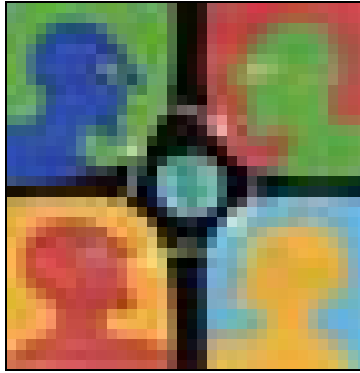


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"Real change begins with the simple act of people talking about what they care about."

-Margaret Wheatley

Congratulations to **Joe DiSabatino**, <joed@phoenixleadership.com>, AIFT Philadelphia, who helped some parents of young children in a Sufi community ***talk about what they cared about***—creating a school for Sufi and other children. Pro bono, **Joe** facilitated an Appreciative Inquiry in February with a group of 10 people--members of an international spiritual organization called the Shadhiliyya Sufis who self-organized to envision the school they wished to create.

To get started, **Joe** invited a Core Group of five people to help him design the Inquiry: three parents and two interested adults. The Positive Topic was "Imagine a Sufi School at Its Best." The purpose was to establish a progressive children's school in the community that nourishes and develops students' bodies, minds, hearts and souls with an emphasis on Sufi teachings and life style, while being open to all children.

Here's the Interview Guide **Joe** and his Core Group developed for the face-to-face interviews:

1. Tell me about a formal or informal pre-school/elementary classroom/whole-school learning environment that you were involved with (either as a child, or as a parent, teacher, administrator, board member, college/grad student, or in any other capacity) that made you feel most alive, most engaged, most enthused about, and really proud to be part of.
2. What external circumstances made the best possible in that learning situation? (such as teachers were given a lot of freedom, there was lots of support from parents, etc.)

3. What were the essential inner qualities that gave life to this learning environment when it was at its very best?
4. Without being modest, what unique skills and jewels do you bring to the Sufi children's school project?
5. If Allah gave you a magic wand and said, "My beloved, you can have any three wishes granted concerning the children's school project because it has My blessings," what would they be?

The Inquiry group identified the Life-Giving Forces (what they MOST wanted to create MORE of) in the stories they shared from the interviews:

A Loud Room for the children
A Living library for sharing resources for parents and children
Truth
A Quiet room
Independent space
Baby space
Morals and living the values
How to walk emotionally and spiritually in the way of Allah
A school building full of light, love, warmth, nurturing
Allowing children to be children--understanding development
Adults nurturing childrens' natural love of learning
Child-led learning—tuning into each child's individual needs
Prayer
Community and family flow; parent-child flow
Parenting forum—how to hold sexuality, hold faith, etc.
Kitchen
Healthy green building and healthy foods

From those Life-giving forces, they created a Provocative Proposition for a Sufi Children's School (from a child's perspective):

"Our school is a lovely, beautiful place where we get to learn and do really cool things. We are so blessed. Our building has Allah's light pouring into our school that radiates out to our community. We have animals that we care for and gardens that we nurture and which nurture us. We learn how to care for each other, to work out our differences. I feel very safe and held here in the ocean of love that we share with each other. I know who I am; the adults reflect that to me. I am a beautiful being from Allah. Everyday I learn new things from my friends, the other kids, adults, my parents, and everyone and everything around me. I am learning to deeply listen to my

heart and hear Allah's words for me. It brings me so much joy and peace. I bring this love back to the community by doing things for others in service."

They also developed a Strategic Intention: "To build a school by the end of 2008 that nurtures the children's hearts, bodies, minds, and souls in the way of Allah."

Then the group went on to develop one-year and five-year visions, and action items and action teams to address fundraising, governance, state of Pennsylvania legal requirements, building, location, and enrollment. They also held a facilitated follow-up session in June.

Joe says he will continue to facilitate the group's meetings while keeping the focus on positive success stories to date, reminding them of their vision and values for the school, having fun, offering positive feedback and appreciation for the work they are doing and, finally, helping to keep the school start-up process grounded in both their positive vision and practical realities. He will encourage them to celebrate their successes along the way.

Joe said, "This was my first experience facilitating a full-scale AI process—my wish was that the Sufis would find it to be a useful and positive way to get their school up and running. So far, so good. I learned that I am able to do an inquiry really well, that I'm a "natural" at it. I was at ease and playful, as well as task focused, all within the AI positive framework. My best experience—one of the parents came up to me at break and said that I must have been doing this for a long time since I "obviously know what I am doing." That was affirming!"

Good job, Joe!

Best wishes,



Nancy Stetson

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