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Book Review - Brief and simple: Solution Focus in organisations

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Brief and simple: Solution Focus in organisations

Natalie Polgár and Katalin Hankovszky (Eds.)
2014. Hungary: Solutionsurfers.
Book available from www.briefandsimple.com, €35.00
Kindle e-book edition \$US8.37

Ebook review by Nick Burnett

Managing Director of Nick Burnett CCP and Managing Consultant Queensland for Growth Coaching International

The lasting impression having read this book connects with one of the opening phrases by Dr Mark McKergow in his 'Not-Foreword' when he describes the book as similar to visiting an Art Gallery. There are some real gems in the wide range of case studies presented in 'Brief and Simple', and there are also some which 'clash' with my understanding of what being Solution Focused is. Having said that I'm sure, like the art gallery, those which resonate and those which don't will vary from one person to another. So I would suggest that it is worth investing time and patience in exploring this book.

Fundamentally this is a book about organisational change, and follows on from the 2007 Solutions Focus Working book edited by Clarke and McKergow. There are 43 case studies presented either directly by the consultant or via

an interview with one of the editors. The case studies are grouped by chapter with a common theme such as:

- When leaders initiate change
- How to change solidified structures
- Large scale interventions
- SF in small businesses
- SF organisations

Whilst some of these are helpful and make sense, in other chapters the grouping appears to be more difficult to identify what the common theme is. Additionally, some of the chapters have a helpful introductory, setting the scene, discussion whereas others don't. It may be that given such a large number and wide-ranging number of case studies the structure of the book was an attempt to help the reader make sense of those chapters which may be of most use to them, but going back to the art gallery analogy, there is a danger that some readers might just dip into one chapter and in doing so miss some really helpful case studies.

Reading through the book there were a number of common themes that I kept noticing.

Firstly, there were a number of common elements which I would group under an SF approach to organisational change. One is that it came through clearly in most case studies that there is no pre-determined formula to implementing an SF approach in organisations. In the interactive and constructivist nature of SF, meanings and approaches are continually being created, moulded and evolving through conversation. There are, for those not conversant with SF, a number of radical elements including operating in the clients world with a belief that they have the solutions and using their language to frame up the intervention. Participants in a number of the case studies were definitely seen at a minimum as equal partners or indeed the experts. I was also reminded of the importance of 'noticing'. A number of the cases identified that even before the intervention they were asking participants to 'notice' what was going well and the strengths of colleagues, through invitations to the training day.

Another common theme I noticed was that of the light, often playful approach in using an SF approach to organisational development. This was even played out in the way some of the case studies were written, with one of them being written through the eyes of a dog! A number of the case studies refer to a range of approaches such as the use of visuals, or going for a walk, as elements of the interventions.

A number of the case studies have a strong element of risk taking that not all would feel comfortable with. In some cases this played out by adopt-

ing a guerrilla approach to implementing SF – basically just doing SF without telling people that’s what was happening. On others it was even going into training sessions with virtually no pre-determined structure, and in others adopting a very different pricing structure.

One of the elements of some of the case studies that I found challenging to varying degrees was the implementation of SF with other approaches which are more formulaic. These included mixing SF with:

- Constellations
- Psychodrama
- Open space
- The Art of War
- Flow
- Other HR specialist interventions

I know of some within the SF community who would feel that as soon as another model is introduced it stops becoming SF as we know have more knowledge than the participant. My view however is a bit more pragmatic than that and, rightly or wrongly, I rely on the “If it works, do more of it”, and “Every case is different’ principles of SF in viewing approaches adopted. I guess I’m left with the question can this be called SF or is it better called a SF approach to implementing the strategy?

Another key theme coming through for me what also that there is need to be ‘trained’ in SF if individuals and/or organisations are to master the SF approach. Many of the case studies talk about the benefit of participants experiencing SF approaches throughout the intervention but additionally there is a need to then practice and reflect on adopting an SF approach.

Additionally, what is different to most external interventions is that SF interventions are not seen as long term. Based on the reference to Insoo Kim Berg who stated that we should treat every session as if it were the only one we will have with the client, a number of the SF consultants talking about wanting to make themselves irrelevant as quickly as possible. The key focus being on building internal capacity.

The final theme is that at the core in adopting an SF approach to organisational change is the importance of conversations. If we change the quality and focus of the conversations we change the relationships. The case studies are full of examples of where the conversations are changed through the power of questions asking participants about what they want.

My final reflections on the myriad of case studies in the book are of likening SF to Improv. The importance of having a beginners mind and the confidence to take risks and see where the conversations take us allow us to be the best we can be for the organisation whether we are internal or external. With

a fundamental trust in the process and the participants there are 43 examples that this will lead to success.

The reviewer

Nick Burnett is committed to helping people and organisations be the best they can be. He is an experienced and accomplished Educational Coach, Consultant and Presenter. He is the Managing Director of Nick Burnett CCP and a Managing Consultant for Queensland with Growth Coaching International. He has run training for well over 4000 people in the last 10 years, presented at a number of conferences and has written for a wide range of publications, including authoring books on Leadership and Special Education Provision and Reducing Risk and Restraint in Asia Pacific, with plans to co-author books on Solution Focused Special Education and Working Restoratively in Special Education. Prior to this he was recognised as an excellent leader of an all-age, large Special School Provision in the UK.

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