

GREAT GATHERINGS

– a SF approach to working with large groups
 SOLWorld conference, Oxford 2012

Thank you!

First of all, a BIG “thank you” to all of you who took the time to visit my workshop and gave me so many wonderful insights. And to you who kept asking questions afterwards, which made our conversations so rich and gave me so many new ideas.

Work in progress

I promised to document the workshop, and I’m happy to break that promise. Because I’ve come up with something even better (I believe), and that is to make my writing on working with large groups a public work in progress.

I will publish a chapter as soon as it’s finished (at least finished enough to make sense to others than myself), and in the end I’ll have a skeleton for my book project called:

The magic (hand)book of

GREAT GATHERINGS

*- A solution focused approach to working
 with large groups*

Sounds good, doesn’t it?

Planned chapters so far (in random order):

- How big is large?
Different ways of looking at groups
- Introduction to methodology
SF with a touch of World Café & Open Space
- Flow and rhythm
Physical movement as a process tool
- Turn brains into a brain
How to share knowledge and build on each other’s work
- Documentation
Stay close to the original and accept constructivism
- Pre-planning
SF interviews the Gonzo way
- Examples of process scripts
A practical bit about logistics and how to throw away your plan

Make a wish

If you want, you can follow it on:

greatgatherings.net.

Imagine that you’re holding this book in your hands already. Or that you are flicking through the pages on your tablet. What would you like to find? – You are welcome to let me know if there’s anything special you would like to see written. Only condition is that it’s related to the solution focused approach.

First step

What you get now is a chapter about pre-beginning, how to warm up your participants before you meet them. Next is a short chapter on documentation as there were some good inputs from you in the workshop that make excellent examples on how to document.

About me

I have been working as an independent consultant, coach and trainer for the past 15 years. My experience is based on my work for public and private organisations in Denmark and Europe. To read more please take a look at:

jesperchristiansen.com.

Begin before you start

When you have a one time event (one or two days with an organisation), you might want to start the process before the participants meet, in order to get as much out of your time together as possible. One way to do so is to remind participants of the event just before it happens, and "get them hooked"/ "hook them up" on the theme of the event.

In the Solution Focused approach one way could be to remind participants of what is already working well: What kind of concrete, practical everyday situations do they experience, where something works in a way they find useful.

Mail example, asking for what works well

This is a mail that was sent out to the of participants; several teams in an organisation, where the goal of the day was to come up with initiatives on how to make the workplace environment better. Before I was called in to plan and facilitate the day, there had been a workplace evaluation that showed a low score in many aspects of the organisation. The theme of the day was chosen by the management: "the world's best workplace" to show the employees that they took the issue seriously.

So in order to begin before I started the day, each participant got this personal message from me:

Dear [persons name]

In two weeks we are all going to meet and spend a whole day working together on the topic:

The world's best workplace

We are going to talk about how we can create a better work environment with high professionalism, less stress and more fun and learning.

Before we meet, I have an observation task for you:

From now on and until we meet, please notice any small signs at your work that indicate that this company actually has potential to some day become the world's best workplace.

Signs can be like:

- a job accomplished well - something you were actively involved in*
- a conversation, presentation or a meeting that was slightly different from what you usually experience.*

And please think about:

- what happened that made it different?*
- what else?*
- how was that useful to you?*
- if something can be learned from that - what would it be?*
- what else could be learned?*

We will share each other's discoveries when we meet.

Looking forward to meeting you!

Best wishes,

Jesper H Christiansen (– your facilitator for the day)

Positive focus

The intention of this mail was to create an awareness of details of a good workplace environment. Helping participants to focus on what's already working, at least a little bit. A positive side effect is that the mail also introduces words and ways of speaking that I later use at the event.

When we meet I then start the day with letting them share their observations in small groups. I begin the day with their own positive experiences.

Framework

I can't expect that participants understand the principles of SF, so I have to make a framework that has a tight focus on possible solutions, and at the same time I have to make room for expressing wishes for change and to talk about these wishes (that some people call "problems").

With a beginning like this, where they share observations, I explain the overall purpose. Why have I given them this observation task? I tell them that we only have a very short time together and that my best hopes - as their facilitator for this event - is to make sure that they can leave the room at least knowing one or two small concrete steps towards "the world's best workplace". This to make sure that today's valuable work becomes more than just talking. So if we're not able to change the whole organisation today, at least we will know where to start.

I invite them to follow some simple principles for the day:

✓ What is working well?

We look at what is working well (or at least a little bit well), in order to either use that as a platform to do more of it, or to make sure that we don't need to talk more about that.

✓ What could be usefully different?

We look at what kind of changes can help this organisation move in the right direction. We always look at what we will be doing differently when these changes happen. In other words: the positive profitable outcome of changes.

✓ Look for solutions instead of problems

When something is not working in a desirable way, we will not turn into experts in "why-not's" and "who's-to-blame". Instead we will talk about what it is that we would be doing instead if it was working, – and then focus on ways of getting there.

Now you are ready to start your event.

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Workshop given at the SOLWorld conference 2012 in Oxford



DOCUMENTING THE PROCESS

People document, not you – but for who?

When you facilitate a process, your client might want to have it documented. It can be for strategic or political reasons, or because what you are facilitating simply needs “proof of action” for the client (money well spent).

As a part of my service, I offer a photo-protocol which is a document with photos of the final conclusions from the group’s working throughout the day.

Letting participants document their work throughout the event is a further part of making the process transparent and creating collective wisdom and knowhow. *(Note: A detailed description will follow later.)*

Whatever the topic is, and how many participants there are, it is their job to make decisions during the process, and to filter their reflections and insights into key points, initiatives and action plans. Down to the basics they decide, write/draw and filter, and do so in a way that is shareable with others.

I structure the photo-protocol so all it needs is short process descriptions for each part – often copied directly from the slides – and then photos of the flipcharts, cards, post-its etc.

If a client wants a more detailed magazine or report as documentation, I either sub-contract that service or supervise the client into doing that by means of own resources. Remember that if you can gather 50-100-500 or more employees for an event, you probably also have some sort of communication or marketing resources with competent people who can collect and interpret the intellectual outcome of the event.

In such situations, I let go. I don’t want to have any influence on the interpretation of the event, other than to invite them to think about:

In 6 to 12 months from publishing this material:

- What will who say or do as an indication that it has been worth spending the resources on producing this material?
- What else?

On the following pages you will see a very rough example on a photo-protocol with my comments on it.

If you have further questions about it, please email me:
mail@jesperchristiansen.com or visit
www.greatgatherings.net.

"Start before you begin"

Less is more when it comes to process description. You know what I am writing because you were there in the workshop. Does that exclude others from benefitting from this material or does that make you the ambassador of the further process? Well, if I had a list of participants I'd include that at the end of this document, so what do you think? ☺

Dear [persons name]

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And please think about:

- what happened that made it different?
 - o what else?
- how was that useful for you?
- if something can be learned from that - what would that be?
 - o what else could be learned?

We will share each other's discoveries when we meet.
Looking forward to meet you!

Best wishes,
Jesper H Christiansen
- your facilitator for the day

Make the email personal. You can use free mail services like MailChimp or others to make a template.

As long as you write the persons name it doesn't matter that the text is the same going out to everyone.

Purpose of the e-mail:

- create awareness of upcoming event
- focus on what already works (linked to theme)
- introduce words and phrases that will be used at the event
- start "rumors" about what is to come

Question

Based on the example of this email. How would you create awareness of an upcoming event by building on what already works?

Process

Round A: in groups, come up with more ideas on how to engage participants before an event.

Round B: pass on your work to the group next to you.

Qualify the ideas: are they understandable? If yes, tick them off. If no, improve the wording to make the ideas more understandable.

Always ask people to write legibly and always expect them to do so in their own understanding (hint: it's all constructivism).

Alternatively make them write on flipcharts and make sure they only write with thick markers.

BRING AN ~~EXAMPLE~~^(A)
OF YOUR BEST
EXPERIENCE WITH
THE SUBJECT

Suppose, this was the (B)
best workshop you ever did,
how would you know

Ask: email
what would have to happen in
event for it to be useful to
you.

or Scaling question →

Suppose the event is
extremely useful for you,
on a scale from 1 to 10,
it would be a 10!

What would you see happening?

B

✓ Plan ahead and give out chocolate hearts for positive relevant behaviour before the event. (anonymous or not)

A

Observation task in an email

observation task :

e.g. What works well already?

e.g. What ~~too~~ ^{small} stories do you observe that demonstrate that?

(write it down and bring it on the workshop)

B

✓ Call them and ask about A their success (if group size permits)

✓ Send list of participants

✓ Send

✓ have^{SF} group conversations before the event, using a chairman or facilitator

✓ face group book before

✓ Spread rumours: first define ambassadors that conduct positive gossip or share SF questions

• Send mini SF questionnaire (5 questions) "you have to invite a colleague/friend to ask you these questions"

The most important aspect of a photo-protocol is that the quality of the pictures is good!

Unfocused pictures like these make the material more difficult to read (and it makes your photo-protocol look cheap).

You can always edit the photo afterwards like I've done, but you can spend your time on better things than that.

So: take your time photographing the material.

✓ Send a letter with observation task A

✓ Send a chocolate and invite them to
put it secretly on the table of the
person they had a nice conversation
with.

✓ Send a feather to anticipate lightness
in their communication.

like SOL 2012
✓ Send postcards, email with little
secrets! keep people posted
secret code that to log on
all info not given before
feed curiosity

A

• FIND A QUOTE, AN APHORISM,

A POEM, A PICTURE, ...
SYMBOLIZING THE BEST HOPES FOR
A SUCCESSFUL
~~BRING IT ALONG~~ TRAINING!...

• BRING IT ALONG IN A PRINTED WAY

⇒ PRESENT IN THE BEGINNING (SMALL GROUPS)
⇒ PERSONALIZE THE ROOM

ⓑ ✓

WHEN YOU'VE
ATTENDED A
WORKSHOP THAT
WENT WELL, WHAT
MADE IT THAT WAY? (A)

(B) BRING A STORY (A)
SUCCESS
OBJECT | POEM | MUSIC
... SOMETHING
THAT ILLUSTRATES
THE SUBJECT
WE WILL DISCUSS

- ✓ Interview each other.
 - Share ideas with colleagues
 - Self assessment.
 - ✓ Interview tour "teaser" tour
 - Return
 - What do you think?
 - Interview CEO FUT. PFT (like wgh was mellen)
- (A)

- Cross-team sharing of what works well
 - Questionnaire on what you do well
| colleagues
 - Meet, greet and share expectations (Pre-conference speed dating)
- (B)

When participants are working on each other's material, it's a good idea to use different colours to indicate the various phases.

A) MANAGEMENT TEAM
PREPARING IN ADVANCE
They motivate, spread the word,

B
How would you know as a M.T.
that your team will be
CONFIDENT WITH THE UPCOMING
EVENT

DURING WBC COME [A]
COFFEE - BEFORE START OF EVENT
GIVE PEOPLE A WARM-UP
QUESTION,

- WARM-UP QUESTION: (B)
- ① How will you NOTICE THAT THIS DAY IS USEFUL FOR YOU?
 - ② How will you know AFTER ONE HOUR WHEN THE EVENT HAS STARTED THAT IT IS WORTH STAYING, NOT RETURNING TO your WORKPLACE?