

OPINION PIECES

A Solution Focused Approach in Times of War: Views From the Inside



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In this article, I will be sharing my personal and professional experience of applying a Solution Focused Approach (SFA) during the war in my country. I will consider what worked and what was difficult, try to summarise the resilient strategies of Ukrainians, highlight (not for the first time) the power of a single question and speculate if there are naturally solution focused people and countries. [Chinese traditional](#) [Chinese simplified](#)

It will be no surprise for you to learn that the SFA proved once again its unquestionable viability in situations of the highest uncertainty, prolonged stress and difficult circumstances. Focusing on what is wanted, what works, noticing the good and paying conscious attention to the slightest signs of progress are probably even more important in war than in peaceful times. My article will only reinforce this obvious conclusion.

At the same time, I invite SFA practitioners to consider rethinking and re-designing some commonly used SF tools and practices, be it a flexible scale or an alternative Miracle question, to make them more adjustable to new and challenging circumstances. Maybe some of them are worth exploring in wider contexts? I wonder if makes sense for you?

*“Everything was forever until it was no more”.
(A message I found on a stand in Prague’s National Museum)*

I remember well the early morning of the 24th of February 2022 in Kyiv. Bombing woke me up and my first thought then was: “Finally it has begun. We will win”. Later I learnt that many other people experienced the same insight. Little did we know how, but we *knew* we would go through all this and win. That confidence was and still is difficult to explain but

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it serves as a powerful source that nourishes our Victory, commits us to daily contributions, makes us strong, brave and resilient and supports the incredible effort and dedication of Ukrainians.

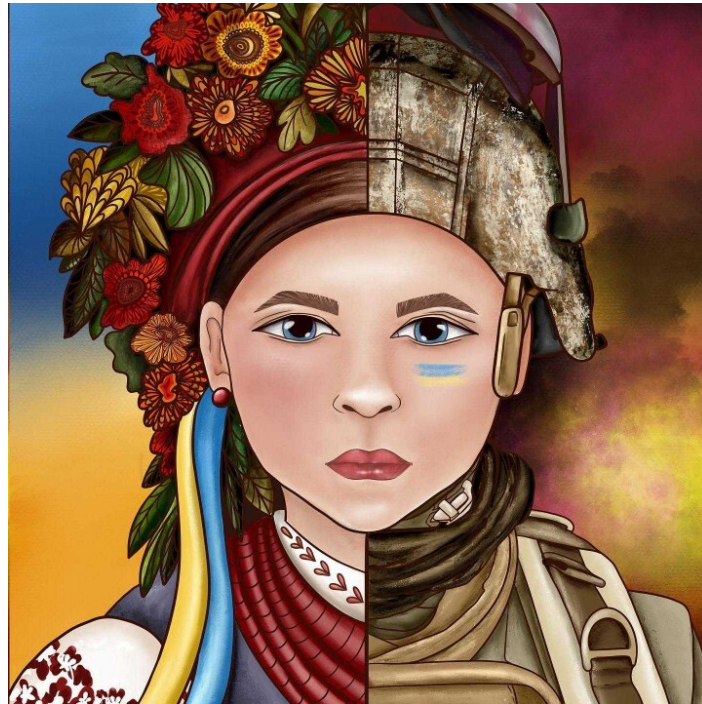


Figure 1. Art by Kateryna Drobroer

In fact, the war of Russia against Ukraine started in 2014 when they annexed Crimea and occupied the Eastern part of our country. Or I'd rather say, the war started a long time ago. And it hasn't been a conflict over territories but a centuries-long confrontation of values and mindsets.

However, with the full-scale russists¹ invasion in February of 2022, war became a daily experience for all Ukrainians and many other people in the world. The experience we had never had before.

Being a stranger at home

Several hours later that day I was standing in front of the window observing missiles flying in all directions, looking at the deserted city and thinking that there was nothing left from my 'yesterday's' life and that all of us had moved into a completely different, weird reality.

Many things seemed to lose their sense and both the past and the future became an illusion. I was thinking that nothing, not a single thing from my previous life had survived and... at that very moment I saw my neighbour, an old man with a stick, walking slowly by my window with his dog as was

¹ 'russists' is a neologism combining Russian + fascists. Please, note, I write "russia" with a small letter, as it is used by many people in Ukraine. Also, in September 2023 the National Commission on State Language Standards officially confirmed the name of the aggressor country can be written in lowercase letters in unofficial texts. I think they were very much influenced by us! Language is also a battlefield...

their daily ritual. I was amazed... I thought “In the middle of this paramount uncertainty there are things that depend on us! Wait, some of my daily rituals can also continue to be performed and I should create new ones”.

And that is what I did. For instance, every day I took my bike and travelled to the park, a 15-minute ride from my house. There I met with my friend, we walked in the park, shared news, feelings and thoughts and then I rode back home.

The question “*What are your old and new daily rituals? How are they helpful to you and others?*” became one that I ask frequently since the beginning of the war. People share different stories, but they always find it to be a good exercise because it helps them to realise that there *are* things under their control.

But what to do with so many things that were not under my control? How to live in a shaky world, where anything and everything can change at any minute? How can I continue doing what I had been doing professionally?



Figure 2. Monument to [Princess Olga in Kyiv](#). Her message: “I need armour!” (Photo: Victoria Spashchenko)

When answers to the question “What do you want INSTEAD?” are too obvious....

I was sure that SF thinking and communication would work well and be very helpful and useful, but should I introduce any adjustments? Should I practise it differently?

For instance, the question “What do you want *instead?*” was one of my “favourites” before the war. But now, in the war, many answers to it are too obvious: people want their killed family, their destroyed houses, broken relationships and ruined lives back. And it is not possible.



Figure 3. Window in Lviv, August 2023. (Photo: Victoria Spashchenko)

So, in many cases the question *What do you want instead?* was transformed into *"How do you want to feel instead?"* and *"How do you want to think instead?"*. These two shift the focus to internal experiential exploration and learning rather than speculations about the things beyond your control.

They help to concentrate on personal responses to often dramatic and traumatic changes, explore inner resources to cope and investigate into alternative thinking modes that create a better reality within the given context.

I talk to a person, she says: "Our neighbour's house was bombed and partially destroyed yesterday and I'm afraid the same might happen to ours". The question "What do you want instead?" is irrelevant and sounds out of place here. So, I say: "I understand your concerns, the war is terrible and can easily make us think out of fear. How is this thinking helpful for you now?" She thinks out loud and comes to the conclusion that the "catastrophy speculation" is not really helpful because it only makes her weaker and powerless, attracts misfortunes and makes things generally worse.

The question "How do you want to think *instead*, so that it's more helpful and healthy for you now?", on the contrary, invites a person to recognise the crucial importance of beliefs we create, review their thinking patterns, reconsider what is possible, feel more confident, and gain more control over their lives.

Or take the question "How did you solve similar problems before?". Most of the challenges we have been facing during the war were never present in our past, and we don't have ready-made answers.

So, rather than referring to past experiences, I decided to pioneer looking at the ones we have been creating now. *“What helpful experience for the present and the future are you creating now?”* I noticed that this question helps people in their search for meaning and sense and re-connects them to their strengths and makes them proud and more powerful.

Scale - not always from 0 to 10? Or a flexible Scale?

We often use a scale from 0 to 10 to help people locate themselves on their way to progress. What I learned is that we should offer people to come up with their own scales.

I remember talking with a woman who lived for almost two months in the cellar of their house escaping from bombs and russian terrorists. When I met her virtually, she had moved to a safer place and she was looking for a job, so we were discussing that. At a certain point, I asked her: “On a scale from 0 to 10, how confident you are that you will find a job soon?”

And she asked: “Is it possible that we use a different scale?” “Sure, I said, but why? What’s wrong with this one?” And she said there were 10 steps in the cellar... since then I always ask people about their preferred scale.

I would suggest we experiment more with a flexible scale. I think it better supports a client-focused culture. A client who is not offered a ready-made scale but chooses their own, individual one would probably feel more comfortable with it, has more ownership and is more eager to cooperate, don’t you think?

A power of a single question

We were exchanging messages with my friend who was fighting against russists on the front line. He wrote: “The war is now my life and although I realise the important purpose of my being here, it’s a waste of time for me as a professional” I asked him: *“What if it’s not?”* There was a long pause in our communication, and I was getting worried that I disappointed the dialogue by making “a wrong move”. But then he came back to me: “Thanks for the great question, I have been thinking about it. I’ve changed my perception of myself as a professional”.

One question is often enough to enable a transformation.

Positive gossiping as a mantra

I remember that in March 2022, one of the then advisers to the President of Ukraine said: “The russian army is not strong, it is just very long.” You can argue with that statement, but you can’t deny its impact.

Wars are happening and communicated. We are influenced and we influence. I think that in Ukraine we have been speaking an SF language. The war is terrible, but we take the challenge, our fight and our global mission have deep sense, we will win because we are spiritually strong, united, unbreakable, and invincible together, the world supports us, and justice is on our side.

Opposite the house I live in there is a kindergarten and one of my neighbours works there. Every time there is an air raid siren, I see kids running to the shelter and after the all-clear, returning to their premises. I asked my neighbour what they communicated to kids and this is what she shared: "We say: "The air raid siren is a signal to go to the shelter and stay safe. It also means that our military note a threat and neutralise it. They defend us. We are thankful." And then when they are back from the shelter: "All sirens are clear. We are safe. You coped so well! How have you done it? / You did..... We were all together and we managed! Well done, kids!"

Messages of strength, power and encouragement are everywhere, you hear them from media, businesses, and people around. Are they said and heard by *everyone* in Ukraine? I don't think so. We are different and attract only what we are. Now you are looking through my lenses and obviously, people with my type of mentality and vibe are many, otherwise we would have lost the battle already. When I call someone and the line is busy, I hear "Sorry, the line is busy, but maybe this particular conversation brings us closer to victory". I fill in a Google form to register for an event and at the bottom of the page I read: "Ukraine's victory is unquestionable for all clear-minded people in the world. We wish us all peace and Victory!". I go to the theatre and on the roof of it I see the slogan: "The war will end. Ukraine will win". These examples are numerous and result in a "strange" but prognosed situation when victims (us) feel powerful winners and invaders (russists) feel miserable victims. "Yes, we can!" we say and act. Positive gossiping works

Thankfulness is another mantra here. We are grateful to our defenders, volunteers, energy engineers, transport workers, our partners, and supporters....., we are thankful for the experience we have and every new day we are presented with.

Thus, when my colleagues and friends from other countries say they feel sorry or pity for me, my immediate reaction is "Why?" When they say I demonstrate spiritual strength, resilience, and confidence, I face challenges without fear (I can still be afraid) and invest continuous effort in what makes paramount sense for me and us: Victory, I accept it, am grateful and I feel and act powerful.

Our supporters and partners have been strengthening us with ammunition, finances and humanitarian aid. They should also remember about the power of resourceful talk that helps us to be people who are able to create miracles 😊.

SF-Light or 'You never know how BIG your small effort is'

Some of you know that I'm a self-appointed manager of the SF-Ukraine project. I have been working and talking with different audiences and individuals promoting SF thinking and communication. (Sometimes I'm asked if I'm not afraid of the scale of the project. I am not. A path to any goal, big or small, is just a chain of small steps and you only focus on one



Figure 4. I'm OK. Art by Anna Sarvira

at a time). I talked a little bit about this project when I participated in a workshop with Mark McKergow and Peter Röhrig at SOLWorld 2019 in Budapest (McKergow & Röhrig, 2022).

Two years after I started my project, I arrived at the concept that I called “**SF-Light**”. It emerged one day when after a full day of training in SFA I asked myself a question: **“Do people really need to know and understand all the details of the SFA to start applying it?”** And my answer was “NO”. We know that sometimes we just need to invite people to *notice* little “good things” or elements of desired changes in their lives or ask a single question that leads to an “aha” moment or participate in co-constructing a preferred future.... These seem to be “small SF-injections” but they make a difference and create a network of people who spread an SF word around. Of course, those are their interpretations of the SFA but isn’t great that they facilitate positive changes in the world?

Being present is important. Not as a specialist, not as an advisor and even not as a supporter. Being present as *an energy* that creates a space for transformation.

My problem with a miracle question

In Ukraine, I’ve always had problems with the miracle question. It can be best illustrated by my dialogue with a teenager long before the war. I asked him a miracle question and he demanded a clarification: “Do you mean what *I* have to do to make a miracle happen?”.

You see, it’s not that we, Ukrainians, don’t believe in miracles. It’s just that we believe that before it happens you have to create it yourself. How can you do that?

I believe we create reality out of our state of mind. If you desire a change, you should first create a mental capacity that allows what you want to happen. You can only do what you believe is possible, don't you? Miracles, as many of us see them here, do not come out 'all of the blue', they are the results of the changes you have introduced to your mindset, thinking patterns, and your 'allowance capacity' (do you allow yourself to be treated to a miracle?).

In a traditional miracle question we admit that it is a result of a mysterious "outside power". In my case, I shift the focus to the inside power and the ability to create miracles internally and then manifest them outside. It's about empowering people to become magicians for themselves.

I don't know if what I ask **INSTEAD** of the miracle question could be interpreted as a modification of it or maybe I totally misunderstand the whole concept 😊. I go straight for: **"Imagine, what you want has already happened. How did you do that?"**.

At the first instant the person can be taken aback - but then, as my experience proves, most people enjoy exploring their "magic powers"

Conclusions

The SFA demonstrates a convincing power in war time. However, in the context that is very different from peaceful environments, an SF practitioner should become more flexible, open to fast adaptations and experimenting without fear of "misinterpretation of the SFA".

I was writing this article with you all in mind. I have learned so much from you! And I'm so grateful for all the support and encouragement you have been generously giving me during many years, and the last two+ difficult years, in particular. If my war experiments and discoveries could serve you, it would be just a modest payback for all the professional and personal good energies you have been sharing with me.

Our war is still in progress and unfortunately, conflicts in other parts of the world have burst out. The SFA proves to be a valuable resource and a highly applicable tool to navigate through the most turbulent times to the preferred future.

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