

## Cross Functional Team Building by Fiona Turner

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### 6. Introduction

Team building is very important if you wish to get the best out of your employees. A team of individuals may deliver some desired results, but they will not deliver them to the high standard that a high performing, healthy team will. In my experience of working in schools as a teacher, or more broadly in education on large-scale projects, more often than not, when team members work together to harness the wisdom of the group and apply what they have learned, that eventually may decide the level of success of a project.

During the past 5 years of coordinating or leading various small teams working on technology projects for the Catholic Education Melbourne office many different attempts were made at building team or *Ways of Working*. Despite the good intentions of all involved there didn't seem to be meaningful or sustainable gains in relation to development of the characteristics of effective team development.

I hoped that by undertaking a Solution Focus approach to working with two small teams at the office in 2017, we might not only develop a sense of positive focus on our work, but that the changes may be rapid if we develop a positive collaborative approach to solving our problems. This acknowledges the history of Solutions Focused Brief therapy *that solutions may rest within the individual and his or her social network.* (["\[Solution Focused Therapy\]" 2017](#))

### 7. Background / Context - *The context and situation: the 'problem'.*

The project I have been involved in has been in development since 2010 and only recently has begun the implementation in schools.

During the past 5 years or more I have held a coordination role of other team members also working in this area.

Significant project delays or a 'perceived' change in emphasis from learning to a more 'technology' focus has seemed to create a loss of clarity and purpose for team members. There has been a feeling amongst team members of being in 'limbo' which has caused discontent about their worth and interest in work. Ultimately impacting on a collective sense of team.

In March 2017, I sat down with my colleague, who was also a leader of a small team within the project, to discuss what might be gained from both of our teams seeing themselves as 'one team', even if we weren't officially one team on paper. Given past failings in relation to team building, we wanted to allow our team members to determine what being an 'effective' team meant themselves. I was keen to use the SF tools I had been exploring through the course I was undertaking and would work my colleague to help me plan the sessions and reflect on their impact on building team.

*8. Summary - How you decided what to do, including references to any books/work used. What you did - including tools, principles, simplicity and responsiveness.*

### **9. The Solution Focus Approach**

The process we would need to use in order to galvanise our team members into action, to explore how an effective team operates, would require individuals to have a feeling of choice, and a sense that their choices could have an immediate impact. The Solution Focus approach with its message of 'find what works and do more of it', sat well with this. The SF Tool 'Small Actions', explores actions that can take place tomorrow or the next few days, allowing individuals to work quickly reviewing what works and continue to move in the direction of change.

"You will start seeing the results - impacts of the actions - sooner rather than later." (McKergow 2011)

As a result of the [Growth Coaching International](#) accreditation course my colleague and I had previously undertaken, we also understood that building sustainable and productive team behaviours required building positive relationships. The decision to run a series of Team Workshops meant that the team members could be supported in community with others.

### **10. The Team Workshop sequence**

Over a period of 10 working weeks we decided on the following format:

3 x 1 ½ hour team workshops where all team members would attend.

1 hour planning sessions prior to each workshop involving discussion of the SF tools and approaches to be utilized using my colleague as a critical friend.

½ hour post workshop reflection and evaluation involving my colleague and myself reviewing what we noticed about the impact of the strategies and tools used in the workshop and a reflection of the feedback from the team.

Editor note: In the following sections you will notice "SF Clues" mentioned. Please see the SFiO website ([www.sfio.org](http://www.sfio.org)) for more details on these [at this link](#).

### *Workshop 1 - Exploring the platform for change*

Discussion: Is our aim to become a more effective team?

Describe: Who benefits if we do become more effective?

Identify: 'Hot Topics' - What we need to get right.

Gauge commitment: Are we ready to become 'Customers for change'?

Our Future perfect: 'Paint the picture'

Scale & small actions: Where are we now in relation to things we must get right?  
What small actions can we take?

*SF Clues noticed:*

**Practitioner** - deeming clients to be the expert on their own lives and desires

Change is happening all the time – our role is to find useful change and amplify it

### **Tools**

Seeking useful change and positive difference in all phases of the process, from before the first session, between sessions and afterwards

Establishing elements of the "preferred future" which are already happening using scaling questions, exception questions, coping questions, counters questions and other methods

Helping the client identify and take small constructive steps in the direction of the desired change

### *Workshop 2 - Getting specific*

Elicit something that is better since last time: The [EARS protocol](#) by Insoo Kim Berg (pioneer of [solution focused brief therapy](#)).

Let's get specific: More time to detail specific behaviours, actions, language being used in our Future Perfect.

Multi scaling: Where are we now in relation each of the things we must get right?

Commit to a small action: to implement between now and the next meeting.

*SF Clues noticed:*

**Background** - some reference to Insoo Kim Berg, Steve de Shazer, the Milwaukee group and others

### **Tools**

Seeking and amplifying instances of useful change, positive difference and signs of the customer's resources between sessions in ways which build the client's role, agency, efficacy and choice in participating in such change

Using simple, concrete language, "staying at the surface", promoting interactional descriptions rather than mentalistic explanations

Identifying and commenting on the client's resources, offering compliments and tasks appropriately

### *Workshop 3 - Developing a team charter*

Develop team behaviours: Further detail about the 'Things we must get right'.  
(Using the Values into Action video as guide <https://youtu.be/U5yshOu5SN4>)

Carousel activity: Reviewing team behaviours and providing feedback on the ideas of others.

Pairs: Affirms activity (pg. 192 ([McKergow 2011](#))).

*SF Clues noticed:*

### **Tools –**

Using simple, concrete language, "staying at the surface", promoting interactional descriptions rather than mentalistic explanations

Building conversations on the basis of the client's language, metaphors, stories and behaviour  
Promoting descriptions in specific, small, interactional and positive terms (presence of solutions rather than absence of problems, start of something new rather than stopping something). **Practitioner** - A respectful, non-blaming and co-operative stance **Background** - Much of the work and the explanations of the work would be in terms of 'people grammar'

Further detail including facilitator notes and reflections of the facilitator and feedback from the team can be found in a slide presentation online <https://goo.gl/s62HCu> or see the PDF below in the InterAction Online journal.  
Examples / images, of work from the team involved in the activities has been added to each of the relevant slides. Team feedback and a reflection by the facilitator and colleague have been included at the end of each workshop session.

## 11. Issues / Comment – how it went - including reactions of others involved. What's better?

Lessons learned for next time.

## 12. Reflection and Evaluation – Facilitator's reflection on what worked

### Workshop 1:

Our fear leading into Workshop 1 was that these team workshops were being imposed upon individuals who didn't naturally work together. The risk was, that whilst both my colleague and I felt that it was important to explore the characteristics of an effective team, it might not be a commonly held desire by the wider group. However, my colleague set the tone with some input first on how all teams within the project were being challenged to see themselves as not working in isolation, but when required, would be asked to work across teams for the good of the whole project.

We invited discussion by all members in response to this. Allowing individuals to provide their opinion on why this might be something worth exploring was most useful, in that it allowed some airing of problems and issues people were holding on to, whilst at the same time however, they were being gently nudged to continue to focus on why this topic may be important. The discussion provided a chance to get things off their chest whilst moving in a positive direction.

I realised the need to take time on establishing *The Platform* for change. Ample time was given to exploring it. This was the opportunity to turn around any talk about ongoing, long held problems of the team and past failures, towards a solution, beginning our quest for what would work. Particularly useful was the exploration in pairs of *who would benefit if we did become an effective team?* (See Slide Deck PDF, slide 9). This began to create some valid reasons for beginning on the journey.

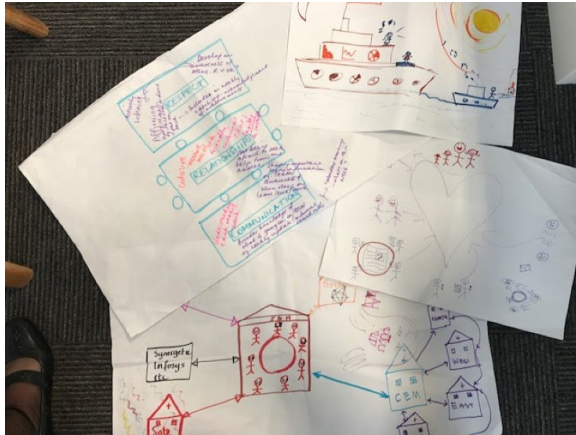
Identifying 'Hot Topics' or rather those things we simply *had to get right* if we were to become effective, gave us language for the change we wanted to see. Topics were brainstormed on sticky notes in quick fire, rapid succession. These were bundled by pairs and brought to the main group where they were bundled again and appropriate labels given to the ideas. A voting protocol was used where we finally identified three categories the team felt they must focus on to become more effective as a team; *Communication*, *Respect*, and *Relationships* became our Hot Topics! (See Slide Deck PDF, slide 25).

*Image: Hot Topics voting protocol.*



do. We were reminded also of those we said would benefit from us working together more effectively.

*Image: Examples of Future perfect drawings by the team*



By being more specific in our images team members were able to begin a list of some specific behaviours under each of our 'Hot Topic' headings - Communication, Respect, Relationships.

One challenge we have faced throughout the workshops is that there have been times where individuals are unable to be specific in their examples of team behaviours associated with *Hot Topics*. The language being used was quite esoteric.

This would have to be dealt with by providing some scaffolding in Workshop 3. What was pleasing though, was other individuals were producing really specific ideas and language. As the facilitator, I encouraged these ideas so that we focused on where we wanted to get to.

### **Workshop 3:**

The focus of this workshop was mainly to detail our team behaviours under each of our 'Hot Topics' so we could develop the main content of a Team Charter.

Working in pairs, the specific language we came up with in workshop 2 would be further refined in order to provide very clear set of expectations around team behaviours. (Slide Deck PDF, Slides 43 - 44).

The *Values into Action* video provides a useful guide, <https://youtu.be/U5yshOu5SN4> for the language structure that pairs used to further describe our team behaviours. The final result can be found outlined in the slide show. (See Appendix, Slides 45-47).



Utilising the collaborative functionality of Google slides team members were easily able to locate what others had written and provide comments or questions for discussion in the bigger group. This was an effective activity.

We ended the session on a high using the *Affirms* activity from (p192 - 193 Jackson & McKergow 2011). It was a great way to end the Workshops providing all team members - even those that find it difficult to focus on themselves, with a feeling of worthiness.

## 18. The art of keeping it SIMPLE

Our Team Workshops to date have had an immediate impact. A sense of hope and positivity can be felt amongst the team that wasn't there before, because the team have focused on moving forward with their sights set on *solutions* not problems.

Almost as soon as we began the Team Workshops things began to noticeably change. Through individuals implementing small actions, the little changes impacted on others causing more interactions in *between* team members resulting in greater changes and a greater feeling of positivity as a result.

Focusing on what is already present in the team isn't complicated and provides a useful launching pad for change. Within each workshop was an opportunity to focus on what was working even if it was something minor. This created momentum and made it easier for individuals not to have to feel like they had to search for what to put into action but rather *make use* of what good things were already in place.

A skill I had to acquire as the facilitator throughout the sessions was to gently shift individuals in the direction of *possibilities* when they focused on mistakes of the past or used language that was not helpful in moving them forward. This might've required a response from me such as, "*Well, what might help us turn that around? What has worked? When you think of others that will benefit from us working more effectively, what do you think we need to do?*"

Helping the team recognise what being effective really looks like was supported by the use of very specific and clear *language*. When team members didn't understand the descriptions of team behaviours by others, they challenged them to provide more simple, useful language and examples.

When beginning these workshops, I had an idea of the characteristics that are required to be present in an enhanced or effective team. However, I knew that the team would have to explore for themselves and then determine the things they needed to get right. *Every case is different* and every team will take a different path to get positive results.



We have gone from two separate small teams working silently at our own work stations, to a group of connected colleagues who discuss, engage and meet regularly most mornings to discuss work priorities. Most pleasing is that all the suggestions for changing supporting structures have come from the group. They have not been imposed by Clare or myself. I have had personal feedback from most team members that the sessions have had an extremely positive effect on team and even social relationships. Great change didn't take long to occur!

#### **19. Team's reflection on what worked**

Some of the feedback provided at the end of Team Workshops included:

- the 'Hot Topics' Activity and protocol for prioritising them was effective
- The time given to 'Platform', exploring what we wanted to be better, worked well
- Coming together forces us to stop & focus on team!
- 90 minutes workshop is Adequate time - we get it done!
- Workshop enforces change for team
- Interacting with people we don't normally interact with works well
- Want More Workshops

#### **20. Noticeable Change**

There are tangible changes that have occurred that were not present before the Team Workshops.

These include:

- We have a team charter that outlines what we have to get right in relation to Communication, Respect and Relationships in order to be a more effective team.
- Every Monday, Tuesday, and Friday we have 'Stand Ups' where everyone quickly shares a work priority they have for the day. If they need help or have a question this is the time to share, discuss and make connections.
- All team members use a common diary to share meetings and other activities they are involved in so that communication is clear.
- Team members are invited to be a member of a WhatsApp group (if they wish). This is used for any urgent or other team information that needs to be shared across many at one time.
- There is more talk! We are no longer silent individuals. Team members are engaging in informal chats and making incidental timely connections, therefore enhancing their work.

## 21. Recommendations

At this point, there's an appetite for continuing to come together to explore and understand how we might continue to become more effective as a team. One team member raised the possibility of the team learning to give feedback to one another. I think using protocols to enable effective professional conversations can support this. *The Solution Focused Reflecting Team Format* (Process originally devised by Harry Norman, John Henden and Bristol Solutions Group), could be a useful tool for us to use going forward.

The Team Workshops have made a difference. And the impact was positive and immediate! It may take time however, for me to learn if the pursuit to become a more effective team is sustainable, but I have the feeling that we are on the right track!

## 22. Works Cited

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## About the Author



Fiona Turner is working in education at Catholic Education Melbourne on a large-scale project. As Product Owner, eLearn, Fiona works with teams delivering enterprise technologies to schools in Victoria. Her role involves liaising with school personnel and project teams to provide contemporary learning technologies for teachers

to improve student learning. Previously, Fiona had worked as a curriculum coordinator and teacher in primary schools in Melbourne. Fiona is an accredited coach with Growth Coaching International and has a certificate in Solution Focus Coaching.

### 23. Contact

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### 24. Review by Annette Gray and Nick Burnett

We (Nick Burnett and Annette Gray) were very impressed with the Solution Focused project that Fiona presented it was simple, short and achieved the aim of helping the teams work better together quickly and is still occurring! Fiona's understanding and application of the SF clues was very comprehensive. The structure of the intervention was well thought through and responsive to what occurred during the workshops with workshop participants. We were very impressed with the short nature of the intervention and the lasting impact it has had on the teams. The other outcome is that the teams want more workshops to help maintain the ability to work together. A great example of the effectiveness of the SF approach.

Lead Reviewer: Annette Gray <http://sfio.org/annette-gray/>

Second Reviewer: Nick Burnett <http://linkedin.com/in/nickburnett>

