

SF Chart - A simple method to get out of the plan

Marco Matera

Summary:

I'm offering the preview of a simple tool, its practical application, the advantages and rules for you to experiment with it, so you can contribute to on-going solution focus (SF) research with me. The SF Chart is the result of my personal research in the field of SF which is truly a paradigm shift to find solutions without analysing the problems. SF is broken down and simplified into points. In this article you will find a symbolic space to gather your insights and a 'plan to get out of the plan'.

The SF Chart methodology

Do you have a dream? A personal project you love, but have difficulty moving forward with it?

Imagine helping others achieve their goals or acquiring a practical tool to help your own team.

If you work in a group and conversations are long and complex, this tool will be useful for you.

Let's take it one step at a time.

As mentioned in the text "Punta alla Soluzione" edited by Franco Angeli, SF is a powerful, practical and efficient coaching approach that promotes positive change in people facing difficult situations.

Originally conceived as a therapeutic approach, SF has consolidated worldwide as a coaching method able to provide practical tools to reach goals without investing time in analysing the problems. I know this might seem like a strong statement.

Authors Paul Z. Jackson and Mark McKergow mention in their book that going shopping with the list of things we don't want, isn't at all useful! However, this is the kind thing we often do: "I don't want this kind of boss", "I don't want this kind of job" etc.

Our educational system has encouraged us to correct problems, rather than focus on solutions. Our mind-set is programmed more on scarcity than on abundance: we know exactly what we don't want instead of knowing what we really do want. This leads us to focus on moving away from the problem rather than moving towards the solutions, thus keeping us anchored to the problem.

The first thing a person does when asked to talk about a problem is to create a connecting framework, a context in which the problem manifests or the life-area in which the conflict has arisen. "In the relationship with my wife... with my boss... with my project..."

The more we inquire about the problem, the more the frame is filled with colourful details, such as complaints, recriminations and all the things that just don't work. The person will focus more and more deeply on the problem.

Try for a moment to bring to mind one of your problems and try to understand what is wrong; what is the issue and where is the block?

The thing is we are already experts on our problem. We know exactly what we don't want!

So how do we get out? With a simple question that is at the core of this approach.

Imagine the problem is already solved, what will be in its place?

What would be different?

This question is not asking for a solution, it merely asks to describe the differences you would encounter if the problem had already been solved. It's asking to play with your mind for a moment and imagine. Using your imagination costs nothing and doesn't require a large investment of your time.

You will then be able to create a different picture, filled with the colours and emotions of the things that do work. You can become aware of the resources you have or the personal talents you had forgotten about. As we become more aware of what works and we investigate and explore this shift of perspective, the more the picture can expand.

If we look at the two pictures, the "problem" and the "solution", the fundamental difference is that the "problem" has a framework and the other image doesn't! The frame, the context is what closes the image within set boundaries, whereas creativity and imagination require freedom and empty spaces.

In the solution picture one is free to stretch boundaries, explore differences, find new possible advantages and so expand. In the SF approach this means finding new possible action steps. It's the equivalent of looking at the differences as a whole and allowing what you want to emerge. The co-creator of the SF method Steve de Shazer said, "I may not know what is right, but I will surely know what is best".

It's the difference that makes the difference!

Would you like to try it out first hand?

Imagine everything is going the way you wish, or even better. What will be different? What clothes will you be wearing? Where will you be? How will you feel in your body?

The point is that way to often our minds think in terms of scarcity and this can make us feel inadequate or powerless. What if this was just a perception? SF allows us to exit the 'complaint mind-set', reactivating our personal resources.

When working with a group, SF creates a sense of belonging and directs the focus of the whole group towards greater productivity. Whether you use SF for personal issues or as a tool to work with groups, the end result will be a greater effectiveness and efficiency. It requires a true paradigm shift: stop focusing on the problems and move the attention to what works.

If you want to know more on the SF method I have listed some links and the bibliography at the bottom of the article.

But let's delve into what I offer you.

I wanted to create a simple tool, accessible to everyone, to give a taste of what getting out of patterns means. The chart below facilitates this process by identifying different areas with related questions, allowing a clearer management of ideas, suggestions and action steps.

This article is a simple guide to optimize the SF Chart approach, explaining the advantages of this tool and the rules of the game.

After discovering and appreciating the Business Canvas Model I realized how much it helps and supports group discussions by giving structure, time and space for personal reflection.

The layouts I have created for practical application are based on the BCM but with an SF orientation. I have been testing it for two years now with very interesting results in terms of effectiveness and improvement of team dynamics.

The charts are to be hung up and filled with 3M Post-it Notes. The SF Chart will become a conceptual box for your organized knowledge, a space to express your passion and confidence; this will give you a structure, allowing you to follow up with action.

The different areas are thought to encourage reflection and they follow the basic structure of SF.

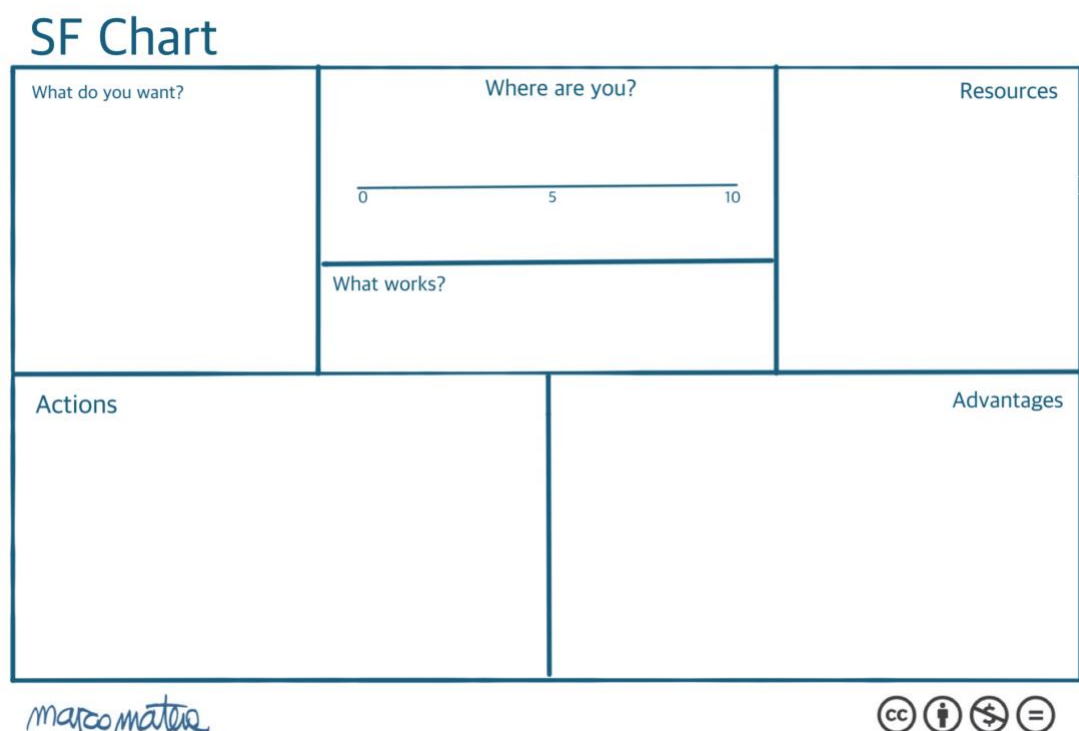
The SF Chart is:

- SIMPLE: you only need 3M Post-it Notes, some time and the willingness to engage yourself
- EFFECTIVE: it is based on years of field testing SF
- STRUCTURED: you will find questions to guide you through each specific area

There are two different diagrams:

- Personal SF Chart – designed for personal work
- Group SF Chart – designed to support teams or work groups.

SF Chart Personal



Who is it intended for?

- For anyone interested in SF.
- For managers or coaches who want to implement this method.
- For whoever wants to improve their life by getting out of the box using creative thinking.

Advantages

- It's fast and doesn't require time spent analysing the problem.
- It's fun and light-hearted.
- It allows you to create a space to reflect and find steps towards new solutions.

What do you need?

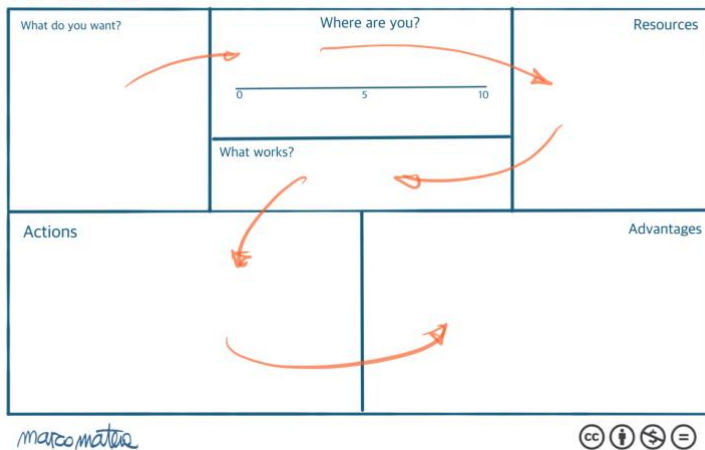
- A problem to solve or a dream to achieve.
- A SF Chart printed in A2 or A3. (The bigger it is the more you can add)
- A place to hang the chart: a wall, a door or a piece of furniture. I suggest a space where you can leave it for some time and see it frequently.
- Different size and colour 3M Post-it Notes
- Coloured markers. They have the advantage of adding colour to the words and create an immediate impact from a distance. Using large felt-tip pens forces you to be concise.

The areas of the diagram

The areas are structured in a way that guides you through the exploration, providing opportunity for thought.

The sequence I suggest is the one shown on the following image:

SF Chart



Do you have a problem that is bothering you, a goal to meet, a dream or wish to achieve?

The first question to ask yourself is, “Do I want to address it?” Taking care of oneself is extremely important but we often forget or procrastinate. If the answer is “yes” or “I don’t know” you are ready to proceed.

The SF Chart will allow you to transform your dreams and wishes into achievable goals.

The difference between dreams and goals is that goals are tangible, actions need to be taken and resources put into play.



What do you want?

Every journey has its objective. Do you remember when I mentioned that we usually know exactly what we don’t want? From now on notice whenever your mind expresses a “don’t...” and transform it into a positive statement, something you want. For example, “I don’t want to be stressed” isn’t a useful answer for this kind of exercise. Ask yourself “Ok, how would I feel if I wasn’t stressed?” “What do I want instead, and how would I notice it happening?” And write it on your 3M Post-it Notes. The invitation is to fill in your 3M Post-it Notes for this area with the differences you notice, imagining that the problem has disappeared.

What would be different? Supposing the problem is solved, how will you notice it? What will make you realise the situation has changed? Explore; what else will you

see happening? Dream. Remember our mind is used to thinking in terms of what it does not want, but as mentioned, a shopping list made of things you don't want is not going to help you shop quicker.



Where are you?

This section will help you follow up on your progress along the way. The area holds a scale of numbers from 0 to 10. If 10 represents the preferred future and 0 the opposite, where would you position yourself right now?

Now choose a colour for your current position and draw a dot on the corresponding number. This shows all you have achieved till now and the point from which we will move forward today.

As you move forward with the work you can mark your progress on the scale. I use small pieces of coloured 3M tab markers to highlight my progress.



Resources

This section of the SF Chart represents what Mark McKergow and Paul Z. Jackson refer to in their book "The Solution Focus" as "counters": the counters that allow you to stay in the game.

What useful resources do you have right now? Perhaps resources you usually use in other circumstances. Look at the position you chose on the scale of numbers from 0 to 10. What has been useful for you to get to where you are now? What resources allow you to stay as high as you currently are?

Have you dealt with something similar in the past? If so, what resources did you tap into?

Are there any external resources that could be useful? Friends, colleagues, methods or tools. You can use different colour 3M Post-it Notes to collect these new resources.



What works?

On this scale of 0 to 10 what has already brought you up to the point you have chosen? What is already going well? There is always something that is working: it could be talking with someone, using one's determination or self-irony, or some other resource, like cuddling the dog. When we are involved with a tormenting problem it's easy to lose sight of all the things that are actually going well, that allow us not to make the situation worse.

Stop for a moment and ask yourself, "What is working?"

Write down on your 3M Post-it Notes what is working for you. Make a list of things that work or that have worked in the past and could work again. Take a step back from the SF Chart and observe it in its whole. What is your general impression?



Actions

Small actions are what we need, tangible things that might work. For example, in order to walk we need to lift a foot, move it and place it on the ground. But the first thing to do is raise the foot; a small action.

Observe the numerical sequence and place a finger on your current spot. Imagine you are $n+1$ how would you notice, what might have moved you towards $N+1$?

Write your number $n+1$ on a 3M Post-it Note with the corresponding actions that allow you to advance one step up.

What other small actions come to mind? How far along the scale do they take you?

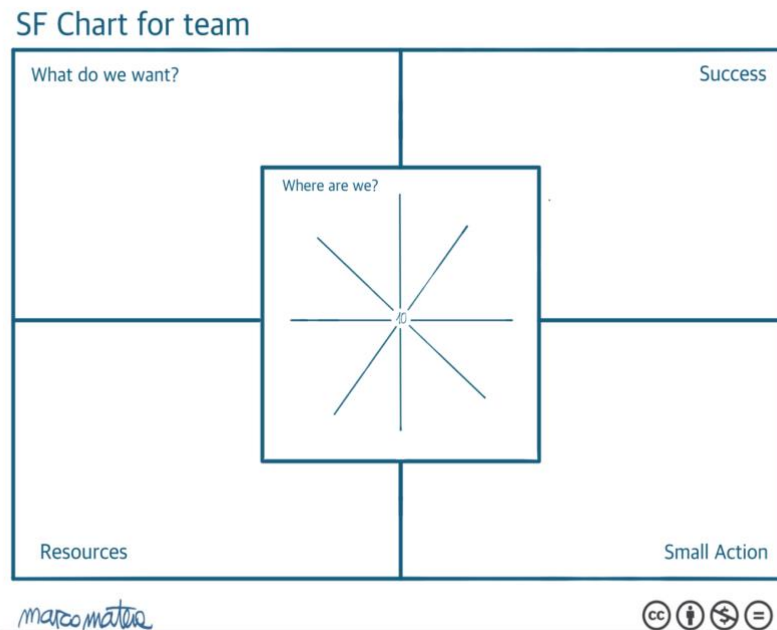


Advantages

For each small action you have noted, write down the difference you will get by acting on it and what advantage it will bring. Advantages move our actions.

Now let's examine the team focused diagram.

SF Chart for Teams



What do you need?

- A group.
- A common goal to achieve or a problem to solve.
- The SF Chart printed in A1 or A2. (The bigger it is, the more you can add¹).
- Different sized coloured 3M Post-it Notes
- Coloured markers.

Make the coloured markers and the 3M Post-it Notes available to the group. It's a good idea to designate someone as facilitator to guide the group in keeping on track and managing time. In order to ease group interactions, I suggest you explain the sections and share the structure of the day.

Each member should have a different colour 3M Post-it Note to write their name on, this will create an association between a colour and the person's name.

I also suggest you choose a group colour, so you can identify the individual teams later.

¹ There are charts in format in A2 A3 and A4 available on my website



What do we want?

In this area collect the answers to the following question: “Imagine the problem has melted away, imagine that we achieved our goal, what will be different?”

It’s useful to focus the attention on tangible differences that are real and measurable. The question “What else?” can help expand the exploration.



Where are we?

This area represents the “measuring scale” as in the SF technique. If 10 represents the preferred future and 0 the opposite, where am I?

Every line of the star represents a participant’s scale, the extremity being point 0 and the centre symbolising point 10. This way everyone will be making his or her way towards the 10 in the centre.

The suggestion is for each participant to choose a line – you may create extra ones – and mark the point they’re at with a coloured pen. Each person can share with the group how they feel in their numerical position and how they got there. In a big group it is possible to add lines, or the number can be reduced by merging homogeneous subgroups.

When everyone has marked their spot, take some time to see what has come up. Some people will be closer to the goal and others further. This understanding alone gives very useful data when managing a project. Sometimes we take for granted that if we have the same information we must have the same starting point. Each person will have a different perception depending on their self-value, their personal resources, their deadlines or the amount of work they have. Clarifying what’s working, analysing past success, brings the group together.

This is actually a practical application of the “group miracle scaling” I used at the Breda University (NL) with a Faculty Management team. You can find the miracle scaling article on my website and the link to the book *Strutture del Successo*², in which I describe the implementation of this method in chapter 8.

² Claude Rosselet, Georg Senoner (2011) *Le strutture del successo* Milano: Ledizioni.



Success

What positive steps have we taken as a group? Analysing our success is a precious moment, it activates resources and reinforces the awareness that together we have reached victory. Too often success is not adequately celebrated, immediately passing on to the next goal without acknowledging the resources and value of what we have achieved.

Here too the simple question “what else?” can encourage further exploration of success. Generally one feels a greater sense of companionship with the group and the success 3M Post-it Notes become small milestones.



Where are we?

Where are we now? Did something change to move us further forward? Am I always at the same number or does the fact we work well as a team make me feel more advanced?

Dedicate a moment for sharing what’s working, just a quick round and then move on to the next section.



Resources

What resources do we have? What resources have we used in the past? Do we have shared resources as a group?

This is a very important stage for team interaction and may require some time, but it sets the stage for action.



Small Actions

Act! That is what is needed to reach goals: small tangible and measurable actions are more proficient than grand proclamations.

In this section the group discussion can be more concrete, leading to real action. Which small actions can move us from our numerical spot "n" to "n+1" and what can we do both individually and as a group? Each member should write the actions they think might be useful on a 3M Post-it Note, one action per note and briefly share the advantages of taking that action before adding it to the board.

When everyone has finished, take a moment to evaluate all the options and prepare a to-do list, assigning tasks, responsibilities and carrying out timings.

Conclusion

The SF Chart provides a structured way to use SF for personal and team issues. It enables a very clear visual representation of your work. I hope this method has intrigued you and been helpful.

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