Interview with Hans Christian Nielsen
Solution Focus Suits Me

Hans Christian Nielsen is an HR professional, currently working for Roskilde Festival. His skills are within the areas of HR, Communication and Leadership. As Head of HR he has managed and developed all facets of an HR function. He uses the tools of Solution Focus in all change projects. As Head of Communication he has worked with marketing, PR, web design, social media and business Intelligence. He has been a manager for a total of 12 years in both public and private organizations. He's a passionate break dancer, unicycle rider and father of two kids.

Natalie Polgar.: I've heard that you are devoted to SF, while there are millions of other ways of management, management models, styles, theories and structures, so why SF?

H.C.N.: For me the beautiful part of SF is that the theoretical background is very massive, it's based on Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg's work in therapy and other really big thinkers', philosophers' of the 20th century, but the tools are extremely easy to apply. The combination of having something very complex and something very simple is elite and unique I think. SF suits my way of working, living and thinking as well. There is a good match between the way I think, work, and the way these tools are meant to be. For me the most important part of SF is the future perfect part, actually, that we work very detailed on what it is and where we are going to be giving very detailed descriptions of our desired future. For me that's actually much more important than the appreciative approach, because that's where we develop a vision of where we are going to go together. When you have this accurately detailed description of your future perfect then it's really easy to take the first step towards it. Being a manager it's highly important that your employees should know what your plans, intentions are and where we are heading, because it's much easier for them to take decisions, all the small decisions that they have to take during a workday, when they know this. Besides the fact that it's much easier for them to make decisions in this way, it provides them a lot of freedom. It's a method to develop a common vision.

N.P.: Imagining the other managers on the same level as yours, what can they realise that tells them you work solution focused?

H.C.N.: Oh, they don't know it, because I never use the word, we are just chatting.

They can see that change has happens fast; they can see that I can help them, that my department can help them on difficult issues and matters, and they can see that I work at the HR department in a way that is very fast, efficient and helpful for them.

N.P.: So how do they look at you as a manager or as a leader who has a completely different kind of approach to what they do with these issues and problems?

H.C.N.: I'm not sure that they have even realised that I have a totally different approach, maybe a little bit. Naturally, I talk a little bit awkward, but for me solution focus means also that I could talk about solution focus for hours and just lecture on it but I really try to use their language, so I don't use the solution focused jargon when talking to them, I use their language, so for example when we're talking about some kind of IT development project then I talk to the project manager about what's the desired outcome of this project? Asking how would you see that we have realised it if you go into the organisation one year from now and this project is highly successful. How would you see it? What kind of small signs would show you that we have achieved it? So I do not use the word preferred future or future perfect and I don't ask the miracle question as a miracle question but it'll be still the very same.

The language is different in each case, the concept is the same.

N.P.: What makes SF different from any other management styles in your view?

H.C.N.: Well, two things. The one thing is the very detailed descriptions of the future perfect, that's something that's different because in other kinds of management tools you are thinking that OK, we have the vision it's short and broad, it's like we have a common big wish and then we have some others under that, then we have a strategy, under the strategy we have different kinds of goals, and for each goal we have some kind

of unique tasks with responsible persons and so on and so forth. So, the vision is really very broad, and not really concrete. That's totally different in solution focus, because at solution focus when we ask the miracle question for example, then we get highly detailed descriptions of how it'll be in the organisation when the vision is realised. When asking it, I rarely use the world miracle, but that doesn't matter, it has the same function. The point is to get this meticulously detailed description about what's our preferred future or future perfect, I think these two words are a little different depending on what kind of manager I'm talking to, what kind of situation it is, because sometimes it's best to talk about the future perfect, other situations it's better to talk about the preferred future, it depends on the situation and the manager as well that I talk to and the people I work with.

N.P.: You said that in your everyday work what they can see is that you're faster, your department is faster. What else can they see in work?

H.C.N.: They can see that I'm involved in plenty of processes and projects; it's very easy to get support from us, and also there isn't so much resistance at us, because when you involve people a lot

"The point is to get this meticulously detailed description about what's our preferred future."

more in the processes and in the decision making then you don't see so much stress. I think what also different about using solution focus is that on the one hand you have the detailed descriptions of the future I mentioned, on the other hand you don't have all the fix plans you don't have all the milestones of your plans and it creates something flexible, you're talking about and concentrating on the next step. What's the next step? What's the next step for this day? What's the next step for this week?

Instead of steps and milestones and all that comes together with that, all that you know from traditional project management. The funny thing is that within the IT world there is a new way of making IT development, called Scrum. It's also called interactive agile project management; and the whole idea is to speed up the process by working with a team without a project manager. They are self-organised and basically they pick up

the tasks that they are most devoted to. It has shown and proved to be efficient, while a completely new and different way of working. In Scrum during the sprint, which is a fix timed period you have a daily standup meeting, the Scrum team as it is called meets every day for 15 minutes, and every team member tells what they did yesterday, what they're planning to do today and what's the next step, then they finish with small talks, pick up a new task and work on in the same way. As anyone can see there's a very big similarity with solution focus here because they focus only on the next step; and that's another characteristic feature of solution focus and it eases stress. When one works on the next step, then it becomes clear to everybody what he or she is working on, right here, right now. Otherwise it can be difficult to see it clearly even for members of a team if they have a huge and long lasting project line with a lot of milestones... so focusing on what's the next step for this week everybody can understand it, moreover you get small successes that you can celebrate because of the instant feedback. *"Wow, we did that, yeah, we did that. What's the next step?"* A week after or two yet again an occasion to mark or celebrate: "wow, we did that, yes, we did it again." and so on and so forth. We get all these small successes because people realise all the small steps. It is highly motivating as well.

N.P.: If the whole structure is based on initiatives practically, individual initiatives; what happens if the initiatives are dominated by people who should rather not dominate?

H.C.N.: Probably, that's where I might use my more classic management tools. Of course it's important that the right people should do the right things instead of the wrong. That's one of my responsibilities as a leader, to make sure that it works that way, it's about, of course, how you organise your project, who you invite into the project team, who you think should be there, and how clear you are about telling them why they are there. Each team member should know that he or she is in the project because of having common senses with something, being an expert on another thing, focusing on people's strengths. So then they know what strengths, resources they have and what they have to put into this team.

N.P.: What do you do with individuals who don't care so much, or not so really interested in the projects, or they just simply don't like their work? I suppose to get involved in the process you should be interested and motivated, but I may be wrong.

H.C.N.: It's very difficult to say something in general, though I think one of the main tasks of a good leader is to find out which strengths do certain persons have, and make use of each person in the right way. Typically if people are underperforming, maybe they're not in the right place and we're not using the best parts of them. You have to focus on finding out new-placement possibilities, figure out how we can use this person in another way so we will see more strengths. Creating a dialogue with people about that helps. Telling that as I'm reading you, your strengths are this and this and that and I'd love to see you do this, and I'd love to see you do more of this, because that would tell me that you are, you are basically doing the right things and you're doing the things that you're good at. Naturally, sometimes people are very sceptic about this approach in the beginning, but hopefully they will see how useful it is because if you place your people in the right way, then they will have success, and when they have success, they will, basically, enjoy their job.

N.P.: You mentioned the concept 'good leader' apart from solution focus what do you need as a good leader?

H.C.N.: A good leader? A good leader for me has visions and ambitions about the area that he or she is working within. A good leader is good at communication, it's a vitally important leadership tool, a good leader is good at combining performance with situations where people thrive, so performance and job satisfaction goes hand in hand. A good leader is very loyal to the organisation that he or she is part of and the subordinates, and he or she is focusing on the whole organisation, not only the area that he or she has the responsibility for, and then of course a good leader has the ability to see everybody and recognise everybody, and acknowledge.

N.P.: On the individual's level. If you think about the university what are the specifics about that?

H.C.N.: Well, there are so many things that make this place different from a normal workplace. One thing that makes it very different is of course all the special staffs we have, they are very engaged in their research. I'm not sure even they think of themselves as employees at a normal organisation, they are into something much bigger and much higher than just a job. So they are engaged and that's the one thing but they are all exceedingly critical because science is also about being critical, being really critical, even being critical of your own research results as well as being critical of others' results. Therefore scientists are usually all remarkably critical to managers like me and that's the way it is.

N.P.: How can solution focus work in this atmosphere? How can you integrate SF?

"Focusing on the small steps make change happen faster and with more joy."

H.C.N.: You can, of course. When I started down here a few years ago I was thinking a lot about that, but you know the final goal is the same. For example, our learning method towards our students is called problem-based learning, that doesn't sound very solution focused at all, but what's the idea behind problem based learning is that you take a real problem, and you try to solve it. While you try to solve the problem, you learn. That's basically what we're doing in solution focus. We have a problem, we don't use that much time to talk about the problem, because that's not efficient, but that's the only reason why we're not talking about the problem. That's a big difference if you compare solution focus with appreciative enquiry, because in appreciative enquiry you're not allowed to talk about the problem. In solution focus we can talk about the problem and we're allowed to talk about the problem, the only reason that we're not talking about the problem so much is that it's not efficient. So, that's the start and from then on what we're doing is to try to solve the problem and try to learn while solving the problem, so there's no big difference between problem-based learn-

ing and solution focus when you're talking about what we're doing. The words and the language is very different but the end goal is the same.

Solution Focus adds, for me personally, it adds a lot of small successes in my daily life because when you work with the small steps, almost every day you reach a small step and you can celebrate, you can walk back home, and say yes, today I did this, and I can share it with my employees, and say yes, we did this, yes, we did this. So there's a lot of joy involved in working that way.

Basically when you use solution focus in organisation development, the differences are with two things, the one thing is that it helps you build much stronger and detailed visions, in addition the small steps, focusing on the small steps make change happen faster and with more joy. The same way when I started here I decided that I would really enjoy solution focus working and be part of the way at work, so my future perfect was that I saw an HR department and of course more and more of the university using the methods of solution focus. Tough I'm not sure they know that they are using it, but I can see that they are using the principles of solution focus. I'm still not home on this one, but I'm taking it step by step, small steps all the time towards it. A lot of small initiatives were conceived with a lot of solution focus in the initiative.

One example was that we worked on how to improve the employee satisfaction in the administration, because we had to reduce the number of employees in the administration last year, which was very hard and stressful, so this year we're working on how to reduce stress and to improve the work satisfaction. One little way of doing this is that I hired a solution focused consultant to help this team on working on this. That's one of the ways of introducing solution focus into the organisation using external consultants who work with these principles.

N.P.: Historically if I look at from the start what were the critical points or the turning points of this process?

H.C.N.: It's very difficult to point out one critical point but I have some small funny success stories that I can tell you. One thing is that I'm pretty sure that it was thanks to solution focus that I got a job as head of Human Resources at this university, because basically, what I did was

that when I saw the job in the newspaper, I called the university director who is my boss now, chief of the whole administration and the whole economy at the university, so I called him and asked a miracle question. I hadn't tried that before. I called him and asked him while trying to write an application for this job and it was very important for me to talk about what's important for him when he should select the head of Human Resources, so I asked that if it was okay, I would really love to ask you maybe a little hard question. Also I said to him: imagine that one year from now you're driving home with your car from a normal workday, you're going to do what you're doing when you're out of work, and suddenly it strikes you that hiring Hans Christian as your new head of HR was the best thing that ever happened.

Then I asked him can you tell me what signs tells you that it was the right decision. Then he started telling me about all the things that really mattered to him in his cooperation with the head of Human Resources. What was very important for him, too, that in the cooperation between him as director of the university and the head of Human Resources and all of that I could reflect on I wrote the application and when I went to the job interview.... So that was the way of applying solution focus already before I got the job.

N.P.: It was a personal turning point for you, if I look at your department, so were there critical points or turning points in this whole process for it?

H.C.N.: One critical point was the training they all got training in solution focus. I'm sure that was very important so that they knew what it was all about, however, I think the critical point was actually when some of them started to practise it, because we had some teams with a lot of problems, not within the HR department, but in our organisation, and I had some consultants who were quite afraid of taking these tasks because it was really difficult to work with them but finally they said: okay, I can do this. when they came back, finished with the task and said: well, I just used some of the solution focus things that we learned and it was very easy, or it was not so hard to consult because I just used some of these solution focused things in my work. I'm convinced that was a significant turning point. For myself I thought a great turning point was

combining solution focus with the way that we do projects and how we work with the projects on an everyday basis, using small steps as a method all the time. I see it more and more that the people just by themselves are talking about what's the next step, what's the next step and it gives me... it's a great satisfaction for me, every time I hear the phrase what's the next step, it tells me that something is happening.

N.P.: How did you know when you were on the right way?

H.C.N.: I knew it since there were a lot of different signs of it, examples, like one example was that we have been using a whole new IT system in the administration at the moment, and for many people causes stress that there is this new big IT system that they have to use every day in the administration and people think it's very complicated.

The project has been going on for almost three quarters of the year now, and it's still a hard to really get people to use the system as there has been a lot of resistance. Then, one month ago I decided that now it was time to not focusing on all the things that didn't work and all the problems, just the next step and nothing else. Everybody in my own department was using the system and there were a lot of problems and everybody was talking bad about this system, but then, one month later everybody was using it and people were talking good about it. It was almost a miracle, and the change came only from introducing the concept of let's stop talking about our problems, stop talking about what's not working, just try focusing on what's the next step. What's the next step today, what's the next step tomorrow, and so on and so forth. That was really fun.

N.P.: It seems there's a kind of joy and satisfaction in using SF. What is the contribution that you've made and you are the most proud of?

H.C.N.: I think making change of processes where people really are involved and they are really taking the decisions together with me, that's a thing I'm very proud of, because then we share the success, as it's not my success, it's our success and it makes it more fun to go to work for everyone, I hope and I believe.

N.P.: Supposing you could turn back time with a special time machine, what would you differently?

H.C.N.: Of course a lot of things could've been done in different way, but it's not so solution focused to think that...so it's not so good question for me, I'm not used to think in that way. I think that the two learning points that I talked about earlier, focusing on creating a very detailed vision and focusing on what's the next step, that's something that I've learned within these past two years, how important that is. So if I had that knowledge two years ago, I would've done more of it already in the beginning, so that's something that I think I would have done different, if I had known how efficient it was two years ago, of course I would've done more of it already when I started here, from day one.

N.P.: Where else do you feel that you could make a good use of SF, but you haven't tried it yet?

H.C.N.: Well I think I'm not using the word solution focus much, I'm using managers' own words, so I'm using it as a method more than a concept, but of course it could be funny to say them in one, two or three years if that really was my concept it so that everybody knew that's the way we're working here is SF, because that's the most efficient way to work here, because that's the most efficient way to reach our goals.