SF work with conflicts
- the know and how of Sf mediation in different approaches

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1. Basic assumptions – Our "common ground"

SF conflict management is a peculiar way of dealing with conflicts. Principles and tools originally developed in solution focused therapy (de Shazer, Kim Berg) are applied on conflicting situations in organisations. (see Bannink 2009, Ferrari 2015, Kolodej 2016, Ronzani 2015, Wüstehube 2010).

Bannink has described the difference between "solution focused" and "problem focused" conflict management on the basis of 18 criteria (Bannink 2009, p. 65ff). According to her the two approaches differ among others in what is seen as an achievement:

- In problem focused conflict management, the solution of the initial conflict is considered to be the achieved success.
- In solution focused conflict management, it is much more about reaching the clients' goals. As a result, this can be different (or better) than just solving the initial conflict.

This points to one of the main differences of the two approaches:

- Problem focused conflict management deals mainly with the causes of the initial conflict, its consequences and the emotions involved,
- while the solution focus is mainly directed to the preferred future: What do the parties involved want instead of the conflict and how can we reach that better future?

This approach is particularly attractive because of its speed and efficiency: Bannink describes results from therapy outcome studies which show that sf therapy is much faster and more inclined to meet the client's needs for autonomy (Bannink, F., 2009, S.57) Our experience is similar: we can reach results faster and with more satisfaction for the conflicting participants

The practice of sf mediation has developed in many respects since Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg have inspired mediators to use sf principles and tools. You will find a lot of similarities and differences between practitioners. From our experience, there is one crucial difference regarding the focus on "problems" in a conflict: Are they mentioned at all – and if yes, in which way, with which ambitions and with which interventions? In our experience, the participants need space to tell about reasons, history or causes but to enter the solution process itself it is not needed to know it all for the mediator. So, we mostly spend less time in the history but we spend all our energy in finding the solution space and desires for the better future.

We are deeply convinced of the many benefits that are offered by working with a solution focus in conflicts – for our clients and for us. We work principally and consistently with an sf attitude. That's why we call our approach "solution focused mediation", even if we incorporate elements of "classical mediation", depending on the situational requirements.

SF mediation

- follows the basic assumptions of the solution focused approach and rigorously shows this in action
- works consequently with sf methods oriented at the desired futures

- and can essentially support the parties involved to find constructive ways out of the conflict, effectively and with as much lightness as possible.

Setting an atmosphere of "lightness" is very important. In our experience, the conflicting partners have built up an atmosphere of "heavy", "dark" and "stuck". Here our interventional attitude is of the most importance.

Sf mediators can be especially supportive to their clients when they work with an elaborate mix of sf and classical methods on the base of a rigorous sf attitude.

From our point of view there are some suggestions from "classical mediation" that turn out to be quite helpful, for instance:

- To estimate the degree of escalation (Glasl, F. 2013)
- To ask the parties' self-responsibility in letting them define the necessary amount of working with the conflict-issues and problems of the past

The degree of escalation often gives a solid guidance, how much preparation and problem work is necessary. Each conflict situation is unique – and there is a tendency: The deeper a conflict is escalated; the more preparation and problem work is necessary to clear the way for a constructive transformation of the tension in a conflict.

Some tools in de-escalating the conflict are indeed traditional SF tools like scaling, holding space, the miracle question, the preferred future and – above all- the listening experience. For most clients the experience, that in this specific conflict you are listened to and appreciated in your own competencies is one that makes the atmosphere fluid and ready for progress.

2. The essence of solutions focused mediation

With the sf approach the mediator mobilises the positive resources, emotions and attitudes as much as possible. From our point of view there are some core elements of good sf mediation in organizations:

- To understand conflicts as a phenomenon of both personal and organizational contradictions
- To appreciate conflicts as a sign, that change is necessary and use their energy as a powerful source of change
- To appreciate what works well in the present (personal relationships, working processes which function well) and trust in the parties' ability to improve their cooperation
- To support the parties in creating images of a better future
- To trust in the ability of the parties to decide which of the problems of the past – which have caused hurt and emotional damage – they want to solve and to support them to do this in a very professional way.

3. Approaches and methods - how we use the solution focus in mediation and training

Each of us focuses primarily on different subjects: Martina, Sieds and Leo work a lot as mediators, Peter works as mediator and as leadership-trainer. Therefore, we will describe our most inspiring and successful experiences in the fields of mediation and conflict management training.

3.1 Martina Scheinecker – Trigon (A)

In many years of practicing sf mediation in organizations Martina Scheinecker has developed a procedure in four phases (Scheinecker M., 2012, 2014)

1. Orientation phase
2. Construction of solutions
3. Testing phase
4. Evaluation

The **orientation phase** consists of individual interviews with all parties with the following aim:

- Provide a solution oriented analysis of the conflict system
- evoke a change of perspectives, enhance empathy
- activate the power of self healing: Register small steps of improvement, give recognition, make aware options to de-escalate the conflict
- inform: what will happen in the meeting with both parties
- clarify the contract and strengthen the emotional contract between the mediator and the parties

The solution focused analysis of the conflict system is necessary to find the best steps towards an improvement. It provides deep understanding – for the mediator and for the parties – concerning the goals of the parties, their hopes, the issues (distinguish: observations, interpretations, emotions, needs), the points of disagreement, the resources and skills of the parties, what do they appreciate about each other, the process of conflict, the level of escalation, the conflicting parties and their nature (individuals or groups?), the relations between the conflicting parties (informal and formal = systemic, organisational aspects) the basic attitudes of the disputants.

The phase **"construction of solutions"** covers several meetings, workshops etc. in which the mediator supports the parties to find solutions for their further cooperation or for a peaceful separation. A very important method for sf facilitating the dialogues between conflicting parties is the so called „**solution dialogue** ". It covers 7 steps
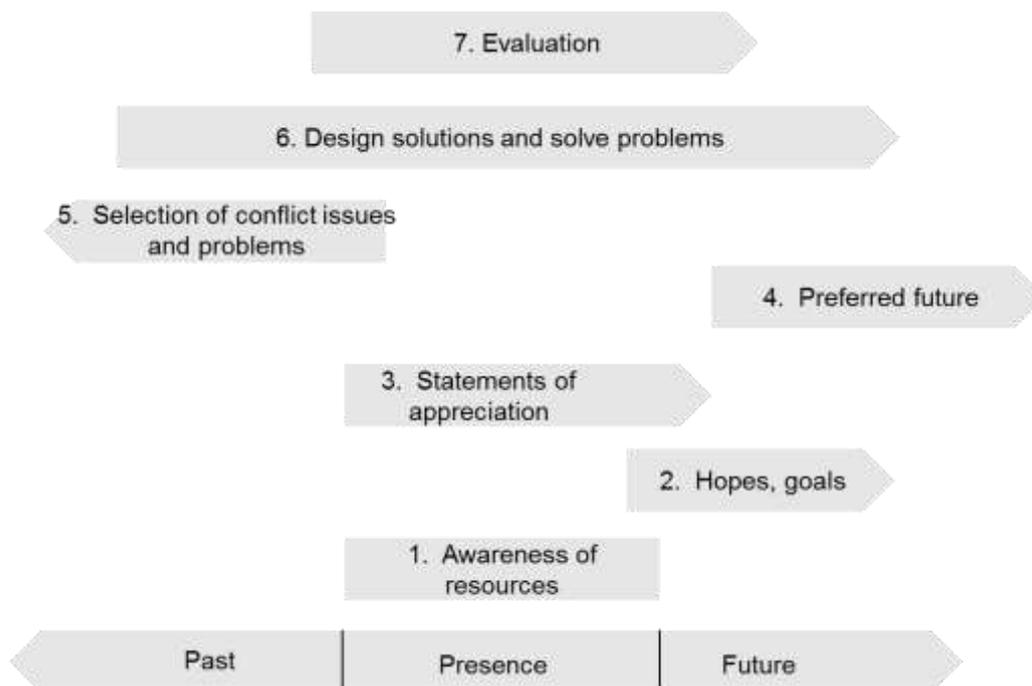
1. **Awareness of resources**
   Which – even small – changes have you noticed since our first interview?

2. **Expressing hopes and goals**
   What are your biggest hopes? Suppose, our efforts for solving the conflict are successful: How could you tell / how could you measure this after our first meeting?

3. **Statements of appreciation**
   "We will try to find out, if there is a way to a better future cooperation for both of you ... We will talk about the conflict and about what still works in your cooperation... let us begin with the things that connect you... John, which of Melinda' qualities do you appreciate?" (and vice versa)
   Or: In case the interview had shown that there is no appreciation left: „Which future chances should the other party get?"

4. **Preferred future**
   Encourage the parties to describe: "Imagine a time, a year from now on for example, when the conflict does no longer exist and you have reached a really good cooperation / a really good life...what does it feel like? How can you tell that things are alright? What are you doing then?... Miracle question, scaling questions ...

5. **Selection of conflict issues and problems of the past:**
   "If you consider all the things which you appreciate about each other and if you think about the future you want to reach: On which problems, conflict issues, episodes and wounding incidents of the past do you have to work before you can get access to your preferred future ... and which can you let go?"

6. **Design solutions and solve problems.**
   Support the parties with the whole range of methods of conflict solving (Nonviolent Communication, Solution Focused Questions, problem solving techniques, U-Process of Mediation, Systemic Structural Constellations …)

7. **Evaluation of progress**
   at the end of each meeting and about 6 months after the end of the mediation

The **testing phase** starts after the parties have found an agreement for their future cooperation. In the last mediation session, when this agreement is finished, the parties fix a date in the future (in 6 weeks up to 4 months), where they will evaluate together with the mediator how their agreement proves successfully. Now they „test" their cooperation, which means there are some months in which they do their ordinary work and observe their cooperation

3.2 Leo Blokland and Sieds Rienks – Masters in Conflict (NL)

The working method of Masters in Conflict in the Netherlands is above all very similar to the descriptions of Martina and Peter. The tools, the methods, the vision: it is all embedded in SF and we work in the same atmosphere as described.

However, there are three major differences in the way Masters in Conflict.nl works:

1. We take a short and limited time to solve the conflict. Let us say 2 to 3 weeks. We work intensively, we bring in a lot of our energy, and the dialogues are full of listening but also sharp and sometimes confronting, without losing the appreciative approach.

2. Leo and Sieds work together. Leo is a very experienced lawyer and formerly CEO of Hospitals and Residential Care. Sieds is psychologist and formerly director and manager of Institutes and Hospitals in Care and Commerce. We mostly operate as a duo, and we use all the disciplines in which we are brought up (law, psychology, economics, business).

3. We do take the lead in the conflict. We frame it, we build up the agenda, we conduct the dialogues. After a while (mostly every day) we evaluate with the partners about the progress. We think it helps the conflicting parties to concentrate on the feelings and space they are giving to each other.

The **pressure cooker model** as alternative approach

Leo and Sieds also work as mediators and have developed an approach, which they call "the pressure cooker". What is that ? From the beginning we use a time scheme, a planning of the (short !) period in which we want to resolve the conflict. Mostly it is 2 or 3 weeks. We have the agreement that we all do want to reach for a final solution. We say, that if there is no good future for the cooperation, the team or the two directors involved that we will advise to the board to find another and legal solution.

So all parties involved are asked to skip their agendas, to work on the solution and to come forward to a good ending. In our experience we always get the guarantee that everybody involved wants to participate in an open and cooperative manner. That is enough for us to go on for a positive approach.

Amongst SF practitioners we often hesitate to use the word analysis. In our view we strongly agree with the summary Martina uses above: we need analysis (sometimes even diagnosis) to fully understand what happened. Analysis is something like a processs, not a scientific, numeric or case-bound approach. It is observation, listening, giving space to the participants.

3.3 Peter Röhrig – ConsultContor (D)
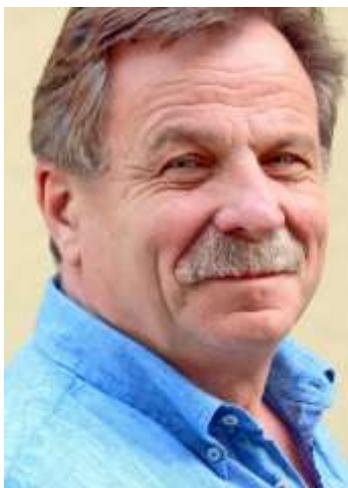
He does not have a standard procedure because "every case is different". In some cases, he will start with an exploration phase, interviewing the parties involved, in others he starts with all involved parties at the same time. Criteria for a single interview approach are: The more escalated, the better it seems to do some preliminary work to open the perspectives of the clients and slightly start to think about the future and development in that direction.

Some of his principles for good work:

• *"As a mediator, I do not expect the conflict parties to change – and I assume (explicitly) that they know about the consequences of "no-change"*

• *I slow the process sensibly down – by leaving a lot of space for different perspectives (from your point of view / and from your point of view) – enjoying lulls in the conversation when clients are thinking about good answers to very good questions.*

- *I acknowledge the different points of view – with a special appreciation for all kinds of approaches to the problem – even if they turned out to be not very helpful*
- *I explore joint interests and desired futures*
- *And I support the parties in finding resources in past, present and future that could help to find a way out of the problem*
- *And sometimes it is much easier for clients to find a small step towards the common goal than towards each other.*
- *I work with a lot of attention and calmness. "*

One of his passions is to **support leaders in challenging situations**. As conflicts in an organisation are one of the most frequent challenges he does a lot of leadership training on that – and calls it "conflict empowerment". This means training work on real cases from participant's everyday life, showing them how to use sf tools and principles in conflicts in a professional way.

What all participants find very useful for their future way is to handle conflict situations solution focused and not so much problem focused anymore. The most important differences:

In traditional (problem focused) conflict resolution as a leader I …	In SF conflict resolution as a leader I …
… focus on the causes of the conflict, on the effects and emotions related to the conflict	… focus on the desired futures and resources to get there
… try to solve the conflict	… support parties to find steps towards the desired futures

The benefit leaders find in their experience from that new way of working with conflicts:

- They must not dive into problem analysis and stir up all the negative emotions again
- They must no longer provide solutions for the parties involved
- They keep in mind that responsibility for sustainable solutions is shared between the conflict parties.

The solution focus gives trainers and consultants a chance to support a lot of people in their everyday life and make this world a better place to live in.

4. Evaluation of our work as mediators and trainers

Our discussions brought up some differences also in this topic. In conflicts with two single persons Martina and Peter usually evaluate their work as mediators together with the parties:

1. At the beginning of each mediation session (What has improved, what changes did you notice since our last meeting?)
2. At the end of each mediation session (How well did you reach your goals for this session? What did you learn about your communication and your way and competence of dealing with differences / contradictions / antagonisms in this session?)
3. At the end of the whole process: the evaluation meeting after the testing phase (which is often 3 to 6 months after the last mediation meeting)

Long term evaluation often brings up interesting results and shows us a lot how people start to develop their future autonomously after a successful mediation: Peter usually asks the clients 6 to 12 months after finishing the mediation to give him a short feedback on the impact of the mediation for

themselves and for the organisation. Usually this turns out to be an interesting learning opportunity for both, the clients and the mediator. In some cases, he hears sentences like "Thank you for asking! You know, the advice you gave us at the last session, that was very good for us, it helped a lot." And when he asks about this advice he gets some ideas of what the clients connect with their joint work – even if he is completely sure, that he never gave this "advice" in the session. That makes him humble about long term evaluation. It seems that some clients construct explanations about the success of our mediation that are quite different from his view.

In team conflicts, continuous evaluation and "progress monitoring" is part of the process. When Peter does workshops with teams in conflict, he does the first monitoring 4-6 weeks after the workshop and per e-mail.

He usually uses questions from Susanne Keck's article in "57 sf activities…": Progress monitoring as transfer assistance, for example:

1. *On a scale from 1-10 „1" means there has been no progress and „10" means your desired future. Where on the scale do you see [yourself, the team, subject xy, the organisation …] today?*
   - *How do you realize there has been a progress on the scale?*
   - *How would you be noticing [at work, in the team, concerning subject xy …] that you were one step higher on the scale?*
2. *What do you do concretely to make this possible?*
   - *What would your [colleagues, team members, line manager, person xy …] say you contribute? How would they have notice that?*
   - *What will you do more of in the future to encourage this positive development? How would relevant people notice you want to encourage the process?*
   - *Which contributions of [your colleagues, line manager, the team, person xy …] do you appreciate most? How do these people notice you appreciate their contributions?*
3. *What should happen more [at work, in the team, concerning subject xy]?*
   - *When did this already happen, even to a small amount? What did you notice?*

Sieds and Leo do not often measure their results in terms of scaling and results. They do not use evaluation forms but do use a good dialogue afterwards and they are often asked to stay some time (low-frequent, without framing) .

5. **How different (organisational) cultures influence our sf mediation work**

Martina:

Sf mediation in organizations must always consider the organizational framework: Culture, structure, roles, processes, financial resources, market conditions and so on. It is an essential part of my approach that any action and feeling of a person in an organization can only be understood when you consider the role of this person in the organization. It is characteristic for organizations that systemic contradictions or fields of tension show up within organizational roles or in the cooperation between members of organizations which hold different roles (for example: systemic contradictions between production and marketing, sales and central services and so on). In many cases conflicts occur between two or more persons or teams which are not primary personal conflicts but which are an expression of systemic contradictions. In all these cases the conflict between the persons is a signal for the need of further change – organizational development, change of roles, resources, processes, business models or other factors of that kind.

Peter:

Mediation work is always dependant on the context (for instance the culture of the organisation). In many cases mediation is also a starting point for changing the (conflict-) culture in organisations

Changing interactions in a complex world is a great chance for leaders in any organisation. The solution focus offers a lot of helpful ideas in those challenging change projects (See for instance "A user's guide to the future" Mark McKergow & Helen Bailey: Host – six new roles of engagement, London 2014).

Sieds and Leo:

In terms of management you always want to know more about the results and the threats of the company or organization. If you do not do that, your intervention is empty in organizational terms. Then it is only a conflict between people.

And furthermore, if the culture and atmosphere of the company are bad, the conflict will have too much potential to rise again. So, you always should deal with culture, values and atmosphere or leadership.

6. **Which aspects of sf mediation deserve further research?**

Martina:

How findings of positive psychology (B. Frederickson, M. Seligman, F. Bannink…) and neurobiology support the practice of solution focused mediators

Peter:

How new developments of communications theory, like "embodied communication" and "emergence" support the practice of solution focused mediators.

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