

*How SF conversations help leaders – a conversation with **Elfie Czerny & Dominik Godat***



John: So, what are your best hopes for this interview?

Dominik: Hmm, that's a good one, hmm. One hope for us is to share our story and invite people to join our journey, explore more Solution Focus in their lives and find out more about SF in our private and business life.

Elfie: Yes, and well it's a solution focus interview so we're sure there is something in it for us. When we saw your beautiful questions, the two you sent us before, it was like, yeah, let's talk about it and we'll clarify things for us too. We're talking a lot, we have a lot of Solution Focus talk every day.

Dominik: It's always good to talk about the preferred future, what works and signs of progress and see how this kind of leads to days we want to have and things we like to do, so we're looking forward to your questions.

John: There are some people out there who don't know what you're doing, so, my understanding is that you've sold up and moved from Switzerland, you've bought a camper van, you painted it very beautifully. Did you do that yourselves?

Elfie: Together with a friend of ours. He's actually the one who helped us bring our ideas to pictures. We'd already worked with him when we prepared our cards set, so he's very solutions focused and he does graphic recording and he did some graphic recording at our two conferences on Solution Focus leadership in Switzerland and it's just beautiful to work with him because he's really able to transfer everything we say into beautiful pictures

Dominik: Yeah, it was quite a challenge to reduce all of the messages that we want to spread to only a few messages, kind of the main messages. We did it with post its, laying them out on our floor in the living room. At the end, we had all of those nice messages but didn't know how to get them onto our campervan. It was really a great co-creation with him and we are very happy with what emerged now.

Elfie: it definitely was a co-creation process over several weeks, again figuring out and finding the pictures and how to place them on the motor home.

John: So, you bought your van and put it on a boat... or did you fly it over?

Dominik: No, we shipped it from Hamburg to Halifax. The beginning is not quite accurate. We didn't sell up, we just gave away everything. The story is that we wanted to kind of find out more about the essence of life and there we found that we did not want to sell the stuff we had but we wanted to give it away, to people who can use the things. So, we gave away everything and moved into our camper van, we didn't sell it.

Elfie: Ja, we had a flat ...we were renting a flat. All of the other things we had we gave to friends and we had donation boxes for three organizations which are quite close to our hearts where we donated the money we collected from people who wanted give something for the things we gave them. It was a really important part for us, ... to let things go in a joyful way and find places for things we also like, but you know we thought like, ok, we can't take this with us on our journey, we won't need it during our journey, but still we like it, and we want to find a good place for the things.

Yes, it was really a process, to give it to the people we feel they are happy with that but even here it's not about giving it to them because they have to keep the things but much more the joy of the moment, to give something to someone you like and to someone who needs it and likes it.

Dominik: Yes, and that makes a difference for the person and for us too. It's like SF, we like SF in a very basic way and we want clear away everything that is not necessary to get to the essence of Solution Focus and it's the same as we did with our life. To give away everything that is not part of our life at the moment and explore more of the essence of our life, in a very basic and simple way.

John: Thank you. That was interesting to find that out and it's a nice introduction to you. And just a logistical thing, when do you plan to return? Have you set a return date?

Dominik: No

Elfie: It's a solution-focused journey.

Dominik: Yes, a solution-focused journey. We just had our preferred future and made a first step and now we're here and we'll see what will emerge out of that.

John: Ok, and so again because there will be some people who don't know you. What's your background in SF, what's your experience? Elfie?

Elfie: Well the funny thing is that Dominik and I have quite the same background. It was exciting when we met for the first time (at the SOL World CEE conference) to see that there are so many similarities. I studied economics in Vienna and that's where I got in touch with Solution Focus for the first time, working with an organization in Vienna, who organized a huge conference for systemic thinkers and there were people from all around the world. Even Steve (DE Shazer) and Insoo (Kim Berg) were invited, actually Insoo for the second one but she couldn't come then.

That was the first time that I got in touch with Solution Focus. At that time, I was like: "I'm not sure what that is" and I think it was a few years later when I met Peter Steinkelter, a dear friend of mine, who was very close with Günter Lueger, and I got involved with some projects with them where we developed solution-focused tools for competence, assessments, also

team assessments and diversity assessments with scales. Günter did a lot of work with Solution Focus scaling and applying it to ordinary systems, leadership tools and assessment tools in organisations and well, this was when I really fell in love with the approach and even more when Dominik and myself met. It was like getting a booster and getting rid of other concepts and sticking to Solution Focus even more and exploring the values of simplifying life and my work.

John: And Dominik, what about yourself?

Dominik: Yeah, I also studied economics in Basel and met Peter Szabo in 2001 but didn't follow-up on anything with him back then. In 2002, I got an HR job and I realized I needed some conversation tools and there was this flyer of Peter Szabo's training on my desk and then I thought, ok, now it's time to do that. So, in 2003 I did a training with Peter Szabo. From there on I applied Solution Focus in the HR position I had and in the leadership function and got into the whole SOL World network in 2004.

In 2004 or 2005 it was my first SOL conference and after that I was very eager to apply Solution Focus to my whole life and in my Leadership function and HR role and I was really, really hooked up to that. From there, everything went its way, around the main topic of SF Leadership and the book I wrote and meeting at the SOL World CEE conference. It was really like she said, a booster for both of us in learning even more about the SF approach while applying it in our everyday life. There has been no day, since we met that there has not been an SF conversation or talking about the principles or asking questions in an SF way in our family life and of course in our professional life

Elfie: And I really think it was like this, it was your book (Solution Focus Leadership – Dominik Godat) actually and then the findings in your study where it got so clear that Solution Focus leaders compared to coaches, they usually don't do the whole SF circle when they have a conversation, they only have a lot of small daily interactions with each other or with their employees. This was something we got really curious about exploring deeper. This was one of the things which encouraged us to start our journey here with the camper van, just figuring out how to apply those SF principles even more to our daily lives and our small interactions. Yes, to explore it and to dig deeper into the essence of Solution Focus.

John: It's interesting, as you take it into your everyday and notice how you can be more solution-focused in your own personal lives as well. I guess some people would say that that is not what SF is about. It's not something we do in our personal life, it's for business.

Dominik: Yes, it is interesting what you say with the people who kind of say that it's for professional life. Most people say that it's for conversations and well where do you have your main conversations in your life? It's in your professional and in your everyday life. This is what we find very interesting is to kind of have both. In every conversation, there is room for SF.

Elfie: I think what we learned is that it is a lot about where we put our focus. When I started applying these principles in my daily life... I started to ask different questions, to listen in a different way which lead to different conversations with people. All of a sudden people were telling me much more about what they want, what worked in their lives just by asking different questions. Just by observing solution-focused practitioners at conferences or wherever we meet them, we see that they do something different and also in their lives actually.

John: Yes, I am of the same view as you. That SF comes into our lives. I've had conversations with people and experiences with people where they are SF in their professional lives but very not SF in their personal life. I find a huge contradiction in that.

Dominik: I usually want to ask these people, if your son comes with an issue, what do you ask him? I'm sure they would probably ask him something that we would detect as a solution-focused question. That's interesting. For us, what can make a difference in your professional life, in your daily life, in every conversation you have?

Elfie: I think it's especially in leadership trainings, we realized, as we often tell people stories about how we apply things and what they usually realise is "oh my gosh, how many conversations do I have where I can make a difference with my employees" and they are very inspired also by our stories that we share with them. What we are talking about, applying it to our lives, has a lot to do with what people do in organisations, where they don't have this one hour space for a whole Solution Focus communication all the time.

John: My response to that; with a colleague, I did an SF coaching course with about 30 managers in a big company, and the one thing they didn't want was to become a coach. That was a really strong feeling throughout the whole group. I can't think of any actually who wanted to be coaches, they just wanted a way to talk with their employees that was more productive.

Dominik: Yes exactly ... before I wrote my book, I did a study with Solution Focus leaders and one of the main findings that was interesting for us, is that they just want to have good conversations, productive conversations and that they apply it in their everyday leadership; very small things they ask for. One question in a meeting, apply the scale in a 1:1 conversation, go to the desk of the employee and ask him one question and things like that, those everyday interactions. That is where I personally think that coaching as a leader is the wrong term. It's much more about solution focused leadership conversations. Everyday conversations with a different perspective with a different focus in their everyday life. That is why we do not try to use coaching anymore when we talk with leaders.

Elfie: I think this is a lot about our journey now. Our solution-focused journey, our journey through North America, it's about discovering, well, how far can we go in applying these principles. It doesn't mean that we are happy all the time and never have challenges, we don't argue with each other or whatever, it means what we really discover is that we are getting so good at changing our focus within a millisecond, sometime when we start arguing. It's just this constant training in where to put our focus and inviting each other to solution-focused conversations.

For example, we love to play solution Ping-pong; it's actually what we call it. When we drive,

Dominik: or myself, we ask a solution-focused question and the other one finds 5 answers, you know 5 details to this question and the other person has his/her turn and is allowed to ask a question. This is something we really love to play and we can do this for hours and our drives are really fun and we learn a lot about each other. We talk about our preferred future, about what works and we celebrate our successes through that or whatever.

John: I'm really interested in your little game you play; what would be a question you would ask me, if I was sitting alongside you in that van? What would an SF question be that you ask me and what would I be responding?

Elfie: Maybe if we started right now, we would ask you the question as a first question: "What are your best hopes from our conversations?" This is how we often start it. Or if we have been on our way longer, "What's been your highlight today?" So, if our first question would be "What are your best hopes?", the next questions would build on that. Sometimes we just ask ourselves: "What worked well today?" When we have a special challenge or things don't go so smoothly, we often ask ourselves, "How would you notice in the next hours that we are on our way to our preferred future or that we are on our way to create this day the way we want it or the way you want it?"

John: That's very nice. I guess we can say that the first bit (of this article) was very much about your philosophy, about using SF and it's been fascinating for me. My best hope for this interview ... was very much that we would find something that I wasn't expecting. And we've done that, that's great. And my other best hope would be that something really good came out of it, again for me we are already on the way to that, so that's good. Those would be my best hopes.

I'm going to kick in to my next question: I guess you've answered it partially and we can thread it in. "What are your best hopes for this SF tour of North America?"

Elfie: I'd say it's two things

Dominik: Yes, two main things, yeah!

Elfie: The one is to, what we've already talked about, as a family, to explore the approach even more and what it means for our interactions in daily life. The other thing is to, one of our dreams is to bring the solution-focused approach to well, to the whole world. We see a big chance with our campervan, this is why we also painted it, to bring people and to introduce Solution Focus to people who would never learn about that if they didn't meet us on the road.

John: That's great! Is that the best hope for both of you?

Dominik: Yes, it was the best hopes for both of us. About spreading and making visible what is working well and what other people do. We are doing some podcasts with some people for example and showing what they are doing in their lives, in their leadership life and in their daily life and whatever it is their solution-focused practice. It's about sharing, making visible what there is and inspiring people on the road and in the internet with our blog our podcast that we have started and that we are kind of getting into that even more now. Yes, making visible, exploring, spreading, spreading...

Elfie: Share what we learned and invite others to join our learning journey. This is actually one of the things that we are still trying out with our blog, how to make it more interactive and also create a blog in a solution-focused way, where people are invited to engage with each other, to share their thoughts and inspire each other. So, for us, whatever we do, we want to do it in a solution-focused way and find out how we can get better in implementing it, whether it be the conversation, the blog, the website, the Facebook pages, whatever.

Dominik: Yes, with the sharing, making it visible...It's about meeting people who apply SF here in the United States. We've met some people already and we'd like to meet even more people on the road that are applying SF, inspiring each other, sharing with them, learning from them. Making visible what they do. With our camper van, there is quite a lot of attention, people like what we do and it's a great way to share stories and we'd like to have even more engagements with the solution-focused friends on the road too.

John: Have you had people coming to you, to talk to you about your van, what it is that you're doing?

Dominik: Yes, it's like an everyday thing. Like yesterday for example, we were eating breakfast at our breakfast table in the camper van, and a family stopped and they were looking at the van and they were discussing; so, we opened the window and started a nice conversation with them and they even asked us if they can make pictures with us and those inspiring messages to take with them. That was a nice story from yesterday.

Elfie: Yes it's like every day we see at least a few people, you know with smiling faces, passing our camper van which is what we really love because when we... with Harald, the one who did the design for us, we discussed a lot what are our best hopes from our camper van and the look of our camper van and it's really about inviting people to get in touch with us and to have people smile and to have people see that there is something different around here so that they are eager to get into contact with us.

Dominik: Yeah, a joyful attraction

Elfie: And this has worked quite well so far

Dominik: Yeah, a lot of people that we meet are fascinated and it's an easy start to talk with them either about the SF principles or to engage them in a solution focused conversation and at one camp ground for example, we talked to the camp ground hosts and they were so inspired that they invited us to the Thanksgiving dinner that they had. One camp ground host even said that he is now very motivated to... he has an issue and he was very motivated to tackle that again and to do his steps to tackle it after our conversation. That was really, really, nice.

Elfie: He had already resigned about this topic before, that's what we'd learned afterwards. They also sent us a message on Facebook later that we had really touched their hearts there. It is so beautiful to meet all of those wonderful people, we would have never met otherwise. It's always that you meet people when you are on a journey that you would have never met otherwise of course, and still it's like... What I think is a huge difference for me is that as we have our campervan painted with all of the messages, it's so easy to make people smile, it's so easy to leave like a ... some say that you should never leave footprints, but sometimes it is good to leave footprints in the hearts of people. And I think this is what our camper van allows even more.

Dominik: Yes, just the other day we said, "Well, we never want to miss a conversation that we could have had." So, whenever we see people who are interested, when they see our camper van, either they see us or mostly it's Bibiana (their daughter) who gets in touch with them... we just talk to them, about what we do. Just the other day, in a café, Elfie had this nice Solution Focus conversation with this lady who opens up a fitness studio and she had some issues with that and within a short period of time, with a few questions from Elfie, she was really all eager to get on with that.

Those are the kind of everyday interactions that we are looking for and that we had so far. Up until now, they are mostly one to one conversations and what we would like to do even more are workshops around our camper van. We have done a few around Europe and are about ready to start doing that here too, either on site, in campgrounds or the little villages, just stop and do a workshop with people who are interested.

Elfie: The workshop, because we really want to have people experience the power of Solution Focus in a group. We think this is really a good chance to do it around the camper van, bring people together.



John: So as someone listening to you, what is fascinating is that it sounds like you are trying to change things one conversation at a time. That is a bit of a SF mantra but...

Dominik: Yes.

John: But it really does sound like that is what you are doing or trying to do.

Dominik: Yes

John: I guess the next question would be.. your preferred future, I mean I came into this conversation with the thought of: "How is your tour going to help me as an organisation in America become more SF? What's the preferred future around that?" I think your philosophy if I can say it seem to be: "We're going to have conversations and we're going to see where that leads. We don't know where it leads but it's going to lead somewhere."

Elfie: One of our best hopes is that people we engage with visit our website and find more information about the solution-focused approach on our website so that they get curious about it and want to learn more about it. This is one of the reasons we started our podcasts. So far, we only have the one and the second one will come out before Christmas, it is also in German and we have a third one in German and from then on, we want to have more English conversations, to make visible what people are doing, how they apply those principles in their daily lives. We have these Solution Focus inspirations, where we write in a more theoretical level about that and also to really get people more in contact with this approach and to invite them to learn more about Solution Focus.

Dominik: One best hope we had even before we started is that we would like to have a seminar centre in the future, Solution-Focused Centre, and we were looking for a place where that could be for about a year or so and we couldn't find a spot that would fit for us because we were looking between Vienna, where Elfie lives for 20 years and Basel, where I come from in Switzerland and it was quite difficult. Whenever we found some place we'd say, "Wouldn't it be better to be closer to the parents?" for example, and then we'd find something at the parents and say: "Isn't that too close to the parent's, would it not be better to be in Basel?" So, we were just looking and suddenly, one day, when I came home Elfie said: "well you know, it's not working the way we do it, so let's do something else. Why don't we just start our trip and go on this camper van trip?"

Elfie: "Well it wasn't that clear but... well almost that way. I did a meditation and in the meditation, it was this picture, "hey we should just do the trip." We talked about doing a trip

like that when we met for the first time at the SOL CEE in Budapest and that was right before we became a couple. We had this idea of, "Oh how much fun would it be to travel the world and to just bring joy and ease and Solution Focus to the world?" When I did this meditation I just saw this picture, hey we should just do this trip instead of trying to find a place when there is no clear impulse. When Dominik came home, I just said, you know what, let's go on this journey and he said, "Yes" and I said: "After your day you don't even know what I'm talking about" and he said: "Yes, I know what you are talking about, let's go for it".

Dominik: Yes, and also with the idea that on the journey, we'll find out where that can be. The place where we would like to settle down in the future. That's also another best hope that we will find out on the one hand where it will take us from here and where it leads to where we will stay and settle down in the future. And also with this energy and all the things we do, we can inspire, not only inspire people now on the road but also build a library of things that work, people who do great things and podcasts of working things and leadership in other areas of life to inspire even more people in the future. I think that is also one answer to the questions you had on the organisation side.

One thing is having conversations and inspiring people with those and that they go back to their organisations and hopefully do something with that. The other thing is also building up a platform so that organisations can find a lot of inspiration and connecting a lot of those platforms that are already there, so that organisations kind of see that it is not just a little thing that a few people do but that it's really a movement and a way to lead an organisation in the future and to have conversations and to have a culture of SF in their organisations.

Elfie: And that there are a lot of people applying those principles in a very successful way.

Dominik: Imagine what is possible if all the people who do SF in their life or business life and their leadership life and their professional life. If they connect even more and spread it and spread what other's do too. How powerful? That's even more powerful.

John: Yes, that's SFiO's philosophy, certainly my philosophy and that's why we are really keen to make SFiO grow. It's not about membership, it's about, what can we contribute? What can we do to make SF just bigger? (**Elfie and Dominik:** Ja!) It's a huge potential cake that's the size of the globe almost. It's just great to hear a story like yours that just talks about that and I love this concept of the conversations and taking that forward and see where it goes. I love your idea of seminars around your campervan. Though it's probably better in Florida at the moment than Ohio (this was December!).

John: So, what is a small action that other people can take to help you achieve your preferred future? Because your best hopes have described your preferred future for me in giving lots of little vignettes, little stories of how that preferred future is going to play out. So, what are small actions that people in SFiO could take? Let's start with that one.

Dominik: I think there are two things that help us very much. One is connecting with us. Either through meeting us on the road, connecting through email or going through our blog and contact us there, that is really helpful for us and inspires us. Meeting people and spread what they do.

Elfie: And maybe one thing I can add here. A really huge thing is to comment on our website, because I think this is the way that we can invite people to comment is if they see that there are comments and that people engage. It's not really about the comments, it's about the

perspectives and ideas people have on a special topic and about sharing and inspiring each other....

Elfie: We think this is a good way to invite people who don't know much about solution focus yet to become more curious and to engage in a conversation.

Dominik: So, one thing is contacting or being in contact and the other thing that helps us very much is spreading what we do, what others do. We are still dreaming of being on radio shows, being able to spread it even more. I think the camper van story is very appealing to many people. We've already met someone from a radio station who thinks of making a podcast with us. If people know where we can spread it even more. It's not about us, we don't earn money with that, it's just about the joy of spreading, of making a difference with this approach in the world.

Elfie: And the way that we are able to do it best, in our crazy way.

Dominik: So, if people know someone who can spread that in an article or in a radio station or even mouth to mouth, and they like what we do and do something with that again and connect our best hopes...

Elfie: If you or someone else knows someone and you think they could be interested in having a conversation with us or could be interested in meeting us, or could be interested in spending a good time with us, we'd highly appreciate to just get connected and the other thing when you asked what small thing they could do. To just move on doing what you do and what they do to spread the word about SF. The way *you* do it even.

Dominik: Doing and spreading SF. We are happy to hear and to see and to hear people talk like that in their professional and daily lives.

Elfie: That's one thing I just learned from our conversation, which I am very grateful for, is that we definitely will put more information about the SF organisations on our website. Our blog is still only starting and we have so much ideas and Bibi, she's doing such a great job too, she's supporting us really in a great way, finding the time, the family time and...

Dominik: And finding internet is one of the great issues here.

John: It's amazing that America seems to be not quite as advanced as we think - at least in broadband.

Elfie: Yeah! That's really true yeah!

Dominik: Especially the really normal small town, everyday America. One of the biggest challenges and also one of our biggest joys at the moment is finding our way and finding a kind of routine here because life is really quite different to what it was before. That's also one thing that we like is to keep ourselves moving and adapting to everything that is here and seeing what works well here and then learning and adapting to that.

John: Elfie and Dominik thank you!



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