

# **Discovering You at Your Best Using Appreciative Inquiry**

**Practicum Submitted By:**  
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1. Brief description of the organization, group, or community you worked with.

My client is a consultant who I had been coaching for 9 months. She is highly qualified and gifted and has a long track record of successfully advising clients in the financial arena. When we met, Sandra was deeply unhappy at work. We explored the reasons for this and it became clear to her that she was in what was for her a toxic environment. The more she understood, the more she wanted to leave. One day she made a brave decision and handed in her notice. Having left the company she had been working for, Sandra set up her own company. I accompanied her through this period. However, Sandra soon missed the structure of a working environment and the interaction with others and began to feel lost and lonely.

I felt that this was the ideal opportunity for Sandra to reflect on how she could create a wholesome, Sandra-centric working environment for herself, and suggested an AI process. She welcomed the opportunity.

2. List the names and/or category of stakeholders you included in the Core Group, the cross-section of people that helped you identify the topic and modify the Interview Guide.

Based on our previous coaching process, I reviewed the Interview Guide and emailed it to Sandra 'as is' and asked her what she thought and felt about it. In a way, I was working with Sandra as if she were her own organization, and indeed we talked about Sandra C Inc. I didn't think we needed to tweak it, because I decided to go with the spirit of the questions, not the words.

3. What was the positive topic that the Core Group identified for inquiry? What method did you use to help them identify the topic?

The topic chosen was 'Sandra at her best'. This was born of her feeling of loss at not having a working environment any more. I knew that she had been unhappy at work and so I asked her if she thought there would be a value in investigating times when she had been in 'flow' and things were going swimmingly, so that she could aim to re-create these conditions around her. I wanted to find out enough information for her to create the 'positive opposite' to her recent experience. I suggested that we enquired about external as well as internal conditions, i.e. the context, her behaviours, her abilities, her beliefs and her values. I was not sure whether we would include a mission or not (some people don't know what to do with this concept).

I suggested it, because it seemed to me the most useful subject to meet her immediate need. She accepted the suggestion with a smile.

4. Attach or include the modified Interview Guide they used, i.e., the Generic Interview Guide slightly modified for the positive topic of the inquiry.

I am attaching the Interview Guide I used and which Sandra had seen before the conversation. It is very close to the example in the AI training manual. I made an audio recording of this phase of our work. Generally I asked the questions as written, but there are some small differences because I just glanced at the sheet rather than reading verbatim. I did this because I wanted Sandra to be the focus of my attention, not the correct wording of the questions. At the time I had not thought of writing out a transcript, but it turned out to be very useful.

I am also attaching a transcript of the session in which we used the modified Interview Guide. The questions are in bold. Now and then I re-worded the questions, or added questions to elicit similar information. These are also in bold.

5. What method of interviews did people use to inquire into exceptionally positive moments, face to face paired interviews, or some other way?

We used a face to face interview. The first part of the session was catching up and processing what had happened since our last conversation. Sandra actually asked to begin with the AI questions, because she was sure that it would be of great value to her. I think she also wanted to do something for me. I read out the questions and we worked with them as she talked. When we came to the end of the actual AI questions, and time was over, Sandra actually wanted to keep on ('we're busy') – I assume because she was enjoying herself so much.

6. Attach or include a list of the Life-Giving Forces (what they MOST wanted to create MORE of) that the group identified in the stories they shared.

The most important LGF was real, durable relationships based on integrity, trust and respect. Close to that in importance were credibility and a sense of achievement. Harmony was highlighted as was delivering real value. Perseverance and genuine affirmation were also very significant.

7. Attach or include the Provocative Proposition(s) the group or organization created from the LGFs.

The Provocative Proposition is attached. However, it was mainly my work, which Sandra and I then worked through, changing my draft of the propositions to a format that she felt reflected who and how she wanted to be and to become. I am aware that it is not the usual format (I am assuming this, actually), but is the format which evolved and it worked for Sandra.

8. Attach or include the Strategic Intentions the group or organization developed to realize the Provocative Proposition(s) they created.

These follow the Provocative Proposal. They came in two groups, the one which we initially worked on, and then a second, similar list that Sandra suddenly came out with. I was delighted.

9. Impact or Results: What organizational, group or community **attitude, process** or **structure** changes have people made as they move toward realizing the Provocative Proposition(s)? What progress have people made toward their Strategic Intentions or Initiatives or Pilot Projects? What stories of success can you share?

Sandra realised how important it is for her to have contact with clients. When we started the process, she was spending her time at home, mostly alone. Now she goes to Johannesburg for 4 days every second week to create and revive relationships, and to create awareness of her services.

Following on this point, Sandra is considering renting a small office so that she can create a place away from home which is devoted to work. This will have the added benefit of having contact with other business people, and will spell an end to her isolation.

Sandra tells me that she has now 5 projects running, and expects them to come to fruition this year. They are all with previous clients who she has taken up contact with after a dormant period.

One recent success story is a text message that Sandra sent me two days ago. She had contacted one of her previous clients and told him she was now in business on her own. He met her a few times and then, taking her advice, invested several million rands!

This quote is from an email of 11.11.10 (at 11.10 am!): 'Client invested R150 million. No further success stories other than securing some good meetings, even some that have taken 4 months to set up! So perseverance has kicked in again (which has always been one of my best qualities, but seemed to vanish for a while...)' Several small steps forward in one email.

Sandra's Strategic Intentions are in part very personal. Apart from her increasing visibility in the market place, and other business developments, Sandra has entered a personal relationship and tells me that she is happy just because. Her relationship with her children has improved noticeably, and she reports that she is being more compassionate towards herself. For the first time ever she is allowing herself to be centre stage in her own life.

10. What will you do to ensure that people continue to move toward realizing the Provocative Proposition(s)? How will you help them gather stories of success? How will you help them celebrate? How will you, as the AI Facilitator, support their ongoing success?

I continue to have conversations with Sandra through skype and face to face. She tells me repeatedly how valuable this is. Though I don't see it as a serious means of communication, I stay in touch by sending occasional text messages to let her know that I believe in her and what she is doing (but I do believe that this way of communicating gets an important message across). Texts keep the fire burning.

When I see Sandra next, I'll suggest we run through the Provocative Propositions again, and see what progress she has made with the Strategic Intentions.

I intend to ask her to tell me the stories behind her successes. She tends to let me know when something positive has happened, but to move on quite quickly. We'll dwell on her successes.

I gave Sandra a journal for her birthday, and will ask her to consider reading me some parts (or maybe writing some entries) where she congratulates herself. I'll also suggest that she practises gratitude. Words do indeed create worlds.

11. What did you wish for in the inquiry? What did you learn from the inquiry about yourself and your facilitation? What was your "personal best" experience related to facilitating the Inquiry?

I wanted a good process for Sandra, and in second place I wanted to get enough material for this case study. I also wanted to learn how to do it. I really want(-ed) to do a good job, but that became less important as the conversations started and I saw to my amazement what was happening. I want(-ed) to write an interesting and unique report that put me in a good light. I wish(-ed) to complete my AI training.

I learnt a huge amount about myself, some old things that got re-affirmed, and some new things. One 'old' thing is that people are more important than processes: it was more important that Sandra had a good process with me that helped her move forwards in her life, than it was for me to follow the AI process 'properly'. I learnt that I can take an interview and restructure it so that someone's inner life, aspirations and strengths are captured in their essence, and that I can describe them in a way that strongly invites my client to do more of what works for them. A third thing is I learnt that I feel good when I do this kind of positive thinking with and for others, and I want to do more of it.

My personal best was reading out the Provocative Proposition to Sandra. I could see that she was moved and I felt myself getting teary and started to get a lump in my throat. It was a humble moment, where I felt I was allowed to meet her essence. This continued when she responded (I wrote down her comments and include them). I felt proud of her and me.

## **Modified Interview Guide**

**Best experience:** Tell me a story about a time when

**Values:** what are the things you value deeply? Think specifically about yourself, your work and...

**Yourself.** Without being humble, what do you value most about yourself - as a human being, a parent, a professional woman, an entrepreneur, the person you are becoming...

**Your work.** When you are feeling best about work / whatever, what do you value about it

**Your organisation:** .... What is it about ... that you value? What is the single most important thing that ... has contributed to your life?

**Core value:** What do you think is the core value of .... ? What is it that, if it did not exist, would make .... totally different?

**Three wishes:** if you had three wishes for .... what would they be?

## **Explanation of the following pages**

### **Rationale**

Rather than follow a pattern outlined in a book on AI coaching (e.g. Appreciative Coaching, Orem, Blinkert and Clancy), I decided to experiment with adapting the format I had been taught for using AI in groups. I wanted to know if I could use it with an individual in a coaching context.

The transcript was originally for my own use, but because it shows how I arrived at the rest of the material, I am including it for your interest.

I learnt a lot from doing it this way, and am proud of the result.

### **Method**

I recorded the conversation in which I elicited the information using the Interview Guide. I did this to ensure I obtained the necessary information for the enquiry while also staying in good contact with Sandra.

Following the session, I typed out the transcript. This enabled me to capture the Life-Giving Forces which we checked for accuracy.

I prepared a draft Provocative Proposition from the recording. I then read this out to Sandra slowly, allowing her time to listen and correct the wording. It is long and inclusive, but I believe this was useful as it gave Sandra a comprehensive look at her work and private life as it could and indeed was becoming. We made changes to the draft. I believe this was an unexpectedly successful intervention, and felt to her like a peak experience. Perhaps the effective elements were the wholly positive nature of the proposition, the reality of the description, the chance to re-word and to wordsmith until the text really reflected her and the experience of co-creating such document ('the story of my life to come') with a practitioner who was clearly there for her and who wanted only good for her.

I was concerned that the format and process are probably not the usual ones, and that this might mean that I missed the point of the AI practicum. However, Sandra appreciated the proposition as we developed it, and so I have decided to leave it as it is.

The Strategic Intentions are in two groups. The first was one that we together tweaked into its current wording, and the second was actually Sandra's own continuation from the first. I simply wrote down what she spontaneously said. I was amazed that this happened so seamlessly, and it proved the value of the process to me.

I have sent her a copy of this completed practicum and am appreciative of and grateful to Sandra for her cooperation.

## Modified Interview Guide: Transcript

(C = Colin, S = Sandra)

**C. Tell me a story of a time at work when things were going absolutely fine, things were happening, you were in flow.**

S. I was in a positive frame of mind and things just seemed to start flowing. I'm thinking I would think of a client and they would ring me, that sort of thing. At that time I managed to attract revenues of close to a billion rand in a very short period of time, everyone was extremely happy with me, yes, a great sense of achievement.

C. You actually felt that sense of achievement.

C. What did you do to actually notice things were going well?

S. What do you mean, what did I do to notice?

C. There must have been some figures. Emails coming in ...

S. Yes, there were emails. There was the proof from clients actually investing money. There was proof of money coming in, figures.

C. And you worked in an office?

S. Yes, I did.

C. Were there other people working with you?

S. Yes, there were other people X, Y, Z.

C. So quite a small team. In that team you had someone to back you up?

S. Yes, K. Well at that stage there was no one.

C. So you were pretty much a one-man-band – or a one-woman band.

C. How much contact did you have with other people?

S. Lots, ongoing, every day.

C. So you'd wander from the place you were working, stop and have a chat?

S. Yes, and speaking to clients the whole time. I used to travel a lot to Joburg, meet people. I did a lot of attraction.

**C. And in the actual physical space where you worked, what was there there that really worked for you?**

S. Nothing really, which is strange. At that point I'd just moved to those offices and I had to share an office with W. I don't like sharing offices, I find it difficult to work if someone's listening to me on the phone, so I tended to get out of the office most of the time. I'd never be in the office more

than a few hours. Either travelling or out seeing clients.

C. Oh, right. That sounds like an important clue. And things like flowers? Do they matter?

S. To me? At my place of work? Yes, they are important to me, I love to have a beautiful office. But in that environment I never had. In fact it was a very impersonal office. Nothing would be of me, no photos on the desk or whatever, and nothing to show that I worked there. Just a desk and a chair.

C. The bare necessities.

S. Which is actually very interesting, because all the other offices I ever had were very personalized. Beautiful things, ornaments, flowers.

C. I wonder what your decision will be about your new space.

C. **Tell me, what did you really, really, really, value about the work you were doing when it was flowing and you were so successful?**

S. I suppose it was the credibility it gave me, it was the sense of achievement, it was something powerful for me.

C. Sense of achievement.

S. Yes, that's almost more important to me than the monetary rewards that are attached to that, showing I can do it. That's been a recurring pattern in my life, going right back to school. If I don't achieve, I don't feel good about myself.

C. Ah, right. With regard to that sense of achievement, to what degree are you in charge of that and to what degree is other people's feedback important?

S. I think I'm a good judge of that, I'm very hard on myself, so when I do achieve I know it's real. But yes, it's also important to get that affirmation from other people. Which... and that's why there were those problems, those affirmations weren't really forthcoming or genuine. I never had a sense that anyone valued what I was bringing to the party. Taken for granted, a kind of pat on the head and a 'good girl, we know you can do it', but not... 'this really is meaningful'.

C. Yes, you need people to be genuine and not something quick. It needs to be a real exchange in some way. **What else do you value?**

S. In that context?

C. Yes, and anything.

S. I suppose something important to me is solid relationships based on trust and integrity and respect, I suppose. Very important to me. And it's always fascinated me that in a business context I'm able to, it's one of my best attributes. I'm able to build excellent long-standing relationships built on real value. And yet in my personal life, and in my love life, I tend never to do that, it doesn't last.

I don't know, Colin, I'm just rambling on, is this what I'm supposed to do?

C. Yes, it is indeed.

S. Something else I've realized through this process is how I build up credibility and those fantastic relationships and contacts and what have you and then I tend to neglect them. Let them fall away. When I look back at my career and when I first started working and the contacts that I made and the people I knew ... when I changed direction, I left those there, there are very few of them, and the ones I have picked up on again still have that quality. I don't know why I do that, very stupid. One thing I've learnt through this process, am still learning, is not to make that mistake again. So I've been feeling despondent and rejected. I haven't been creating enough awareness But now I see they haven't gone away, so I'm actively working on them and that's been a good lesson for me.

**C. And in you life in general what's really, really, really important to you?**

S. It sounds so stupid, but – love? Very important to me. Love and um, what's the word, the opposite of confrontation? Harmony I suppose. In my personal life I avoid confrontation is not the right word, acrimony, as much as possible, due to my childhood. I know often, I'll err on the side of being too lenient with my children because I don't want a confrontation with them.

C. So love, harmony, support, I think, too?

S. Yes. And again I think in my personal life I tend to have very deep and strong relationships, but not necessarily millions of them, so friends I have I might not speak to for 2 months, but there's depth there, as opposed to....

C. Real quality.

S. Yes.

**C. Now, without being humble, you as a business woman, what do you value about you?**

S. My ability to deliver, to recognise opportunities and create something out of it. I think perseverance, I don't give up. I think a combination of that with technical knowledge, with my background, is a very powerful one.

**C. If I was to ask two of your close clients who have worked well with you in the past, to describe you, what would they say?**

S. Erm, ... trustworthy, reliable, integrity, ahm, going the extra mile to make sure it works for that client, flexible, one of my pet hates, is if anybody says to me it can't be done.

C. So you're a 'can-do' person?

S. Absolutely. Don't say to me 'this is how it works, we can only do it this way'. I'll find a way to make it work for this client.

C. What I'm hearing is that you are very committed to relationships, to people, and actually you work for the person rather than to make a buck.

S. Ya, spose so.

**C. And if I was to ask J and A [S's children] what you are like as a person, what your qualities are, what would they say?**

S. Um, as a mother or as a person?

C. Mmmm. We can do both of those.

S. I think as a Mother, J told me the other day, he told me that I am the father figure in their lives, I make things happen, and that their dad is the softer one who plays games and is frivolous. I suppose, ya. I think I'm a good mother and I really look after my children,. Maybe too much. I think I'm loving and nurturing, but I don't know if they'd agree with that, A certainly wouldn't have until recently, but as a person I think they'd say that I take life too seriously.

**C. What's contributed most to your life?**

C. My children and my, I don't know, I was going to say my career, but that's changed so many times I don't know if it's true, to put it another way, I don't think I've ever been able to separate my identity, that I don't make a difference between who I am and what I do. It's an integral part of me, that's part of what defines me.

C. Ah, yes. Does the word 'service' mean anything?

S. Mmm. Not sure.

C. I hear that you actually are a servant, you serve people.

S. Actually you are very right, yes.

C. And it strikes me you must have a dash of humility as well. We know this to be true.

**C. What's the one thing, the one, one, one thing that, if it was absent from your life, would change your life entirely and totally?**

S. The one thing? Not person, thing? Um... Love.

**C. Thinking of SCIncorporated, or any business name that you choose to represent yourself, what three wishes do you have?**

S. That I increase and enhance my credibility out there, the perception that people have of me, that I'm successful, so that I can prove to myself and other people that I was not stupid and crazy to leave XXX, to myself most of all, and then, um, to make lots of money.

C. Brill. Ya. Thank you, I'm aware that it's now past our time.

S. We can continue if you like? We're busy.

C. What other wishes do you have for yourself?

S. To finally in my life just be actually happy.

C. What might that be?

S. Content and fulfilled and happy in my own skin, as opposed to, I think I told you before, I used to create happiness for myself, 'if I can go to Paris, I'll be happy', 'if I can buy a new car, I'll be happy'.

C. Ah.

S. I've discovered over and over again that doesn't make you happy, and for the first time in my life now I've discovered what real happiness is. And starting to just be happy in myself.

C. Yes.

S. Not because of something.

C. But simply to be it rather than attach it as a product to something else.

S. That particular, that really started for me soon after I met you...

## **Provocative proposition**

I, Sandra, am a consultant with a strong, proven track record, who creates wealth for her clients. I nurture relationships, attract contracts and seize the moment to serve my client base to the best of my considerable abilities.

I work best when I have a small team around me which gives me sufficient back up for my activities. While I can work in minimalist settings, I choose to create beauty in my workplace so that I can find even more pleasure in my work. My workplace is very personalized, with flowers, photos and other beautiful things. I prefer to have my own room where I can work undisturbed and privately. My office is like a springboard that enables me to launch myself into work, which usually means travelling to and visiting clients. I am at my best when I have lots of on-going, everyday contact with the people and institutions I serve.

Very important for me are credibility and a sense of achievement. I myself judge this, and I also seek genuine affirmation from others. It is vital for me that I know my work is valued and that I feel appreciated for what I do and who I am.

I create relationships that are based on trust, integrity and respect. In a business context this is one of my greatest attributes. I am able to build long, solid and robust connections, which are fantastic relationships based on real quality. I am committed to nurturing these even more.

The personal attributes I bring are my ability to deliver, my perseverance, my ability to recognize opportunities and to create something out of them. I do not give up, because I believe that there is always a way. I am a 'can-do' person. I believe that these, coupled with my technical knowledge, are a very powerful offering.

A perception my clients have of me is that I am trustworthy, reliable and flexible, that integrity is one of my main values, and that I am willing to go the extra mile. I am deeply committed to people and relationships, and this shows up clearly in my work. I do what I do for the pleasure of knowing I have done a good job and without needing to put myself into the limelight.

I am myself at work, and do not separate who I am from what I do. This means that I must feel congruent with myself and cannot represent something I do not believe in or do work that I cannot fully commit to. Service is one of my key values, and I offer this with humility and professionalism.

Of paramount importance in my life is love. As a woman I bring love to my work, I care and I nurture. In the environment I work in, I also have a strong, professional male energy to make things happen where necessary.

The areas of my working life that I am currently paying particular attention to are increasing my credibility, becoming more successful, increasing financial gain and proving myself to myself. I am becoming more happy in my own skin; this new happiness is not contingent or dependent on other

people or things, but simply because it is, and because I am who I am. I notice this happiness as an almost physical sensation. I have become proud of myself, and have begun to believe that I deserve a good and fair life for myself. I have allowed myself to become important in my own life, and am now more centre stage than ever before.

### **Some of Sandra's comments on hearing the Provocative Proposition**

I feel excited as I hear and read this.

Oh my God, just think of what this woman can do!

I feel liberated.

The Afrikaans-speaking environment leads me to regress; an English-speaking environment allows me to be much more in control of my destiny.

### **Strategic Intentions I**

I am committed to my own growth. Some ideas I have on how to do this are to

Select and nurture a number of past client relationships

Inform some of them about my services

Regularly and actively seek specific, evidence-based feedback on my services

Invest in developing my technical skills through further professional development

Continue and deepen my personal reflections and explorations

Focus on, co-create and welcome the future rather than be concerned with the past

Nurture myself in ways that are likely to bring me joy and genuine happiness

Bring my undoubted skills and strengths into other areas of my life, if I so wish

Allow myself to do what I want.

### **Strategic Intentions II**

I am thinking of doing a Masters in tax law

I can use the internet as a source of information for changes to legislation

I am thinking of lecturing again

I have learnt how to stop myself from getting lost in my personal history

I am more in tune with myself

I now recognize what I need to do and maximize what I can do

I have taken permission to make these significant changes in my internal and external life, and from now on I will continue to give myself permissions rather than obey historical prohibitions.

I am more and more moving away from polarity thinking.