

Book reviews

Solution-Focused Supervision

Frank N Thomas

New York, 2013 Heidelberg et. al.: Springer. 345 pp.

Review by Kirsten Derolf

Frank N. Thomas ends his book saying: “My goal for this book is to provide a resource for supervisory excellence. It can only be realised if one acts – ‘ Act always so as to increase the number of choices’ (von Foerster, 184, p. 308)” and he fully achieves this goal. This book offers an incredible wealth of resources for supervisors (and not only for supervisors).

Frank N. Thomas sets out by describing an SF supervisory stance and asks: “what makes something, anything SF?”. His answer is a not comprehensive list (p. 5) which is (un)surprisingly similar to SFCT’s Clues Document. Its main components are pragmatism, tentativeness, nonpathology, curiosity and respect, and the main techniques integral to SF practice mentioned are asking for positive difference, maintaining a future focus, goal setting with the focus on creating a preferred future, inquiry into resources and exceptions, practices that bring attention to the possibility of personal agency, compliments and the pertaining questions.

In Thomas’ view, SF is a systemic approach. In the last *InterAction*, I ventured to posit the opposite and I am really looking forward to a discussion. Thomas describes the similarities and differences very thoroughly. When he uses the term “systemic thinking”, he stresses the emergent, interconnected, context-dependent and complex branch of “systemic thinking” and indeed, there are important similarities which might connect SF supervision more strongly to systemic thinking than I had assumed (hingeing, of course, on the use you make of the word “systemic”).

From what you have read so far, “Solution Focused Supervision” might sound like an interesting foundational/philosophical read mainly for therapists and supervisors – but no! What I have in front of me is an extremely relevant resource for people working in organisations and teachers of SF for all kinds of contexts. In his meticulously researched book, Thomas deals with many important differences of SF practice and the teaching or supervision of practice in contexts where quality is important. In these contexts the responsibility of the supervisor is not only to the client (the therapist or trainee) but also to the “client of the client”. We often find ourselves in similar situations as business consultants when we are coaching leaders or as team coaches who don’t want to forget about the customer and other stakeholders. Thomas talks about the “isomorphism” in SF supervision, the fact that SF supervision will have the same form as a therapy session, however under the different premises mentioned above.

Thomas’ comments on how to work respectfully supervising people who come from different approaches are also extremely useful for SF coaches and consultants who also have to work with, supervise or work for people with different ideas on how the desired change can be brought about. He stays clear of the patronising (yet often cited): “treat them like your clients”, but argues for a relationship of transparency and respect that is as equal as possible under the given circumstances.

“Solution Focused Supervision” gives us a great overview of what is already there: research, material from Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer, many case examples, transcripts and learnings from successful SF supervisors, an appendix and a chapter full of practical tools. It describes the available tools in great details and it is extremely valuable to compare the use he makes of the SF tools in supervision with our uses in organisational work.

On a personal note, I took one question from his toolbox that I have used frequently now for myself and for my students. It went something like this: “Could someone else have acted the same way?” and is perfect for helping to stop

second guessing or criticising yourself for something that has happened and is spilt milk anyway.

There are two things I want to say to end this review: “Read this book!” and “Frank, when can we talk?”

References

Von Foerster, H. (1984). *On constructing a reality. Observing systems* (2nd ed.). Seaside: Intersystems Publications.

SFCT (2013). Clues 1.2. [http:// www.asfct.org/clues.php](http://www.asfct.org/clues.php) retrieved April 4, 2012.