

Appreciative Inquiry for the Government of South Australia,  
Department for Communities and Social Inclusion,  
Disability Services,  
Greater Adelaide Region  
Mt Barker Adult Team

*'An Exceptional Team Culture'.*

Ms. Elaine Nash

Team Manager  
Disability Services  
Department for Communities and Social Inclusion  
Government of South Australia  
[elaine.nash@dcsi.sa.gov.au](mailto:elaine.nash@dcsi.sa.gov.au)

Southern Fleurieu Health Service  
Harbour View Terrace, Victor Harbor, SA 5022  
(08) 8552 0646  
0427 608 413

AIFT Training Dates:  
7 – 10 June, 2011, Fremantle, Western Australia

## 1. The Organisation

Disability Services is a part of the Government of South Australia's Department for Communities and Social Inclusion (DCSI). Its role is to provide a range of services, including case management, to people who live with significant and permanent disability and have needs associated with this disability such that they require a specialist service. People who may be eligible to receive services include; children and adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder including Asperger Syndrome, children and adults with intellectual disability, adults with a physical or neurological disability and adults with an Acquired Brain Injury. The organisation has over 12,000 registered clients who live across metropolitan and country South Australia.

The Community Services arm of Disability Services has 22 regional offices. The Mt Barker Office is located in the Adelaide Hills and is part of the Greater Adelaide Region. The Mt Barker office has two specialist teams who provide services to eligible clients and their families - the Child and Youth team and the Adult team (for clients over 18 and left school).

Disability Services has undergone many reforms over the past few years. More recently, a change in political party leadership has resulted in a change in Ministerial portfolios such that the organisation is now a part of a new Government Department and under a new Minister. An additional reform is the dissolution of the Greater Adelaide region and a change of line management for the team managers in this region.

My own experience as a public servant for 16 years has shown me that change management tends to be a 'top down' approach and much of what works - the best of - can get lost in the change process resulting in a decline in staff morale. Further, deficit based models have and are commonly used at all levels of management. This approach to change management is common in Government organisations who are naturally subject to political will, public opinion and change in political priorities with changing Governments.

I was first introduced to Appreciative Inquiry whilst studying a Diploma in Government (Management) with the DCSI College of Learning in 2010. I felt immediately drawn to it as a model of positive organisational development and change management. I could see the power in Appreciative Inquiry as a way of shifting the paradigm from 'seeing problems to possibilities' and enabling people to engage in 'what gives life to an organization's system when it is operating at its best' (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008, p. XIX). I could see that Appreciative Inquiry had much to offer both my organisation and

myself and more importantly, our clients, and I became determined to become a certified facilitator of this model and offer it widely.

Following my AIFT in June of 2011, I asked if any of my management colleagues would like to use this approach and the Team Manager of the Mt Barker office asked if I could deliver a workshop to her Adult Team. With the dissolution of the Greater Adelaide region, this team will come under new Regional Management and were also experiencing a change in senior staff.

The Mt Barker Adult team consists of the Team Manager, one Senior Practitioner and four Service Coordinators – one position was vacant at the time of the workshop.

I provided the Team Manager with the reading “The Essential’s of Appreciative Inquiry: A Roadmap for Creating Positive Futures” (Mohr & Watkins, 2002). I informed the Team Manager that she could share this reading with her manager, her senior practitioner and her Adult team so that she could consider if the Appreciative Inquiry approach felt right for her and this situation. Following her reading and discussion with her team, she informed me that Appreciative Inquiry was the perfect model to use.

## **2. The Core Group**

Due to the absence of the Senior Practitioner for health reasons – he later was asked to take on another role temporarily with the organisation and was replaced by another team member - the Core Group comprised of the Team Manager only. The Team manager knew her team exceptionally well and felt that understandably, the members of this team were experiencing anxiety in regards to the change process.

What became clear in my discussions with her was that this team would benefit greatly from revealing its positive core and tapping into it. They could then take the best with them into the future and be more flexible and adaptable during the change process given that ‘people have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known)’ (Hammond, 1996, p. 21). They would be also very clear about their culture, their vision, be able to ‘create images of a shared future’ and find ways to deliver that future once their bold ideas were aligned to the State Strategic Plan (an agenda for change).

### 3. The Positive Topic identified as the focus of Inquiry

Following discussion with the Team Manager and presenting to her the five generic processes and some of the theory behind Appreciative Inquiry such as Social Constructionism, we decided that the positive topic identified for inquiry was around exploring the team's exceptional moments and successes to reveal who they are when they are at their best to enable an **"Exceptional Team Culture"**.

The 17<sup>th</sup> of May 2012 was set aside for a one-day workshop in which I would facilitate this day using all five generic processes. I developed and provided an agenda for the day in the format required of our department (see Appendix page 1).

### 4. Modified Interview Guide

In consultation with the Team Manager, the generic interview guide was modified to meet the needs of the Mt Barker Adult Team (see Appendix, page 2.)

### 5. Interview Methods

Face-to-Face paired interviews were used. The interviews were introduced by the facilitator using some of the material in the 'Tips for conducting an Appreciative Interview' including the need to be genuinely curious about the interviewee's narrative (Tab 5, page 18 of the AFIT manual). Prior to the interviews, I read the interview questions to the team and asked them to take a few minutes to jot down some initial responses. Paired interviews were then conducted with 20 minutes set aside for each of the interviews. During this time, I checked in with each pair (two plus the Team Manager and myself) and informed them when they needed to swap roles.

As the team was an odd number, I interviewed the Team Manager rather than having a group of three as I had used the latter method previously and found it not to be as powerful in this discovery phase. I provided the team with the summary sheet (see Appendix, page 3) and provided an additional 5 minutes for the summary sheet to be completed upon completion of the interviews.

When the pairs returned to form the larger group, each person took turns to share the compelling stories, the most life-giving moments, the most creative and innovative examples of success stories and three themes which had emerged from the interviews. This larger group discussion was highly generative and further themes emerged as life-giving forces. From this people agreed on what they most wanted to

create more of as the group shared many of the themes. This discovery phase revealed their positive core.

## **6. Life-Giving Forces identified by the Disability Services, Mt Barker Adult Team**

- We have the capacity to facilitate change
- We care for and support each other and our clients
- We have a good rapport and we respect each other
- As individuals and as a group we are strong because we focus on our successes and strengths
- We have a sense of achievement and enthusiasm for our work
- We enable and facilitate each others growth as professionals
- We are brave, knowledgeable, positive and motivated
- We have a sense of team identity
- We have pride in our team
- We share common meaning in our work and in our values
- We empower our clients to be all they can be
- We are committed, hard working, passionate and seek community inclusion for the people we serve
- We are responsive, adaptable and work in synergy
- We strive for positive outcomes for our clients
- We aim to breakdown the barriers of discrimination of people who live with a disability

## **7. Provocative Propositions**

I then moved the group to the Dreaming phase. I asked the group to reflect on the dreaming phase questions (see appendix page 4) and, using the brainstorming technique, they recorded on chart paper their 'dreams' of all they wished to be as though it were happening now. This was a very powerful process and set the stage for the group to create a shared image of this preferred future. I then gave the group 20 minutes to create a visual image or metaphor (figure 1).



**Figure 1 – The visual image of the shared image of a preferred future**

The Group then created a word image - a provocative proposition. They called this their vision.

### **OUR VISION:**

We set our clients free to dream their dreams and achieve their goals in a process of working together holistically.

### **8. Strategic Intentions**

We then progressed to the Design, Delivery and Destiny phase of Appreciative Inquiry. I facilitated the dialogue of how they will create this future and encouraged the team to be bold, creative and innovative. This generated many ideas with the following 11 bold ideas agreed to be the team as the initial action plan.

### **BOLD IDEAS/ACTION PLAN:**

1. Develop Volunteer Program. This program will provide both 1:1 and group/activities which are developed out of a shared interest/goals/needs of our clients. The program will be sustainable and grow

2. Person Centred Planning (PCP) training for our team with The PCP Project Officer
3. Team Manager to pursue with senior management the ideal team mix for the Mt Barker Adult Team
4. Disability Awareness information sessions for the community delivered by us
5. Neighbourhood links – implement an Appreciative Inquiry workshop for stakeholders in Neighbourhood Links program
6. Find ways to establish a Therapeutic Group to assist clients to develop 'emotional regulation'. Need to identify potential clients and request GP's develop Mental Health Care Plan for each individual. A Psychologist or other eligible allied health professional can then plan, implement and evaluate a group for 6-8 people. This could be piloted and then run again if successful
7. Person Centred Plans:  
Choose a few clients to do Person Centred Plans and action them
8. Physical/Neurological/Acquired Brain Injury: Stakeholder analysis. What do these clients need
9. Work with agencies to expand employment opportunities for our clients
10. Develop the idea of a Community Garden/Hall
11. Establish a 'Team around the adult' model

## **9. Impact or Results**

One of the key strategic intention's, which is the foundation of some of the others, is developing a more innovative Volunteer Service model for Mt Barker Disability Services. This is currently in consultation with key stakeholders but may lead the way in expanding volunteer services and thereby enhancing services to adult clients and their families.

Another strategic intention was to evaluate, using Appreciative Inquiry, the 'Neighbourhood Links' project. This project is highly valued in Disability Services and meets the organisational goal of community and social inclusion. My intention is to facilitate this evaluation involving all stakeholders in the near future. This may result in an expansion of this project to other regions.

## **10. Supporting their ongoing success**

I will continue to explore with the Team Manager and the team how they are progressing and generating more ideas from this process. I have provided reference material to them and have made myself available to attend team meetings to embed the paradigm shift from 'problems to possibilities'. The provocative proposition is on the wall of the Team Manager's office and serves as a constant reminder of their life-giving forces (LGF's) and their dreams for the future and of who they are in the present moment. Team members have a copy of their LGF's and their provocative proposition or vision statement. I have also provided suggestions of how they can include Appreciative Inquiry questions in all aspects of their work together.

## **11. My wish for this inquiry**

For me, I was very pleased and amazed at the power of the five generic processes when completed in totality in one day. I was absolutely blown away by how quickly (literally 2 minutes) a provocative proposition – vision statement - was born following the creation of the visual metaphor. Having attended many visioning workshops, which can be like 'pulling teeth', this 'organic flow of process' from the 'visual metaphor to the word', was a sight to behold. I would not have believed it if I had not experienced and facilitated it myself. It just reinforced for me how powerful Appreciative Inquiry is and how the past 32 years of it's authors and others adding to the evidence base of practice, has produced a model, which does indeed work.

My hope for the future is that I can continue to develop my knowledge and skills base and implement Appreciative Inquiry in all aspects of my management and leadership and share this with other teams or parts of our organisation to the benefit of our clients.

## **12. Permission to share.**

Yes, the Mt Barker Adult team has granted consent to the Company of Experts to share this story.



## References:

AFIT Manual. Provided at the AIFT – Dates 7-10 June, 2011, Fremantle, Western Australia.

Cooperrider, David. L., Whitney, Diana & Stavros, Jacqueline, M.  
**Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: For Leaders of Change (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)**,  
Crown Custom Publishing, 2008.

Hammond, Sue Annis. **The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)**, Thin Book Publishing Co, U.S. (1998).