

SF IN UKRAINE - FROM SFA TO SF LIGHT

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When the editors suggested I write an article for InterAction, my first “problem” was to decide which experience I should choose to report. Luckily, they also recommended I think of a wider perspective, and that’s how I’m writing about my project, “SF-Ukraine”. After all, a country is also an organisation, isn’t it? And Ukraine has been proving it is a highly efficient model.

When I started my SF-Ukraine, people often asked me if I was not “afraid” of the scale and if I was sure I could manage. The answers were “no” and “no”. I didn’t ask myself those questions because I think no answer was helpful. And then, as it was only me who appointed myself to be SF-Ukraine project manager, I’m also free to remove myself from the position 😊. I know now that I have been enjoying the challenge and changes it offers on the way.

I’d like to share some of my discoveries with you in this article, hoping they might resonate, be interesting, or valuable.

THE ROAD TO SF LIGHT OR THE POWER OF A SINGLE QUESTION

TWO STORIES

STORY 1

I was a trainer, facilitator, and mentor in a programme to support women in business. After the workshop “How to solve problems without discussing them”, my mentee said that the Solution Focus Approach (SFA) sounded interesting but complicated. She also doubted if her management style matched the SFA communication patterns. After the discussion, she said: “I can’t promise I will be practising SFA in my company, but I intend to try it by practising on my own”.

When we met the next time, she shared her experience of changing the inner dialogue. She started with noticing, and she was surprised to discover that her communication with herself was very much problem-driven! So, after drifting some time in a problem, she would stop and say to herself: “Well, it seems you don’t like what is happening. And what do you want INSTEAD?” That was the only question she had been practising for a month, and she was very happy and proud of the changes. As we can imagine, her personal changes also positively influenced the company.

STORY 2

Last year we were doing a Working on What Works (WOWW) experiment with a Ukrainian company. It aimed to improve the regular meetings of the HR department; we had five criteria and a six-meeting timeframe. Due to covid, I could not attend the meetings, so I had “a substitute” – the head of the IT department. In practical terms, it looked like this: I “instructed” the head of the IT department who attended each meeting with the HR department and then we discussed and reflected and planned forward. As we all know, WOWW is very much about noticing useful things and communicating them. To us, a single focus was: out of everything we have been doing, what is useful and helpful for meetings to be productive?

Thus, SF Light was born when I noticed that speaking about SFA in more detail is less helpful for people. Sometimes a person or organisation needs just one question to change dramatically. Or they require one question at a time. So, after some more experiments, I asked myself: “Should people learn what SFA is at all to use it effectively?” And my answer was “no, not necessarily”.

INTERPRETATIONS ARE IMPORTANT -QUESTIONS MATTER.

Having been promoting SFA in Ukraine, I concluded that the name “Solution Focus Approach” itself was a little misleading when translated into Ukrainian, or maybe it’s not only a Ukrainian problem 😊. People hear the word “solution”, and they often think it’s about fast decision-making: we don’t want this problem – let’s generate a quick solution and let’s go ahead.

So, SF-Light (which is the term I use for myself and “Questions that make a difference” for anyone else here 😊) was also an attempt to avoid “misfocusing.” After all, does it matter if it is “an SF question” if it is a GOOD question to help a change? Thus, the project “Questions that make a difference” came to life.

A good example might be the 2022 Calendar that I published. Without mentioning SFA, it invites the calendar owners to experiment with different questions that would lead to other answers and then different decisions, actions, results, and experiences. Each month offers a situation, two different (or alternative?) perspectives on it, and a question (s) to experiment with.

SF LIGHT. LESSONS LEARNED

EXPERIMENT AND OFFER TO EXPERIMENT

In the beginning, I was careful about “doing the right things”, or rather before doing something, I often questioned myself: “Am I not distorting SFA? What if that is not SFA?” Until I told myself: “Well, SFA has been very much about experimenting. And each practitioner has got their interpretations and personal versions of the SFA, after all.” Right or wrong, that became my comforting belief. And that’s what I say to other people: play with it, with curiosity and lightness; you are always right.

NOBODY IS PERFECT. AND PERFECTION IS NOT NEEDED.

When I open my practical guide, “How to Solve Problems Without Discussing Them. SFA for Managers, and for Others, too.” written in 2019 (ages ago!) I frown and ask myself, “who was that not very smart woman who produced it?” (I know you would advise me to ask a different question, but since I’ve decided to be imperfect... 😊). But the truth is that in 2019 I was a different person. I did my best, and “me of yesterday” is still needed by someone of today.

THERE IS ALWAYS A “GOOD TIME”.

When we decided to go for WOWW in the company, it was not really “a good time” because of Covid. And we were asked if it was “the right time” to educate the employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in SFA or if our teachers at public schools were “prepared” for the SFA. Each of us has our criteria to decide. How do we know when “the right time” is? And is there “the best time”? For me, “the right time” is any time with opportunities. If an idea comes to your mind, it’s a good time to give it a try 😊. Otherwise, it’s gone, and the energy is lost.

EVERY EFFORT IS BIGGER THAN YOU INITIALLY THINK, AND YOU DON’T REALISE YOUR ROLE IN THE LIFE OF OTHER PEOPLE.

I decided to do the 2022 calendar project “Questions that make a difference” in the middle of December 2021 (some people would say, too late). I delivered a workshop for civil servants; one lady then printed out some slides from the presentation and put them on the wall in their office. Later, she reported to me that those questions and messages worked perfectly well for her whole department. It inspired me to produce a calendar, primarily for her department. But when I shared the idea with a couple of my friends, they said they also wanted the calendar. Finally, I announced on FB and received pre-orders. So, I asked a printing house for 40 or 50 copies, and every subsequent day we added more and more copies and ended with 140, not much, of course, but the alternative was – no calendar.

Since January, I have received messages from the calendar owners proving that the number of people who have been “consulting” the calendar is many times more: colleagues, clients, visitors.... And now, when some calendars are locked in empty offices during the war, people ask me to send them a month’s page so they can continue practising – our every effort is rewarded.

EVEN IF A PERSON KNOWS NOTHING ABOUT SFA, TRUST THAT THEY DO.

As I said, I had a “substitute” for the WOWW experiment in the organisation. It was exciting to work together, and sometimes, listening to him, I thought: “Oh, it doesn’t look very much like SF” the next moment, it proved clear that “his personal SFA” somehow worked out well! It’s just that there are millions of personal versions of the SFA in the world 😊.

PARTNERSHIPS AND SUPPORT NETWORK.

Finally, I wouldn’t have done most of my projects if other people did not support them in this or that way! I can name many organisations and maybe, thousands of people who have been encouraging me and contributing to spreading the word of support for the Solution Focus Approach in Ukraine. The Union of Ukrainian Journalists and Huawei Ukraine organised an “SF Journalism” competition, the NGO “Osvitoria” (a hub for educators) and Private Schools Business Association keep inviting me to speak to teachers at conferences and organise workshops on “How to learn not only from mistakes”.

Collective effort is so important, and this is one more chance for me to thank the great SFA community for having me in it and being generous in sharing!

AFTERWORD

I was finishing this article when one of my friends called and asked what I was doing. I said I was writing this article about my lessons from SF Ukraine, and he asked if I was also writing about the preferred future.

I don’t want to speculate about my plans, but I know for sure that SF Ukraine’s future is Light 😊.