

CASE- *Route for renewal*:

Transforming government via Solution Focus rooted top leadership training – Marika Tammeaid

Introduction

In the previous issue of InterAction Sofie Geisler was discussing how solution focus works on a large scale and in thinking big. That has been my key interest also for years, since aside of my long-term work as a solution focused coach and trainer of the SF approach, I have all the time had another professional life as a civil servant. My daily work keeps me curious of how a solution focus can be applied in transforming large organisations, or even networks of organisations, like the public sector as whole. And furthermore, what do these applications bring to solution focused practice?

Transitions in a governmental context are very seldom definite projects, rather they are long multiplayer journeys. I have worked mainly as a development manager or internal expert in various government organisations, being usually the only one having a solution focused background. So, it is worth asking, would somebody notice that I am solution focused and what does it require to feed in solution focused ideas on a daily basis? In this article I discuss Solution Focus as a vehicle for making a systemic change in central government and track the traces of Solution Focus using my latest mission '*Route for renewal*' - leadership training as the reflection point.

Updating government leadership capacity for the 2020s

During the last two years, thanks to funding from the Sitra Innovation Fund, my main job has been to design a long-term leadership training for the top civil servants. The group of 140 participants consisted of Secretaries of State and Director Generals of all 12 ministries (Finance, Justice, Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs, Defence, Education and Culture, Agriculture and Forestry, Transport and Communications, Economic Affairs and Employment, Social Affairs and Health, Environment and the Prime Minister's Office), as well as Director Generals of some central agencies, such as the State Audit Office, the National Board of Education and The Social Insurance Institution. So, the task meant designing a programme that suits to present and future leadership challenges of the public administration in a holistic sense.

In the design phase it required a lot of work and nerve to convince a bunch of colleagues, academics and leaders that if we want to see real change in government ways of working, lecturing is not an option. A participative style of training means something else and the maximum group size can be only 25 despite the need to train all 140 within a short time frame. Otherwise the quality of the most important function of the training – interaction between the participants – would be reduced. It required one failed, 'three lectures in a row and very little time for discussion' afternoon, before I was allowed to arrange the training with more of a sense of co-construction with the participants.

So, we ran the 8 months' programme six times, for mixed groups of 25 leaders during 18 months and managed to start a mindset change within the present top leadership of the government. The training was designed to serve a dual function:

- Building new knowledge and skills for the future
- Enabling the leaders to create the future together.

A long-term training was a great platform for providing stimuli and multiple perspectives around shared objectives, building interactive sensemaking and awaking individual and joint change agency, and it was also a great way to equip the participants to face the present uncertain and interconnected world.

The present day 'VUCA-world¹¹' brings along a lot of complexity that does not fall under any readymade boxes or administrative areas any more. So, in addition to updating the view of learning and nature of knowledge building among the arrangers, one important function of training was to do the same with the participants. The participants, as top leaders often are, were already in the later phase of their career and therefore their school and university experience came from a time where teaching was more like a one-way road from an expert to an audience - even in a country like Finland, famous for the phenomena-based learning (holistic instead of subject based learning).

Solution Focused leadership itself was not a theme of the training. It is always a pleasure to get a possibility to train solution-oriented thinking and action for leaders and others, but in practice the goal of the government is seldom to become solution focused. As little as a solution focused therapist tells the client to face the situation with SF approach, a solution focused trainer or consultant starts teaching the basics of solution focus over the customer's order. As Milton H. Erickson says in his famous quotation, "customers are not so much interested in the theory behind the attempts to help. They are interested in that they work and take them where they want to go."

We triumphed with the training. We managed to convince our semi-obligatory participants how important it is to spend 11 days of their most busy and valuable time out of town with their colleagues thinking of the future of the country and government. And in addition to that, to use even more time and effort with real setting experiments in their own organisations and networks. The feedback from the participants was overwhelmingly good: 5.4 on the scale from 1-6. And here comes one common aspect of solution focus, modesty: very few of the arrangers or participants understood that the triumph had a lot to do with the SF way of posing questions, creating group interaction and facilitating the enabling side of the challenges.

From wicked problems to new ways forward

When designing the training programme content for our demanding participants - with a median 20 years of leadership experience and very heterogenous expectations, we, with my colleague Petri Virtanen, clarified first for ourselves what the public sector of the 2020's is about:

- Weakened predictability and accelerated speed of change
- Inter-connected decision-making and need for cross-sectoral collaboration
- Transformed nature of work challenging both leadership and ways of working
- Change from active state to enabling state
- Need for human-centred leadership
- Digital and customer-oriented services and citizen participation in service development
- Ecosystems emphasis
- Co-operation between private and public sectors and civil society
- Need to strengthen the democracy and diminish territorial and social polarization.

In practice that all means multiple mindset shifts from juridical and planning culture towards inclusive network leadership, experimentation and an impact driven way of working.

¹¹ A popular way to describe volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity of the present working environment of companies and organisations, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volatility,_uncertainty,_complexity_and_ambiguity)

Similar tendencies are recognized by all the governments in developed countries worldwide, but very few have so far conceptualised these blurred and often conflicting challenges. So, we did a lot of benchmarking with governments in many countries to grasp the theme thoroughly and had the opportunity to create a fresh concept for public sector development. The programme themes were arranged under six modules:

- 1) Global phenomena and renewability of public sector
- 2) New operational models for complex problems
- 3) Models for systemic change from home and abroad
- 4) Paradigm shift from public management to public service
- 5) Leading people and renewing leadership culture
- 6) Learning from real setting experiments.

In practice the training was introduced as a journey providing new flavours to public sector leadership thinking and practices. Every one of the six groups formed for a time frame of 8 months a living test bed for cross-organisational and cross-sectoral phenomenon-based cooperation. During the “boarding school” days introductory key notes and varying forms of workshops took turns. In addition to that we prepared a multifaceted learning environment enabling choices based on individual preferences and learning styles. The learning environment consisted of an interactive and mobile learning platform, a set of pre-, intermediate- and post-assignments, site-visits, real-setting experiments, module-specific article selection, podcasts, “study buddy” mentoring as well as optional coaching and support for larger experimentation processes.

For all participants the learning journey started with an individual strength’s assessments (CAPP, Strengths profile), which helped us to get all the participants’ best resources on board. The personal leadership development plans were based on the idea of first knowing and realizing own strengths, and then extending to building on strengths and resources when leading other people. A resource, not gap-based development approach was a very well welcomed novelty for all the participants. That enabled a leap towards more human-oriented leadership and ensured the engagement of even somewhat cynical participants.

The interactive mobile (cell phone) learning platform kept the network and communication alive also between the training days. The platform was used also during sessions as “Post-it 2.0” with no need for transcriptions. It also portrayed a solution focused learning by doing principle, since as a side effect we managed to develop the personal digital skills of participants on a practical level. That was an important thing with a group taking prime decisions on digitalization in the country.

Switching on the learning mode

There were three main learning targets running throughout the programme:

- Leading public policy as a network of organisations working systemically for the same long-term goals
- Fostering an enabling leadership style
- Meta-skills supporting both renewals.

The participants were introduced to the idea and implications of phenomena based public policy, a shift from siloed and part-optimising mindset and work manner to a cross-sectoral and mission-oriented approach. During the training journey the ideas were developed and tested in areas like drafting of strategies, laws and regulations, mobility of resources, joint operational models, crowd-sourcing and dialogue with citizens.

The goal of leading public organisations and people in an enabling manner had a twofold manifestation, firstly in a citizen-centred way of organising public sector functions and secondly in development of human-centred leadership culture within government organisations. In both spheres that meant the shift from an administrative mindset to a service mindset, becoming familiar with the idea of strengths-based leadership and giving more room for self-guided ways of working. That also meant renewing every day working and

communicating methods, re-designing public services and making best use of the talented and well-educated body of civil servants.

Solution focused facilitation and SF ways to compile the training days and wording the intermediate assignments had a ground-breaking role of building the meta-skills for change and renewal. There is a huge difference between talking about change and making the change. An SF way of accelerating the natural change capacity of the participants made the change a tangible and active process. Too often public sector transitions are discussed only on a strategic level and in passive form and they remain mainly intellectual exercises. Solution Focused features of the training can be described as follows:

- Approaching the participants in an empathetic way and creating personal contact with them
- Being interested in and supporting participants' own goals in addition to the joint ones
- Encouraging participants to take responsibility for their own and joint learning
- Appreciating former experience and non-formal knowledge
- Keeping the overall goal of training clear and present all the time, but without a pre-defined way how to get there (that is the task of the participants)
- Creating positive curiosity for joint goals and building meaningfulness on personal level
- Steering the participants to think the preferable future instead of starting from present problems
- Creating multidirectional interaction and connections between the participants
- Advancing the natural and informal atmosphere with both verbal and concrete interventions (woollen socks instead of ties, distributing the training programme not on a paper but in the form of a T-shirt)
- Enlarging capability to multifaceted thinking and recognising possibilities
- Seeing confusion as a good and useful space, as a precursor of insights and new solutions
- Drawing attention to what connects people and issues (instead of separating)
- Raising everyone's personal sense of responsibility and responsibility for achieving good results
- Emphasising putting things into practice and working together
- Highlighting that anyone inside and outside the group is seen as a potentially important part in increasing knowledge and achieving goals, regardless of status and perspective
- Holding place and strengthening solution talk, possibilities and new insights generated by the group
- Allowing and encouraging different ways to participate and customising the tasks to suit the individual situation
- Communicating with participants with a tone of increasing resources and faith in success, instead of controlling or evaluating
- Showing that failing is allowed; experimenting and retrying is seen as a way to learn
- Ensuring that the way of making group decisions is dialogical and transparent
- Looking for feedback in an active and dialogical way – and utilising it!
- Build a good ending that promoted continuation of the lessons learned, even when the training was over

I think these features are visible in many SF trainings, but none of the issues listed above are currently the mainstream of leadership training or other work-related training, unfortunately. Some participants described that for them the training experience started with wondering what this is about and 'oh, can you really do it like this'. Then they realised they were in a pleasant, guided "water slide" towards common sensemaking and real setting experiments and it was so pleasant, they did not want to use any brakes. Despite the importance and gravity of the issues at hand, a can-do mentality arose within the group and also the collegial networking was taken to new depth. So, with a Solution Focused approach we got the participants fully on-board and equipped them with strengthened personal and collective agency, which are also key elements for public sector to take a constructive and catalytic role in the society.

Learning from future in large scale

One fundamental of SF is fostering new kinds of behaviour and putting the ideas in practice in order to start a favourable change in the system around. The focus of public policies is also in creating an impact in the future, so collecting and analysing present and previous data is not the actual way forward there either. It is important that leadership tools and practices are geared towards the future – both in mindset and in the ways of ways of knowledge formation. The Solution Focus approach is a great tool for showing in practice what dialogical and future oriented sensemaking can bring to decision-making at its best. When resolving complicated societal challenges, knowledge must be produced, compiled and interpreted using several sources, across disciplines. Observing a matter from multiple perspectives means also broadening the concept of knowledge and taking also experiential knowledge into account.

In large scale contexts experiments are one great way to learn from the future. Exploring unexplored challenges to which, by definition, no one knows the right answer means at the same time taking an active role in creating the future. The present cabinet in Finland, has stressed the importance of experimental culture in government in order to find new solutions and make experimental mindset a new civil servant virtue. Experimental culture has progressed very well, although the top leaders have themselves participated less in experimental developments. In our training we wanted to stress the importance of top leadership to show example and accelerate the experimental way of working. During the courses all the participants accomplished real setting experiments (individually or in pairs/small groups). 75% of the real setting experiments made related to renewed ways of leading public policy and 25 % to renewal of personal leadership style.

Although dreaming of and taking an active role in creating a better future have a central role in Solution Focused practice, I sometimes ask if SF tradition has used its full potential when it comes to taking active steps in enlarging thinking and action to new paths in large and complicated contexts. When the fundamentals of working life and organisations are in transition due to new, digitalized and networked ways of communication, how do we help people to challenge the assumption of present conditions continuing? And help them dream of a good future very different to the past and present day? Are we ourselves thinking big enough and learning of new and surprising signals to enable our clients and colleagues to do so? Although creative thinking is an essential part of SF, an approach with therapy background has according to my observations a risk to stay more on individual perspective and on coping side when it comes to large scale.

I would like to see the experimental approach in networked context also as a part of essential SF. That would mean courage to challenge the present organisational ways of working and taking inspiring, empowering, connecting, growing and influencing seriously in the systemic sense. In SF tradition it has been customary to think that we interfere as little as possible in customers life. Taking an active role in broadening the clients view on possible futures can be seen as unfaithfulness to SF principles. I think it would be time to comprehend that the same truths do not always go for large, multiplayer contexts. It is in the heart of SF to dismantle restricting beliefs on an individual and group level.

In larger contexts the restricting beliefs of what is possible and what is not are broadly shared, so it takes an extra effort to lead the way to re-thinking and a new kind of action. Supporting the clients to gather new, contradictory information and deliberately look for counter truths is an essential way to support the change and formation of new solutions in large scale. In governmental context all changes and transformations have a long time span and an extensive impact. It is important that the trainer also bears in mind the broader context and the fact that all the knowledge needed for creating better future is not found only within the group present in that particular workshop. Otherwise SF intervention can in worst case have an encapsulating effect and hinder change.

Riding the elephant

After 36 training modules I can say that the *Route for Renewal* training had a noticeable effect on the leadership mindset of the participants. The participants started to choose more enabling styles of interventions both in policy matters and in leading their own organisations. They reported that it was great

to recognise in daily work that colleagues from other ministries were on the same wavelength. Joint vocabulary and an enabling mindset started to grow within the government. The personnel of the participants' organisations reported observable positive effects in the leadership mindset and ways of working. The citizen and ecosystem perspective started to appear more in thoughts and actions of the decision-makers.

Many participants stated that this was the best training they had ever attended. Most acknowledgement was given to multifaceted learning methods that could be implied easily to every day leadership, too. Also opening new perspectives, activating the personal and joint courage for renewal, giving time for thinking and discussion, putting the lessons learned into practice already during the course as well as international lookouts and mobile learning were praised.

We would have not achieved these great results with *any* kind of training or method. The revolutionary concept in solution focus is to break the mechanistic reason-effect causality and open the gates to everyday creativity and non-linear space of opportunity. In this respect, SF differs greatly from the main stream of service design, facilitation and lean approaches that are widely used in working life and mainly characterized by problem-base and pre-determined procedures.

Public leadership is a very demanding task these days. Operating with heavy responsibility at the edge of uncertainty can be utterly paralysing. SF as a method unleashes the resources needed to tackle serious issues. It's assumption to trust the process and participants involved and support each participant's self-direction and agency is a powerful way to enable change. In large scale contexts it creates a positive learning spiral that has a ripple effects also on interaction in real life settings.

Dominik Godat has described SF leadership as the other side of the elephant². Daniel Kahneman has used elephant as the metaphor of the fast and unconscious part of human mind³. In my experience the ground breaking thing in Solution focused practice is that it truly knows how to talk to the elephant in a way that creates co-operation. This is something other approaches lack.

Leading government and public policy are always about co-operation. The SF way to combine the large-scale mission and impact-oriented horizon to real actions gives an inspiring base of agency for public sector leaders. Looking for great working practices instead of great theories seems to fit well to the present-day circumstances. Also, the art of asking powerful questions is a fundamental skill for leaders. Solution Focused ways of posing questions in a faith building way creates safe spaces for important questions and new thinking to arise. When consciously combined with broad conception of knowledge and participatory richness, large systemic changes are achievable.

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² <http://www.solutionfocusedleadership.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/03-Godat.pdf>

³ Daniel Kahneman: Thinking Fast and Slow, 2011