

Celebrating 20 Years!



A collection of short stories by a few of our Appreciative Inquiry Facilitator Training graduates to celebrate 20 years of creating trust and opening lines of communication for individuals and organizations.

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Appreciative inquiry Story: A Church Intervention using AI

Submitted by: Rev. Dr. Sharon Barley

When I signed up for Appreciative Inquiry Training in the summer of 2006, I was primarily thinking of working with organizations that were stuck or in conflict. However, my AI training along with my training in executive coaching and systems thinking have propelled me into situations far beyond what I could have imagined as a local pastor, or a consultant with a prominent health care system focusing on employee retention and leadership development, and as an executive and pastoral coach to a diverse group of people. I have witnessed how Appreciative Inquiry has transformed entire departments and inspired volunteer groups to move from negative attitudes and a sense of hopelessness to very positive attitudes and energetic feelings of hope for their future.

Shortly after my training in Appreciative Inquiry, I was appointed to a declining and troubled church as an Intentional Interim Minister. St. Paul's is a very large grey-stone church built in the late 19th century with beautiful old-style etched stained glass windows. The church is situated in the middle of a small, yet busy town. My initial six-month assignment was to stabilize the conflict and bring parties together for reconciliation. I used Appreciative Inquiry as a way of engaging individuals who were highly anxious, and as a means for sermon preparation and a strategy for communicating the core values and strengths of this struggling congregation.

The 6-month intervention helped the congregation to refocus after major conflicts had ensued for over two-three years. Just before I arrived, they had lost over half their membership and were down to about 90 people in attendance every Sunday. They lost the entire children's and youth ministry and all the younger parents. They lost most of their leaders who held positions of prominence on all the committees including major Chair positions. Because of the infighting, they gained a very negative reputation in their small community and as a result were low on the welcoming gage. St. Paul's was also culturally conservative in an increasingly progressive community. The congregation that remained after the dust settled from

dissension and conflict averaged 60 years in age. The current reality was sobering: If they didn't change, the church would not exist in 10-15 years.

The church turned the corner and began to look to their future. People reconciled with one another. The system appeared less depressed by their losses, and once again, the people found hope in an upbeat and positive environment that assured them of grace and forgiveness, and love and hope for a future. Because of the dramatic turn-around in only six months, I was reappointed for another year to help then refocus their efforts on forging a vision and mission statement as well as discovering their best stories and best practices. I began two months after my reassignment with a church-wide Appreciative Inquiry. Twenty-four people showed up for a Saturday morning breakfast and to participate in an intensive 4-hour workshop on using the Appreciative Inquiry. The results were electrifying! The small group of twenty-four took three interviews each and over the next 4 weeks committed to interviewing one member that left the church and two who remained. We had full participation with 100% of the interviews turned in.

After all the information was gathered, I formed a leadership and vision task force. For the next 9-months, the team met every month for 2-hours as more formal and strategic appreciative inquiry was initiated to gather the themes from all the interviews, best stories and "quotable quotes." After several provocative propositions were written, goals were formed in the form of a vision and mission statement. This would prove to be the road map from which all ministry opportunities would be initiated. As my year came around during the completion of this task, the church had grown and was on course to move forward with vision and a renewed sense of mission. They asked me to stay another year to lead them through a renovation that would be their next potential growing edge for being a healing presence in their community. I remained another year to help them put into practice their core values, vision and mission from the Appreciative Framework in which it was created.

Before the Appreciative Inquiry process began, their options for restoration and renewal seemed few. However, after compositing all the interviews, creative options began to emerge in their best stories. They suddenly were faced with more

options and less obstacles. Every obstacle was explored, again with options for addressing them. The vision and leadership task force was comprised of leaders on all the committees, along with key stakeholders and investors. Using group coaching and systems thinking enhanced the overall appreciative inquiry, as training helped them move forward when things seemed impossible. Very practical and stretching steps were mapped out to find patterns and strengths so that the church could successfully reach their shared goals.

The result of the nine-month Appreciative Inquiry opened the doors for creative thinking and innovation. The result of the process was the envisioning of a new ministry on Saturday Nights that had far reaching social implications. Only three-months after forging the vision and mission statement that was processed through a nine -month Appreciative Inquiry, the church held a Grand Opening concert showing their new renovated space called the Art & Soul Café! Admission was set at only a can or box of food for the local food banks. Donations are free will offerings. All the food provided is prepared each Saturday night by the people of the church. Local and unknown artists are supported with shows in the new gallery space. Local musicians come to showcase their talent by having a venue and a live recording for their own distribution. People from the community attend who cannot go to church on Sunday mornings, and others who would never go to church as it is so defined. The church has doubled in attendance over my 2-1/2 years as an Intentional Interim Pastor.

The process of asking appreciative unconditional positive questions along with a strategic focus that utilizes good coaching skills and preaching/teaching strategies for change provided opportunities that have turned this sleepy, little conflicted church into a vibrant, growing and progressive community.

Submitted by: Richard "RJ" Johnson,
Quantum Vision Consulting and Lake Sumter Community College

Introduction

Lake Sumter Community College is a relatively small, very student-oriented community college located about fifty minutes northwest of Orlando, Florida. In the spring of 2006, I approached Tim Kane, the Executive Director of Human Resources about doing some teambuilding. Instead, he suggested that I conduct the review of the Faculty Rank and Promotion (FR&P) process. Teachers and staff were completing the initial two years of work to put the process in place and it was time to review the process and plan for the upcoming year.

The Challenge

Little did I know at the time I agreed to facilitate the review, just how contentious the creation of the Faculty Rank and Promotion system had been. I had not been involved with the process and had previously spoken only to one person about it. As I began to talk with some of the various individuals involved, in particular the chair of the committee, Dr. Gary Sligh, I began to find out just what a challenge this seemingly simple review would be. People began to share stories of how the creation of the FR&P system had polarized faculty into two strongly opinionated camps.

The Goal

On the other hand, the goal of the process review was to move into the next school year and have people, in particular, faculty supporting the FR&P process as well as having teachers willing to go through the process. In order to do this effectively, it was important to involve as many past participants as possible.

The Solution

To create the various deliverables for each phase of appreciative inquiry, I relied heavily on The Appreciative Inquiry Summit by Ludema, et al. After finalizing the interview with Tim Kane from Human Resources, he created pairs for the interviews and distributed the interview by email along with a brief introduction to appreciative inquiry (AI). Participants were instructed to interview their partners

and be prepared to talk about the interviews when we all convened. Due to scheduling challenges, it was necessary to split our meetings across two consecutive weeks.

In the first meeting, after a few more words about AI such as sharing Marge Schiller's Avon of Mexico story, we debriefed the interviews by sharing peak stories and success factors, first at tables of eight and then with the whole group. Then, we began the dream phase with each group brainstorming a list of dream elements and then crafting their dream statements. Everyone made significant progress by the time the first meeting was over and agreed to work during the intervening week on a creative presentation of each group's dream. We wrapped up with a spokesperson from each group sharing a little bit about their group's dream. It was during this time that some presenters chose to share what they didn't want to see in the future and this is where some of the past contentiousness began to creep back into the process.

Before the next meeting, both the chair and one of the group's dream presenters informed me of their reluctance to attend the second session. After personally meeting with each of these individuals and encouraging their attendance, I was pleased to see them both at the second session. Additionally, some of the other "campers" had decided not to attend the second session.

To kick off the session, I wanted to dramatically emphasize the importance of "following the rules," in this case, the rule of staying future and possibility oriented. To be sure that I made my point, I had turned on my cell phone and at a prearranged time, shortly after everyone's arrival, had a friend at the college give me a brief call. This got everyone's attention. I then asked if any of them had rules for cell phone use in their classes and their reasons for such rules. They of course said yes. After explaining that appreciative inquiry was no different and had reasons for its rules, I reminded them to be sure that everything they said was unconditionally positive and would help bring out the best in each other.

After this introduction, the second session got off to a great start with each group presenting their dream representation. The most interesting and fun approach was a poem by the committee chair, "If Faculty Rank and Promotion were

Orange Marmalade.” Yes, you had to be there to fully appreciate the humor and poignancy.

We then moved into the design phase and the entire group contributed to a design element “goose egg” (see *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination* by Watkins and Mohr). Each person then starred the top three design elements they felt had the greatest potential for bringing their dreams into reality. Next, they self-selected into different design group based on their interests. Then each group brainstormed about the various design issues that would impact and were impacted by their dream on their own “goose eggs.”

After each group created a list of design elements for their particular dream, they created provocative propositions and shared them with the entire group. At this point, they could switch groups before moving into the destiny phase but everyone chose to stay with their same design group.

The destiny phase provided each group with the opportunity to talk about concrete ways to implement their dreams in the upcoming school year. By the end of this time, the room was buzzing due to the high degree of creativity and participation.

The Results

Here is what two of the participants had to say about the review process. First, we will hear from the Chairman of the Faculty Rank and Promotion process.

Though the rank and promotion idea was often contentious here at the college, and though many came into the Appreciative Inquiry sessions with very low initial expectations, I can say without a doubt that the process did help bring our folks together in a positive manner and helped us to evaluate and plan for the future of the Rank and Promotion system with a high degree of effectiveness.

From my own perspective as chair of the Rank and Promotion Committee, when we came to the final evaluation, I was quite weary and attended the first session with very little enthusiasm. Some of the same negative contention crept into that first session, making me even more uncomfortable. But by the time we reassembled for the second session, I saw a room of folks filled with enthusiasm and hope for the future. I would not have predicted such a turnaround, and I am pleased

to report that the Appreciative Inquiry approach delivered as promised – it moved a process filled with negative energy to one with positive and helpful suggestions to move forward.

Now, a few words from the person that got me involved with this ultimately challenging but very fun process, Tim Kane.

The Appreciative Inquiry process facilitated by Dr. R J Johnson has been effective in enabling positive change with LSCC's Faculty Rank & Promotion system after a very turbulent installment. Dr Johnson's use of AI helped turn negative attitudes and actions back into a positive direction for continuous improvement. As a result of the work through AI, the system's strengths have been enhanced more and new possibilities brought to fruition. The system is more stably established and will continue to improve. I'm convinced that had AI not been employed the new Faculty Rank system after two years of work would have been in serious jeopardy of collapse.

Success Factors

Appreciative inquiry was the main factor for these successes. It enabled people for the most part to overlook past grievances and creatively plan for the future. Another factor that paved the way for a gracious and productive second meeting was missing participants. While some may argue that it helps to have as many voices in the room as possible, in this case, that was not true. Some of the non-attendees were the same ones that contributed to as Dr. Sligh said above, "the same negative contention [that] crept into that first session." By the end of our time together, every one of the participants was involved in a group planning to take one of the various goal areas forward in the next year.

Submitted by: Gloria Mbiha

As a result of the seminar on appreciative inquiry, I gained and learned a number of things which will be and has been beneficial to me personally and as a professional.

Personally, I have grown a lot as a result. This has taught me to look at things more positively in that case to change my attitude of looking or facing different challenges I face in my day to day life. Whether it is problems at office or problems with family members or friends, looking at things from a positive angle, makes everything a lot easier.

For instance, in the view of my professional life as an economist and looking at the current economic crisis, I have had to attend different meetings or seminars where most people talk on how the effect has negatively affected their countries or companies. Recently I have had to fill several questionnaires concerning the crisis. As a result of the appreciative inquiry, my view was different in responding to the questions, and my perspective has been different. While responding I tried to show that may be people and experts should start looking at the crisis in positive manner even though it has affected the whole world. There is a saying that goes; every cloud has a silver lining, hence we should relate in this case that, while looking for solutions for solving the crisis, we should realize that there are some opportunities that may come with the situation. For example; this situation will help business people, investors, policy makers and planners to be careful in any future activities and to plan very careful for the long time to come. On the other hand, may be everyone should take this as an opportunity to learn and always to have a plan B for every situation. I have not received feedback from my outlook on the crisis including the questionnaires I have filled. This may be because the situation is still being solved but I believe we will get there.

So, briefly that is my story, I have learned a lot and much appreciation goes to the organizers of this kind of trainings and lessons. May the knowledge spread everywhere and reach as many people as possible.

Translating Inspiration into Reality: My Journey of Exploring the Possibilities of Appreciative Inquiry in the Midst of the AIDS Crisis in Africa

Submitted by: Ryna Olanan

In the field of social work, we are forever discussing how to translate theory into practice; we explore the journey and achievement of rendering true praxis. I still remember when I came to my own personal revelation on this contentious debate. I was a graduate student completing my Masters in Social Work and interested in embarking upon an international development career. To this end, I wanted to develop my own governance project working with children and youths impacted by HIV/AIDS (human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) in Africa. I had just learned about a relevant grant award funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and I was eager to pursue this opportunity. Having worked as a social worker with refugee families impacted by HIV/AIDS from countries all over the world, including Africa, developing such a project was important to me. However, I was at an ethical standstill. I did not want to be another Westerner going to Africa to point out all that is wrong in an effort to find solutions on how to purportedly fix it; the stench of colonialism inherent in this framework is simply too strong for my taste. The families that I have worked with in Canada have honoured me by telling me their stories and through these stories I have learned about resilience, strength, courage and love. In return, I wanted to honour these stories and similar stories that can be told throughout Africa. This was my opportunity to go to Africa and pursue a unique project which highlighted everything that is right with Africa in an effort to move forward with it and even build upon it. However, with all of these grandiose ideas in my head, my struggle was not simply to translate theory into practice anymore, but how to translate inspiration into reality. How can human inspiration, and passion even, manifest itself into effective results with people? I found my answer one day as I was sitting in my social work leadership and management class. The professor Elizabeth Jones was facilitating a module on processes for whole

systems change when I was first presented with the possibilities of appreciative inquiry and it was within these possibilities that I finally found my answer.

I developed a project focusing on the capacity-building of The AIDS Support Organization Uganda's (TASO) AIDS Challenge Youth Club (ACYC). As the future of both TASO and Uganda, it is my contention that the growth and strengthening of this program is pivotal to the success of the future governance of this organization and the country and its people that it seeks to foster. The youth members of the ACYC represent a young and productive generation with the promise to rebuild Uganda by learning how to discover their personal sources of pride and move forward with refreshing resilience and renewed hope.

So it was through the vessel of AI that I was able to build both a foundation and a starting point in which to launch this project in a fashion that would jumpstart it with a positive momentum that was to be continually and organically fuelled and reenergized throughout the process. In the end, I received the grant award and found myself flying to Uganda, Africa in September 2008, instilled with hope and excited to experiment the utility of AI in an international development context. Through our correspondence, the administration and management of TASO indicated to me that they were thrilled about my project and at the prospect of learning about AI and if it would indeed be effective within their unique context. After all, the idea that a whole systems change process that invoked strengths-based practice and language, in a field of practice filled with the realities and atrocities of HIV/AIDS was difficult for many to conceive of. Thus, my first plan of action for this project needed to be strong. I decided to facilitate an appreciative inquiry conference inviting ACYC youth representatives from across the Eastern region of Uganda.

So it was in a small social hall in Mbale, Uganda, where appreciative inquiry introduced the language of possibilities, as children and youth, many of whom had traveled great distances to attend, were guided through a process of discovering, dreaming and designing. And what a process it was! The electricity to the hall came and went. The generator ran out of fuel. The public address system that we used was faulty at best. Goats and chickens crashed the venue. Village children came

running and screaming inside and out of the room. The caterer arrived three hours late. And a rain and thunderstorm audibly howled outside the building. However, through the chaos, excitement of the possibilities powerfully persevered and permeated through the room. Dividing themselves into small groups, the participants sat in circles passing around a symbolic candle as they related stories of their proudest moment being members of the ACYC; as they told their stories, their shining light became practically visible. The children then presented their vision and dreams for the ACYC and other children impacted by HIV/AIDS all over Africa using song, dance, poetry and skits. The positive energy was palpating. Using that energy and invigoration from the peer presentations, they then regrouped to embark upon the act of designing. They engaged in a dialogical process building upon each other's designs. And finally, the children were facilitated into isolative peace, giving them an opportunity to learn how to kindle and foster that external energy within their internal selves and hearts, and so they put pen to paper and explored in personal journals their destinies.

And it was the information and energy gleaned from this phenomenal conference that was used to fuel the rest of this project. From this conference, a peer leader program was developed which included peer education and peer counseling modules with training manuals, brochures and workshops. And as the children that I was working with learned to embrace their destinies, they decided to empower themselves and become their own nationally recognized and registered organization. To this end, we not only initiated this process together, but we also started an income-generating activity in order to ensure their sustainability. The kids took their original music from the conference and since inspired from the conference and recorded their own music album.

So as I eventually left Uganda and said good-bye to the kids that I was working with, one youth stepped out to thank me. He said that I was their "candle lighter in the darkness...in a time of despair" and that through AI, I showed them that not only did they have strengths to be proud of and that "dreaming is possible" but that their "destinies were achievable". And now, as I sit here back in Canada and am being given this opportunity to reflect back on this experience, I can still feel the

core positive energy radiating...I am excited to learn what future opportunities that these kids will embark upon now that they are armed with renewed hope and possibilities made possible by AI.

Donna Reihl, The Community College of Baltimore County

The Girl Scouts of Central Maryland used AI for their strategic planning. I with the staff to plan for the day at the Community College of Baltimore County. Invited were staff, volunteers, girls, and board members. It was a rare beautiful, warm, January day, and we had full participation. By the end of the day, we had filled the walls with ideas, as well as narrowed our focus to develop our future. The energy in the room was extraordinary, and the group of about 90 bonded. Many of the low hanging fruit was completed within the first three months, and a long term three year strategic plan was developed and presented to all. It was inclusive, engaging, positive, energetic, and crossed generations. Everyone had a buy in to the organization's future. Everyone that day had an ah hah moments, and the ability to accentuate the positive, while telling our stories, was definitely what we needed for all to be vested in change, in moving forward, and to developing the best of the best for the girls of central Maryland. Future projects and goals were challenging but doable. Now I am board chair and it has been an adventure watching the fruits of our day's labor blossom over the last year.

Randal Joy Thompson,
Senior International Cooperation Advisor, Ministry of Planning, Baghdad,
Iraq

When I took the Appreciative Inquiry Facilitator Training in Reno in November, 2007, I never imagined that I would carry out my AI Practicum in Baghdad, Iraq! Although I had spent thirty years moving around the world as a Foreign Service Officer, I had purposed to live my retirement life consulting stateside. That was not to be! In February, 2008, I received an offer I could not refuse – to serve as Senior International Cooperation Advisor to the Ministry of Planning in Iraq. Iraq had been isolated from the world due to international sanctions and Saddam Hussein’s efforts to remain in power. Only after 2003 did they receive large sums of foreign assistance, have global trade relations, and join international organizations. The International Cooperation Unit in the Ministry was hence only established in 2003. Staff possessed little knowledge regarding how international organizations and donors worked and how to effectively deal with them.

I arrived in Baghdad in a military C-130 cargo plane, landing in a spiral pattern that made my stomach queasy. Nine well-armed South African PSDs (personal security details) met me in three armored Jeeps. They wrapped me in a bullet-proof vest, placed a helmet on my head and drove me to our compound in the “red zone.” There, carved out by 10 foot high concrete T-walls in the former Beverly Hills of Baghdad was a street lined with about twenty five villas. Each of the about 150 international consultants on the compound lived in a room in one of the houses and ate in a common dining facility. About sixty Angolan soldiers and thirty Iraqi guards protected us in addition to about sixty South African commandos who drove us to our various destinations. This was to become, and still is, my home.

My visits to the Ministry of Planning had to be scheduled several days in advance because I could only go there with the three armored vehicles and nine PSDs who had to accompany me in my meetings with my ministry counterparts. I felt embarrassed to go to the Ministry with such an entourage and understood why

the Iraqis called us “the occupiers,” but we had no choice because insurgents were still kidnapping and killing foreigners. The Director of the International Cooperation Unit was a woman, fluent in English and extremely well educated and savvy. I immediately knew my experience in Iraq was going to be a positive one. Most of her thirty staff was young, having just graduated from the university. The Ministry historically had been an extension of Sadaam’s rule and hence staffed by high level Bathist party members who fled the country after 2003, leaving a large staffing vacuum. The Ministry was anxious to change their culture and their image and be seen more like a coordinator of national planning rather than a dictator. Interestingly, about 80 percent of the Ministry’s staff were and had been historically women. My first task was to provide the staff a knowledge base regarding the world of donors and international organizations through a series of lectures. The next challenge was to help them decide a future for their unit. Appreciative inquiry seemed like the best approach.

I expected to facilitate an AI process with the thirty staff of the International Cooperation Unit who I had developed a positive working relationship with. But the Director could not let the entire group participate because of work demands. So, thirty participants from many units of the Ministry of Planning showed up for the process. I was nervous because I had no relationship with most of the participants and had no idea how they would respond to the process or work together. Surprising, the experience turned out to be very positive and productive. It changed my life and made me realize that AI is the most suitable approach to help people emerging from conflict and war to design their future. I had been in Iraq long enough to know that everyone in the room had lost at least one family member to the violence which rocked the country after 2003, and I knew that all of them deeply resented the “occupation.” They risked their lives to be associated in any way with Americans.

The AI process lasted five days. The entire group of participants engaged in interviews on the first day of the AI and identified five topics of inquiry: team work, expertise/knowledge sharing, fighting corruption, identification of responsibilities, and time management. As the process proceeded over the next several days, it

became clear that the overarching topic of inquiry concerned team work, since the provocative proposition for team work incorporated the other areas. The reframed positive topics of inquiry included: “productive team work,” “open and effective knowledge sharing,” “taking a stand against corruption,” “working with clear division of responsibilities,” and “clear and reasonable time management.”

Many life-giving forces were listed for each topic of inquiry. Some identified as the “core” life-giving forces for productive team work included “inspirational and effective leadership,” “clear designation of team member responsibilities,” “sportsmen-like spirit,” “success orientation,” “shared expertise between members and between seasoned staff and new staff,” “creation of a “transparency between team members,” “accountability of team members,” and “justice between team members.”

The provocative proposition for team work was: “Sportsmen-like spirited and highly professional teams succeeding with inspirational and effective leadership and accountable team members clear about their responsibilities, transparently and justly sharing knowledge and expertise, successfully accomplishing tasks within specified time frames and being rewarded for excellence.” The group sketched their visual images of the provocative propositions for each topic and I enjoyed watching them joke and laugh and insert humor into their images. I started seeing a powerful life force emerging from their interaction.

What amazed me was that the entire group identified an area which had been totally anathema under Saddam’s rule, namely team work with a high degree of authenticity and principles. They clearly wanted a new future for Iraq. In an environment of uncertainty and fear, I saw the group get exhilarated with hope and the driving belief that they could make a difference, that they were empowered in a way not allowed under the previous regime. I realized that if we had focused on a problem-solving approach that the group would have become mired in the negativity and hopelessness of their situation and not been able to carve a way forward. They would have been going in circles. I recognized that AI is the most appropriate approach for recovering states to move forward and this made be truly delight in the process!