance, she identified from the outset that she needed to set up a meeting with her manager to understand the budget in addition to priorities. The team action plan that was developed at the end of the session included this as a first step that had to be taken. Before the day of the workshop was over, she emailed me to say she

had started working on the action plan already. I believe the key factor for enabling this increased autonomy so quickly was the capability of the SF process to encourage self-initiative.

Two months later, the team leader was still experiencing more autonomy in her role through her increased decision-making capabilities. She had the support and trust of her manager, and her team members understood the business plan for the year and their individual roles in delivering on it. These were all outcomes that surfaced during the development of the preferred future in the workshop. In addition, two of the team members mentioned they understood the budget and their role better and attributed this clarity and support to the team leader's actions.

Key Learning

From the time I received the answers to the pre-work, it was clear that this team knew they wanted things to be different. They just did not know how to move out of their feelings of hopelessness to get started on creating it. Who needed to take the first step? Who was responsible for doing what? What were their priorities? Where would support come from to make changes? Prior to the session, these questions appeared unanswerable. The SF process ultimately helped the team find the first small steps they need to take to move forward. They realised it wasn't all despair or all hope. There were steps in-between on the road to progress. Berg & Cauffman (2002, p. 8) express a similar sentiment: "Most matters in life, and in business, aren't black and white – the range of grey is almost infinite. In fact, such black and white thinking will quickly trap us into believing that a problem isn't solved until everything is perfect, while in reality, small improvement is often the first step toward solution."

This is the subtle yet major shift I saw in the mindset of the team leader and the members immediately after the session. It was confirmed when I reviewed the two-month post-session feedback. From the accountabilities and approach they left the

session with, it was small steps starting with the team leader – a meeting with her manager – that would lead to other changes within the team and by its members.

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Photography – a powerful tool in Solution Focused use

Marika Tammeaid

Abstract

One of the key issues in SF work is to make the future perfect strong and vibrant. Every SF coach knows how useful metaphors and pictures can be in this work. In addition to writing and drawing, photography provides an inspirational and productive tool for client work. This article presents a number of ways to use photography in SF coaching and teaching with both individuals and groups. Pre-existing photographs and taking new photos can be effectively used to enhance self-reflection and learning. Photography can make the future perfect tangible and real – in a genuine way.

Dialogical photography

Although cameras are fairly familiar objects for most of us, our attitude towards photography is worth considering. What kind of relationship do we have with photos? What kind of photographers are we? How does it feel to be in front of the camera – do we feel comfortable or uneasy being photographed?

Traditionally there is a tendency to view photos as the output of the photographer's artistic view and technical skill – a way for the person taking pictures to express himself – with only superficial regard for the people being photographed. This may be why, in my experience, roughly one in ten people have bad memories, or even a fear, of being photographed.

Miina Savolainen, a Finnish photographer and social educator, has developed another method called empowering photography (Savolainen, 2008), which centres on the person

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in front of the camera. According to Savolainen, the first principle empowering photography is ensuring that the person being photographed is not an object in the photographer's lens, but rather the main character. That requires switching the power position around and following dialogical and appreciating principles during photo sessions. This approach firmly leads the photographer to ask questions like:

- what kind of a person is there in front of me?
- how does he/she want to look at himself/herself?
- what is unique and beautiful in him/her?
- how does he/she want to be photographed?
- how can I help him/her to see himself/herself as good and valuable?
- how can I carefully listen and take photos in an encouraging and appreciating way?
- how can I communicate the good I see with my presence, voice, gestures and words?
- how can I make the best inner qualities of the person come through in the photograph?

Dialogical and empowering photography shares the same values with SF and is a great tool for taking better, real and meaningful photos that help people positively narrate their lives, feel better and crystallise what is important to them. Dialogical photography also helps people open up and join the (working) community, make better use of their skills and abilities, and overall feel happier and healthier. When people in working communities start taking photos of each other in this way, a certain lightness and playfulness is developed. This in turn, helps people put a proper perspective on their work and colleagues and understand what is truly important to themselves and others.

An appreciative and dialogical photo session can be a healing experience for those of us with negative photo experiences or insecurities about our appearance. It is also a gentle way for all of us to look at ourselves anew – since we're all getting older anyway. The camera is also a great tool for

working with people who are not comfortable expressing themselves verbally. Furthermore, since there is a technical aspect in photography, it helps certain people participate better in the development of the working community.

Photographs in therapeutic use

According to the Canada-based Phototherapy Centre (www.phototherapy-centre.com), using photos “as means of education and amusement” is as long as the history of photography itself. A more congruent therapeutic usage of photography started in the 1970s within the fields of psychotherapy and art therapy and, later on, within counselling. The therapeutic use of photos includes photos taken by the client, of the client, and taking self-portraits as well as using family albums or symbolic photos in client work.

Phototherapeutic traditions tend to be tightly linked to formal psychodynamic therapy where the key question is “why”, and where a lot of attention is put on hard times and painful memories of the client’s personal/family history (see the Phototherapy Europe handbook *Learning and Healing with Phototherapy*, 2011). This is where empowering photography in SF use differs greatly from the older tradition of photo therapy/therapeutic photography.

The common feature in empowering photography and the older tradition is seeing photography as an active tool and communication rather than art (Weiser, 2008). The actual value of any photograph lies less in its visual appearance and more in its ability to evoke emotions and serve as a tool for growth and development.

By definition, empowerment contributes to competence and success. The philosophical roots of empowering photography can be found in dialogical philosophy, for example in Martin Buber’s distinction between the I-Thou relationship and the I-It relationship, first published in German in 1923 (Buber, 1937). Without the SF touch, empowering photography can easily stop in analysis or phenomenology. SF highlights the intentional side of human action and self-understanding.

‘Intention becomes meaningful through action’, says Buber. By portraying the values and objectives of our lives, we constantly re-frame the past, present and future – and actively create the preferred future.

How is work portrayed in photos?

When working with organisations, it is interesting to notice that people tend not to have pictures of their work. And if they have work photos, they tend to be of special occasions such as parties, conferences, travel etc. It can be a surprisingly new and useful exercise to take photos of an ordinary day or week at work – after all, it’s where we tend to spend most of our waking hours. Visualising everyday work (and those who do it) through photos can be both empowering and revealing. For example, it might be an interesting exercise to explore how the vision, mission, values and processes of the organisation become visible in everyday pictures – or do they?

Important questions to work on can be:

- who are we? what kind of unique strengths do we base our work on?
- are all of us present in the photos?
- how are important goals and values portrayed in everyday life at work?
- what carries us further in difficulties?
- what do I want to strengthen and make visible in my life and work at the moment?
- what is meaningful to me, as an individual?
- what is valuable and important for us, together?

Old photos also provide a pathway to the past of the group or an organisation. In some situations they are a treasure box to make the change visible or to revisit old strengths for new uses. Looking at old pictures collectively tells a great deal about how people narrate their past. In photo sessions it is important to look purposefully for those photos that are the empowering pieces of the years gone by.

When working with photos there is also an opportunity to interact between current and former selves or other people, now gone, but present in the photos. All that can positively contribute to re-narrating “my story”, exploring the sparkling moments, getting the feeling of the long span even in present difficulties, and revealing a polyphonic version of the past. For example, looking at important photos from the beginning of one’s career has for several clients brought back the sparkle that has been missing at work. Discovering that which is good, valuable and meaningful for oneself at work and in life, is a very powerful process that leads to new insights into personal goals and one’s relationship to work.

New self-portraits

One thing SF practice can learn from empowering photography is the art of new self-portraits – photos that make the individual strengths, resources, future perfect and dreams visible – or the miracle tangible. It is up to the client to decide what is the right place and time for the self-portrait session. A special place, clothing, objects or other people may be needed to get it right. The only important thing is to respect the client’s wants and needs. What does he want to portray in the photo? What does he want to strengthen in himself and his life? What is important to him?

The photographer’s task is to adhere to the other person’s view so that the result is truly a self-portrait – even if the person in question does not technically snap the photo. Taking this kind of photo is a true moment of appreciative interaction and co-creation. For work communities, it is an extremely powerful exercise of communication to take self-portraits in pairs. It is a good way to make visible how we look at ourselves and others. It is also an excellent tool to practice dialogical, two-way interactions between colleagues. These processes keep reminding us how different we all are and that you can never know what is truly empowering for another person.

When taking new self-portraits with groups of future SF

coaches, it has been interesting to see the different results and different uses of the photos. Some have taken photos that remind them of an important aspect of client work and have hung them where they work. Others have portrayed successful client cases, the “right” coaching attitude they want to hold on to, or a leap they want to take.

Focusing on the good and valuable

We always make choices when focusing our attention on something. Doing that in a concrete way with the help of a camera’s lens makes our choices very clear. It’s the same choice we make every time we look at photos, our own or someone else’s. Therefore, using photos actively as part of SF dialogue in any setting helps us to reach areas that are less consciously evident or verbally accessible.

A photo is also a strong tool for reflection because it evokes feelings – also in physical form. When looking at an old photo, we can experience again some of the feelings we had at that particular moment. This can also happen with others’ photos. John Berger (2001) has described the uniqueness of the reflective subject of a photograph. There are three: protagonist, photographer and viewer. For all of them, photography provides a possibility to structure life and add something important to one’s own story.

In our mind, different time zones live together, not as a timely continuum. A photograph has the power to tie fibres from different time zones together. A photo is genuine and real, yet at the same time distant enough that you can play with it. With the right photo, we can build new synaptic connections to rehearse things that have not yet happened.

In summary, photography is a good tool to strengthen what is worth strengthening. Photography can give structure to our feelings and aspirations, the things we remember in the past and the future, and meanings we share. I have begun to see that, when working with individuals and teams, photography is a shortcut to the important things. It allows us to focus effectively on what is essential and valuable in everyday life and work.

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Classic SF Paper

Introduction to 'Making Numbers Talk: Language in Therapy'

Harvey Ratner

“Here’s something we wrote recently. I think you’ll like it”. And into my eager hands Insoo Kim Berg put a copy of ‘Making Numbers Talk’. It was during the first EBTA conference in Bruges, excellently hosted by Luc Isebaert (the food he prepared was a culinary marvel, much appreciated by fellow cook and enthusiast Steve de Shazer). Insoo was right: the article has remained one of my favourite SFBT writings ever since, and has been a standard fixture on the BRIEF Diploma reading list.

As an article on therapy I think it has everything: meaty theoretical stuff clearly presented; therapeutic practice generously illustrated with excellent transcripts; priceless tips for practice; and the bonus of a Q&A at the end. Regarding the theoretical side, this article is a particularly clear and simple exposition of poststructural thinking as applied to SFBT. After a perusal of ‘four views’ of language, they describe how after ‘20 years our work with clients has led us . . . to a poststructural view’. There is a chapter in *Words Were Originally Magic*, the book which followed this article and in which de Shazer discussed these ideas in greater detail, entitled ‘Getting To The Surface Of The Problem’, and this is an apt description of the view that there is no need to look behind and beneath the surface and that the ‘meanings arrived at in a therapeutic conversation are developed through a process more like negotiation’ and ‘misunderstanding is far more likely than understanding’. This can lead to confusion, of course, and ‘it

is the therapist's job to use this misunderstanding creatively and, together with the client, to develop as useful a misunderstanding as possible'. They then propose a distinction between 'problem talk' and 'solution talk' and show how the idea of the construction of meaning in a conversation can be used to develop solutions: 'As client and therapist talk more and more about the solution they want to construct together, they come to believe in the truth or reality of what they are talking about. This is the way language works, naturally'.

Scales are introduced as one of the "five useful questions" that the Milwaukee team was teaching in the period of this article. 'As is our usual practice, we took a cue from our clients and developed ways to use numbers as a simple therapeutic tool' (I recall somewhere de Shazer's comment that he'd learned the technique from a client in 1970). When one looks at the writings of the team in the 1980s, it seems that while scales were a part of the therapist's toolkit, they weren't paid very much attention. I believe they came to occupy a much more central part of their practice such that in later years de Shazer would refer to 'the Miracle Question's scale'. Wally Gingerich confirmed this to me when he wrote that "after I left Milwaukee in 1990 I know that scaling became more and more important in Steve's work" (personal communication).

In this paper the use of numbers is shown to fit with their view of therapeutic conversation (and indeed all conversation) as subject to greater or lesser misunderstanding. The number obtained on the scale is the 'client's own perception' and 'since neither therapist nor client can be absolutely certain what the other means by the use of a particular word or concept, scaling questions allow them to jointly construct a way of talking about things that are hard to describe, including progress toward the client's goal(s)'. We are treated to an array of examples and practical ideas about using this technique, and the final section of the Q&A, in particular, gives immensely useful ideas about applying scales with different populations including couples, groups and small children.

Most readers will find that the two cases used in the article

are “difficult cases” and useful to read. We are told the first therapist is Kim Berg and, given the three exclamations of ‘wow!’ in the second case, we can assume she’s the second therapist too, which might explain why she has first authorship on this occasion. There are certain features of the work described in the transcripts that will intrigue readers who have come to SFBT more recently. For example, it seems strange that the first example begins with a non-standard scale, namely to do with ‘confidence’. In fact, it is only in the last Q&A that we find a more standardised outlining of the scale procedure, where 10 stands for ‘the day after the miracle’. Furthermore, in this first case Kim Berg asks the client at least 4 times ‘so what do you need to do?’ De Shazer stated in his presentation at BRIEF a few days before his death in 2005 that the intention behind this question was to emphasise the clients’ need to make their own decision about what they are going to do rather than to look to the therapist for advice. I discussed with him the option of asking clients “how will you know you’ve reached +1 on the scale?” which is our preferred question. He agreed this gave clients more options, but felt the “what are you going to do?” version was very useful in many situations and indeed he was still using it in his very last sessions at BRIEF in 2005. This emphasis on *doing* is linked, as I see it, to another feature of the first case example, namely that of suggesting to clients a ‘homework task ... to help Joan increase her chances for success’.

These are just a few of the points that are raised by this endlessly fascinating and endlessly re-readable article.

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