

Appreciative Inquiry - Exploring a Relationship

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This is my fourth shot at completing the assignment and I will address that process later in the paper. I worked with a married couple of a nearly 30 years relationship, Anya Kumara and Paul Moss.

Date Called: I spoke with Anya on 3 August 2010 and we agreed to meet on 6 August. She asked me to email the generic questions to her before we met since Paul was out of town and she was a bit apprehensive but curious.

Step 1: To focus the interview, Anya and Paul met with me for dinner on 6 August. We looked over the generic questions and defined the interview guide and set up a time to conduct the inquiry process: 10 August.

Step II, Discovery: Exceptionally Positive Moments Meeting: On 10 August, Paired Face-to-Face Interviews were conducted. I interviewed Anya and Paul, together and what started out as an interview with Paul melded into a free-flowing couple's interview. Mostly, I listened and sporadically jotted down summary notes. Silence and giving each participant time to formulate their thoughts was important.

Paul's story centered on his sense of "completeness" in his relationship with Anya. He said, "One scene stands out. We were walking away from the car. She was heading one way to the copy shop and I the other way to the library. We stopped half a half a block apart and smiled at each other and mouth 'Are we complete if we do not see each other again?' We both mouthed 'yes' and walked on.

He continued, "I value my sense of myself as a friend, my sense of honesty and integrity. Trustworthiness. When we are in joy together it could be a walk or doing nothing.

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Just simple not complicated. I would always feel best in this relationship if I have made Anya happy. Love is the central value in our relationship." When asked what he more of, he responded, "Sexuality in a better place than it is. Taking more time to be in a loving place." He smiled and added, "That we die close to each other."

The Design phase caused Paul to add, "Before in couple's workshops, we have written action plans and they always seem to drift. Today is the first time I have had to commit to you (Anya) and have it witnessed. That part of the inquiry seems real important to me."

Anya's story recollected their years in the candle-making business circa 1990-99. She laughed and stated, "Fun time, exploratory. We held a shared dynamic. The company was called Angelic Mercantile. And that proved prophetic. I handled the angelic and he handled the marketing. We could each explore. It served as a bridge to who we are individually. It was nurturing, challenging."

"I value that I am continually inspired by spirit. Feel alive. A quality I bring to others. Seeing their best possibility. In this relationship, I value the steadiness and spirit and groundedness. So big and yet so simple. Brought us together and keeps us together."

"Sometimes it is not easy for me to live with my complexity and parts of me that don't live in this everyday world. Sometimes I fly around I forget to land. I can be in many realms at once. The relationship brings me back to groundedness. When I see Paul's essence. A quality I am experiencing in this inquiry. Focusing on who we are. It feels very nurturing. A quality of appreciation."

She continued stating her overarching value is "unconditional love. Fully expressed lovingness with each other. This AI focuses this moment and you get to witness it."

Step III, Dream: The **Life-giving forces** were identified. For their preferred future, they wanted to have a relational feast with more peace, compassion, nurturing, and sensual closeness.

Paul and Anya created a visual image (metaphor) illustrating a tree with a winged shared heart resting on

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the upper branches. The Living Tree contained: inspiration, grace, honor, truth, love, passion, magic, and expansion. See attachment II. Together, each created a word image, a **Provocative Proposition** and then they worked as a team writing draft after draft winnowing and parsing their words. After about 25 minutes, they wrote and agreed upon: ***Our dynamic relationship nurtures and inspires love, harmony, joy, spirit, passion and magic.***

Our time together on 10 August lasted nearly 120 minutes and the design conference was scheduled due trips by the facilitator and the couple. Their homework is to develop their design; we will meet on 7 September 2010 for me to witness their design letters to each other and to discuss their commitments. Anya continued, "This (AI experience) was a bonding process and changes our relationship."

Step IV, Design: we discussed how they could make their dream happen: **attitude, process, commitments, offers, requests, structures** to turn loose their energies and passions. In the design phase, they struggled a bit until I repeated the hi-lited words. Anya said, "I like the design part. It focused me. I will write you (Paul) a letter." She asked Paul if he would reciprocate? He agreed and added, "This is a lot like couples therapy without the negatives. I am worried about the follow-through on the design." When we met on 7 September, the couple had not written letters to each other. I learned that a reminder note might have jogged their memories and spurred collective action.

There was a month break between setting the dream and our design conference. According to Anya, the design phase has "unfolded" over that time with communicating concerns and appreciation. Paul added, we are more affectionate and this has been an internal process where "I feel an ease. Her level of appreciation and level of acknowledgement is higher since we met with the AI process a month ago." Anya continued, "The seed was planted. The work has been intuitive and the intention has opened to what shows up. The possibilities. Our way of communicating has dropped the way of defending. Appreciation and gratitude are the changes. An unconscious movement."

The couple talked openly about not preparing specific "to do" lists or an action plan but rather unconscious daily communication of their design. Their designs were

seemingly Noetic responses to the Appreciative Inquiry process, openings of their hearts.

The best experience for me were: 1) presenting "What is AI?" to four different organizations: a small, local school; a Superintendent's meeting of administrators; a hospital compliance administrator and her supervisor, and to Paul and Anya. My wish was to put AI theory and our workshop guidelines into action. Tailoring my comments to four different core groups helped me understand the process and how important the focusing sessions could be: and 2) facilitating Paul and Anya's Provocative Proposition. Initially, I was apprehensive about that part of the inquiry and I sat and listened and absorbed their banter, questioning, and wordsmanship. The key intervention for me was asking them to underline their verbs and rework their statement. That sounds so clinical. I feel honored to have listened to Paul and Anya and am excited about our design conference.

Anya and Paul did give permission to share their story. I will support their efforts by checking in, being available in person or via telephone, and celebrating successes.

Attachments follow: I), the interview questions, II) Paul and Anya's visual image for their future, and III) the Pinehurst School experience to date and proposed work with Pinehurst School in the autumn.

Attachments

I. Modified Interview Questions:

1. Best Experience: Tell me a story about the best times that you have had with your partner. Looking at your entire experience, recall a time when you felt most alive or excited about your involvement. What made it an exciting experience? Who else was involved? Describe the event in detail.

2. Values: What are the things that you value most about yourself, your relationship, and your life?

- Yourself: Without being humble, what do you value most about yourself as a human being, friend, citizen, and

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partner.

- Your relationship: When are you feeling best about your relationship. What do you value about it?

- What is the single most important thing that your relationship has contributed to your life?

3. Core life-giving factor: What do you think is the core value or factor that allows the relationship to pull through during difficult times?

If this core value/factor did not exist, how would that make relationship totally different than it currently is?

4. Three Wishes: If you had three wishes for this relationship what would they be?

III. Pinehurst School AI Experience to Date

Date called: 28 March. I talked to Holly Amann, Pinehurst School secretary, for an appointment. Pinehurst School, District 94, located on Highway 66, is 21 miles east of Ashland, Oregon. The population is 21 students, K-8 serving 16 families in an widespread community nestled in a mountainous area known as "The Greensprings." The school began in 1908 and relies on a host of "multi-talented volunteers to supplement the educational program." Pinehurst is truly a "little red school house". Concerns are a diminishing population in grades K-3 and energizing the parent and community members to ensure the survival of the school and a myriad of activities.

Meeting Appointment: On 2 April I met with Lead Teacher, Russ Branson and Holly Amann, school secretary. AI was explained and I modeled a mini-AI experience with Russ. Holly opted to pass. They functioned as a defacto core team and generated their major concerns and challenges. They recommended that I meet with the Site Council that he termed as "floundering". He placed me on the 9 April monthly, council meeting agenda. The goal was to present AI as a tool for energizing the council and see if the council wanted to recommend AI for the school community.

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9 April School Site Council: I met with the five member board, explained the AI process, answered questions, and we discussed possible next steps. This process took about 30 minutes. The board asked to call me with how they want to proceed. The council opted to use the AI services in August 2010 due to time constraints and personal calendar conflicts. I valued this experience and wanted to mention that the next two times I previewed AI to groups at a superintendent's meeting and at a hospital for possible future work, I was much more confident, conversant, and succinct. I learned that modeling AI is much easier trying to explain it in detail in opening remarks.

Appreciative Inquiry and Pinehurst School

How could the council the use AI?

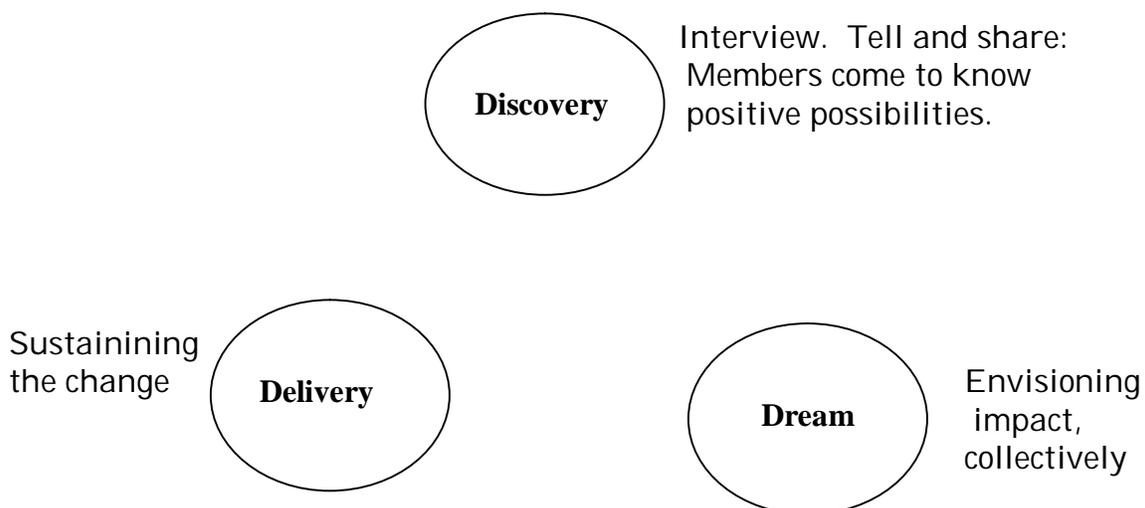
A process to energize the council and be used for shared vision building of high performance success and satisfaction. Think of AI as a conversation using in-depth questioning providing a view of how the council shapes it's future.

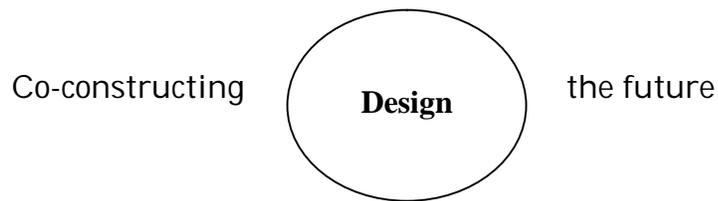
Today's Agenda: Share what is the tool of AI, Q & A.

Objective: Decide what are the next steps? Would the council like to use Appreciative Inquiry?

Cost to Pinehurst School: None.

Time: 10-15 minutes, today.





Describe Appreciative Inquiry (AI): AI is the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity in positive ways. People learn more about what contributes to times of inspiration, energy and excellence by creating images of organizational health. McDonald's, AVON, NASA, British Airways and more organizations use AI.

How is this any different from all the other "change processes"? It focuses on positives looking into the life-giving forces, generative aspects of organizational functions, rather than using the traditional pathology-oriented focus on what's wrong. AI shifts from deficit/problem analysis to strengths and values - how can we deliver the premium product, service, or education?

What are the 4 D's?

Definition phase: Client objectives: the goals or concerns articulated by a diverse core team that frame questions.

Discovery phase: Interviews: The questions are asked to elicit stories, not facts or opinions. **Valuing the best of what is.** They focus on high points of experience, life-giving properties and their structures, associated conditions and dynamics.

Dream phase: system members locate themes that appear in the stories. **Envisioning what might be - the impact.** They develop images of what their organization would look, feel, and function like when the life-giving properties become the norm rather than the exception.

Design phase: system members and agree on the principles that should guide change. **Co-constructing the future and dialoguing what should be.** They find innovative ways to create that future in the organization's socio-technical architecture and develop details of the thought to be needed changes.

Delivery phase: the organization evolves into the preferred future image created in the dream phase. **Sustaining the change- innovating what will be.**

Possible next steps.

Would each council member like to be interviewed and how?

Who should be involved with the interview data after the interviews?

Would the council like to develop the images of the preferred future?

Would the council like to be involved in the 'design' of the new organization?