

# **Taking a Stand Against Corruption in the Red Zone with Appreciative Inquiry**



**Practicum Submitted By:**  
Randal Joy Thompson

## **Report on Appreciative Inquiry Session To Obtain Certification as an AI Facilitator**

**Randal Joy Thompson**

1. I am working in Baghdad, Iraq on a US funded project to help rebuild the management capacity of Iraqi ministries and of the civil service at large. I am working with the Ministry of Planning's International Cooperation (ICD) and Project Follow-Up Directorates. The ICD is comprised of 30 young professionals. The ICD Director General is a very savvy fluent English-speaking woman with considerable experience. After the 2003 war, many of the senior bureaucrats fled the country. This is why the ICD staff is so young and inexperienced. The mandate of the ICD is to coordinate all donor assistance entering into Iraq. The Director General of the Project Follow-Up Directorate is young and ambitious and the protégé of the Minister. He is currently the Advisor to the Minister but also manages his Directorate. His Directorate has six young staff. After 2003, donors pledged over a trillion dollars in assistance to help reconstruct the country. Receiving foreign assistance is a new phenomenon for Iraq. Prior to 2003, Iraq was a donor country. Since Saddam Hussein kept the country isolated from the rest of the world, Iraqis have not developed skills in dealing with foreigners, and especially with donors. Furthermore, many donors, most notably the Americans, have refused to follow the guidelines issued by Paul Bremer that all donors must get approval for their projects from the Ministry of Planning's International Strategic Review Board (ISRB). Staff from both the International Cooperation and Follow-Up Directorates review donor project proposals and make recommendations to the Review Board whether to approve the projects or not.

As a background, the Ministry of Planning was the most powerful and influential Ministry under Saddam's rule, since the country and economy was centrally planned and operated. Most of the senior staff of the Ministry were Bathists and were removed during the Debathification process which Paul Bremer led, and fled the country, went into hiding in the country, or joined the insurgents.

I am responsible for helping to develop the capacity of the International Cooperation and Follow-Up Directorates to work with donors and to influence their selection of projects for Iraq and to move Iraqis into a position of more authority over what donors do in their country as well as to evaluate donor projects to assure that such projects succeed. I have been giving knowledge-building seminars in the world of international development and donor assistance so that staff can understand the history, organizations, modus operandi, and project development process of donors. I am also helping the International Cooperation Directorate to reorganize and divide the 30 total number of staff into one of three units: the project unit which will be responsible for screening donor projects; the donor coordination unit which will liaise with donors; and the IT unit which will house a Donor Assistance Database. I am also working with the Follow-Up Directorate Staff to help them build project monitoring and evaluation skills.

2. I had originally planned to facilitate an appreciative inquiry with the International Cooperation Directorate. However, the Director General of the Directorate would only release seven of her staff to participate. So, my Project Assistant contacted other Directorates of the Ministry to obtain more participants. At first, I was reluctant to do this, but then decided to try to work with other Directorates as an “experiment.” Actually the International Cooperation and Follow-Up directorates are required to work with other Directorates of the Ministry in project review and evaluation. When the International Cooperation Directorate receive donor project proposals, they send the proposal to the relevant technical directorate of the ministry for review and comment so having staff from multiple directorates participate in the AI made sense. Staff from several Directorates participated in the AI, including the Directorates for Housing and Construction, Regional Planning, Agriculture, Communications, and Economic Planning. Twenty-one participated.

3. The entire group of participants engaged in interviews on Day One of the Appreciative Inquiry 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 interview method employed on the first day consisted of one-on-one interviews, discussions in two-pair groupings, and then overall discussion. Interviews consisted of answers to the generic interview guide. The above five areas emerged as key best experiences in the organization. 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.” I tried to facilitate a rewording of the “taking a stand against corruption” into a more positive statement such as “promoting transparent and accountable practices,” but the group resisted and stated that they saw “taking a stand against corruption” as a positive topic of inquiry.

4. On Day Two, the participants engaged in the Discovery Process. The generic interview guide was employed and modified for each of the five topics of inquiry. The same four questions were asked of each topic of inquiry. The words “your organization” were substituted by each of the five topics of inquiry. Prior to interviewing, I facilitated an exercise in which participants looked at how they see themselves and reflected on how their view of themselves is projected into an inquiry. I had wanted them to make collage with photos and colors, etc., but I can not go to the market in Iraq due to security reasons and our procurement department did not procure the needed items in time for the training. Consequently, I asked the participants to think of an animal and a plant that best represented themselves and they each presented their choices to the class. Lively discussions and laughter resulted. Many of the participants chose the palm tree, an important and ancient Middle Eastern tree, to represent themselves.

5. Participants were paired off for face to face interviews on each of the five topics. Two pairs then discussed the results of the interviews and then the entire group discussed the exceptionally positive moments for each topic of inquiry.

6. Many life-giving forces were listed for each topic of inquiry. Those which were identified by dots as the “core” life-giving forces are as follows: For “productive team work,” living giving forces 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 successful event,” “effective time management,” “transparency between team members,” “accountability of team members,” “justice between team members,” “successful event planned and launched,” “rewards for successful accomplishments.” For “open and effective knowledge sharing,” life-giving forces were “mentoring by experienced supervisors,” “open and easy access to internet,” “skills enhancement by training courses,” “justice in hiring qualified staff,” “trust between team members.” Life-giving forces for “taking a stand against corruption” include “transparency of processes,” “accountability of staff,” “vigilant and effective inspector general,” “unlocking the key to administrative corruption.” Life-giving forces for “working with clear division of responsibilities” included “precise job descriptions,” “complimentary team member roles.” For time management, life giving forces were: “clear and reasonable deadlines,” “respect for deadlines,” “success in designated time.”

7. Provocative propositions were as follows: “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.” “Professional and well-selected and well-trained staff working collegially to improve and share their expertise linked up to internet and other knowledge sources.” “An organization effectively preventing and punishing both financial and administrative corruption by transparent and fair application of regulations, procedures, and processes and rapid and just dealings with violations.” “Staff with precise job descriptions working as a team with complimentary and clear roles.” “Staff succeeding within clear and reasonable deadlines.”

The group decided that the last two provocative propositions are really covered by the first proposition regarding team work.

The group was divided into five teams and each team visually represented the provocative propositions. The corruption team drew a shaggy looking man standing alone and then inside a jail cell representing what they wanted to see for those who committed financial corruption. Below these sketches they drew a locked box which represented administrative corruption. They said they could not draw a positive image because administrative corruption needs to be “unlocked.” It is a vaguely defined phenomenon and they were not sure how to represent it in a positive way. Two pictures emerged for the team building topic. One portrayed effective team work in a negative scenario. Two men on the team sketched the scene of an accident between a car and a bus. All the passengers on the bus were employing effective team work to beat up the driver of the car as he lay on the ground. The other picture, also drawn by a man, depicted two railroad tracks being built by two teams from opposite directions and not

connecting. He said this was what would happen when team work without planning was employed. Finally a young woman in the course got frustrated with the men's negative drawings and presented a positive visual for teamwork. A man on the time management team grabbed the magic markers and drew his version of time management. He drew a household scene with a woman sitting in an overstuffed chair, her baby sleeping in a cradle, and her overwrought husband cooking and cleaning the house all at once! The "artist" said this depicted maternity leave, which he considered a "waste of time." He said husbands have to do all the work while their wives sit watching television. Another man in the AI group agreed. The women were quiet. Again, a man on the knowledge sharing team drew a negative image. He drew a giant like man that represented a supervisor who had worked in the ministry for many years. On either side of him, were two small men representing junior staff recently hired. The experienced man was pouring knowledge into the heads of the two junior staff through funnels attached to their skulls. The junior men were pleading, "Please share with us your knowledge and expertise!" whereas the experienced man was saying "I will give you how much I want and when I want to!" Drawing negative images was easier and more natural for the group and I had to work to facilitate positive images which eventually they were able to envision and draw. The team objected to the term "Dream." They preferred the terms envision and imagination. They said that one has to be asleep to dream and that dreams "just come to one," whereas one is awake and active when visioning and imagining. One participant even quoted someone who said that "Dreams come from Satan and Visions Come from God." Whereas I realize that the use of words beginning with the letter "D" in AI inquiry is partly due to the desire to make the process jazzy and easy to remember, when translating the process, those speaking foreign languages may tend to look more carefully at the meaning and implications of words.

8. The next day the group maintained their five teams and drew goose eggs for each provocative proposition. At first skeptical about the good egg framework, they warmed up to the idea after they related that they were raised with the children's story of the Goose who Laid the Golden Egg and that this story gave a positive spin to the framework. Each team presented its good egg framework to the group. There ensued a long discussion about the corruption issue which was very important to the group, but stumped them to a large extent. When struggling with methods to urge others to be accountable, I told a personal story of how I tried to hold our security company accountable for investigating the thefts occurring on our compound in Iraq by sending emails asking for their investigative reports. One participant asked me if I was afraid. I told him yes, I felt afraid that I would lose my job. He said, "Well, we are afraid of losing our lives." His statement clarified the difficult situation under which Iraqis live and work and why they tend to keep their mouths closed and not take action when they see corruption going on. Also interesting, a few days after the inquiry session, I did get in trouble on my project for trying to keep our security company accountable, so I realized that even in our "free and open democracy," it is difficult to stand up.

Some of the key strategic intentions included:



Present provocative propositions and strategic intentions to the Minister of Planning and Director Generals of each Ministry Directorate and obtain their support.

Present provocative propositions and strategic intention to colleagues in participants' directorates to obtain their support and inspire them with the visions.

Meet with Director Generals regarding desired training courses.

Take personal stands against corruption.

Write job descriptions and present them to the Director Generals.

Set time parameters for work assignments and lobby for their acceptance.

9. The group has changed its attitude about their role in the organization and now feel more empowered to help initiate the team work which they envision as their ideal organization. I have met with the group regarding their desired training courses, which is the first time that they have had a voice in identifying training. The team working in the International Cooperation Directorate is working on clear job descriptions and taking control of dividing up responsibilities and working more collegially.

10. Several of the participants wanted to give a presentation to the Minister of Planning and the Director Generals regarding their Provocative Propositions and Strategic Intentions and I will help them set up this meeting. I will meet with the participants regularly and we will decide to expand participation in the Appreciative Inquiry by holding another session with more participants. I will help them celebrate by giving them each a watch which says "believe," and by inviting them for lunch in our compound. I will continue to meet with them over the next year and facilitate their actions toward their visions.

11. My wish for the inquiry was that the young professionals of the Ministry of Planning would become driven by their visions and take the initiative to garner support for their visions among their colleagues and to serve as change agents. I hoped that they would get infected with the belief that they could make a difference and that they could create a positive future for their ministry and for Iraq. I learned that I get very excited when I see people excited by their own ideas and visions and taking charge of their futures in a creative way. I got excited by the air of creativity. I recognized that I need to remain in the background as a facilitator and control my tendency to want to get in and solve an issue which may be perplexing or confusing. My personal best experience was to experience the creativity and enthusiasm unleashed by the process and to see the group working together and building a sense of team.

12. Yes, I have permission from the clients to tell their story. The Company of Expert can share this story with others.

Name: Randal Joy Thompson

Email: [rjoythompson@yahoo.com](mailto:rjoythompson@yahoo.com)