

**Appreciative Inquiry  
For  
Winnipeg Child and Family Services  
Float Team**

**Twin Lakes Beach, Manitoba, Canada  
June 20, 2013**

**“A Connected Team Creates  
Positive Energy”**

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**AIFT Dates and location**  
April 29 – May 2, 2013  
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## **The Organization**

I worked with a local child welfare agency called Winnipeg Child and Family Services. They provide child protection services to children and families. I worked with a group of 8 social workers who function as a “float team” within their agency, meaning that they fill in when other teams have staff away due to illness, vacation or other circumstances. They function similarly to substitute teachers. So, in reality, they do not function as a united team themselves, because they rarely work together or see each other. What brings them together is a common supervisor and the work that they do, which is very unique from others within the agency. They are expected to “get up to speed” on cases that they are not familiar with and work with people in the community that they may not have established a relationship with.

## **The Core Group**

The Core Group was comprised of only two people; the supervisor of the float team, Chrissy S., and me. She had recently stepped into the leadership position and wanted to find a way to establish her relationship with her new team as well as get them connected with one other.

The supervisor, Chrissy, is a friend of mine and it all started when we were on a bike ride. I was talking with her about my wonderful Appreciative Inquiry Facilitator Training experience and the concept of Appreciative Inquiry in general. She was very intrigued and excited and wanted to know if I would be willing to facilitate an inquiry with her new team. She was feeling apprehension about her new position and wanted to start on a positive note.

Chrissy had in mind a “team retreat”. Her plan was to invite the team members to her cottage for a two day gathering. They would arrive the evening before and spend the following day together, getting to know each other in a relaxed, fun atmosphere. She described the stress under which her staff worked, not only because of the nature of functioning as a float team, but also because of the weight of the stories they heard and responded to on behalf of the children and families they serve. For her, the AI process sounded like a perfect fit because it was the counter balance to the negativity which the entire team was exposed to on a daily basis.

I said I would be excited to practice what I had learned and all she needed to do was get approval from her supervisor. As a self-employed personal life coach, my opportunities to do organizational development are limited. Once she got approval, she and I had two phone meetings to identify the positive topic.

## **Affirmative Topic**

Chrissy and I worked together to identify the positive topic. As there were only two of us in the Core Group, we were able to agree on the affirmative topic through one-on-one discussions.

The process for defining the topic began with exploring the “problems” that Chrissy, as the new supervisor, identified. I started by asking the question, “What’s the main issue with the float team?” Chrissy went on to describe that because the team members rarely saw each other, they felt like they worked in isolation with very little support. As a result, they experienced a lot of stress, low morale, and an underlying fear of being alone if/when crisis arose with clients (and it often did). She felt that the main problem was that the social workers she supervised were disconnected from everyone else and had a lack of support to do their jobs well and maintain their own well-being. This in turn, could result in poorer quality service to the children and families being supported.

As the Core Team, we then focused the discussion on re-framing the problem into a more positive perspective and a desired outcome. I started by asking Chrissy the question “What do you want more of for the team and the families being served?”. The key terms she identified in her response were *connection* and *positive energy*. By focusing on those two key terms, we collaboratively came to and agreed upon the Affirmative Topic “*A Connected Team Creates Positive Energy*”. From that, the AI interview questions were formulated.

## **Interview Guide Development and Interview Method**

It was Chrissy’s preference to not be involved in the specific design of the Interview Guide to be used with her team as she wanted to be an equal participant with her staff in the Appreciative Inquiry Process at the retreat. She believed it would help reinforce that she was a part of the team, and that she honoured their thoughts and ideas to move forward without her own agenda or preconceived ideas. In order to accommodate this and still keep her fully engaged, we reviewed the *Generic Interview Format* provided in the *Appreciative Inquiry Facilitator Training Manual* together so that she would get a sense of the format and design, without knowing the specific questions that I would develop. We talked generally about using the same format and essence of the generic questions, and that I would bring the key words into the same framework where it made the most sense.

It was important for me to honour the request made by Chrissy to be a step away from the design of the Interview Guide. I ended up designing the interview guide myself and did not have a strategy to field test it. Ideally, someone else within the agency would have also been included in the Core Group to represent the agency’s perspective and do the field test to determine if the question would move the team in a positive, meaningful direction.

The modified Interview Guide I developed is included at the end of this report. The agenda for the half day inquiry is also included. The interview method used for the inquiry was face to face paired

interviews. Each pair used the “Interview Summary” questions (also included at the end of the report) to debrief their interviews to identify highlights, energy forces and themes.

In order to reinforce a sense of ownership of the AI process, Chrissy was given the responsibility to develop and present the Opening Statement / Preface for the AI to the participants. It was as follows:

*“As the newest member and leader of the float team, I wanted to create an opportunity for us to focus on what connects team members to one another. In an ever changing system, the float team has been a consistent and critical support to the agency. We are always in the position of helping other units maintain balance. And we, too, need time to maintain our balance and internal team support. I hope that our morning session will give us time to celebrate our strengths and accomplishments and leave us with a renewed connection and energy.”*

Chrissy shared her Opening Statement with her staff by email prior to the retreat in preparation for the days away. She left them know I would be arriving on day two as a guest and her intention was to be clear that the retreat was not just a holiday from work but a time to refocus and re-energized through a guided process facilitated by me.

## **Discovery 1 - Interviews**

On the day of the inquiry, I arrived in time for breakfast. The staff team was in great spirits and reported that they had a very fun time the previous night, playing games, eating good food, and sharing stories late into the night. It was a very casual environment for me to walk into and sharing a meal together was a really nice opportunity to get acquainted.

It was a bit of a challenge to transition the team from play mode to work mode moving into the inquiry, but it was definitely a bonus to have a group of people who has already spent time together and were feeling comfortable with one another.

By having Chrissy restate her Opening Statement / Preface to the group as we moved into the actual inquiry, it made it clear this was an important and intentional part of the staff retreat. My start to the session was to set the tone and provide some background of Appreciative Inquiry and the process I would be taking them through.

In order for the team to really understand the difference between approaching things from a negative perspective or a positive perspective, I decided to use an exercise that was introduced to me during my Appreciative Inquiry Facilitator Training. The “Root Analysis” has two groups look at the same topic from two perspectives. I used the same topic of “morale” that was explored in my AIF training and it did seem relevant to this team as it was identified by Chrissy as one of her concerns. I had one group look at “Low morale” and explore the root causes of low morale and what low morale branches out to, once it exists. I asked the other group to identify the roots of “High morale” and what its offshoots are. After about 10 minutes of the two groups discussing their topic within earshot of one another, I

brought them together as a group and in the debrief, I asked them to share their observations about their mood when discussing the topic rather than the actual ideas they came up with.

The “low morale group” noticed in themselves that their energy began to drain as they talked about the causes and effects of low morale (the negative perspective). They became quieter and less motivated to continue the conversation. The “high morale group” recognized that their mood stayed light, happy, and engaged as they explored morale from the positive perspective. They were inspired to continue to talk and keep digging. Because the two groups were in relative proximity to each other (this was part of the activity design) they were also aware of the other’s energy level. Only in the debriefing did they find out that the topic “morale” was the same for both groups, only from a different perspective.

Through this experiential learning exercise, the team identified that a choice in perspective or questions, has a great significant influence on mood and energy. I felt this was a very successful strategy to get the participants fully engaged in the process and to understand how the questions they ask have power. Given the significant learning I observed as a result of this activity, I will (and have since) include this activity as part of the introduction for other Appreciative Inquiries I facilitate.

With the stage set for asking questions from a positive perspective, we moved into the actual inquiry. I placed the group into four pairs with instructions, the Interview Guide, and the Interview Summary. The guideline was that they had 20 minutes to interview one person, 10 minutes to summarize the interview, 20 minutes for the other interview, and another 10 minutes for the summary.

For the next hour, I moved from group to group, listening in and doing time checks to insure the pairs were moving at similar paces. Each time I stopped at a group to listen in, the person being interviewed seemed very excited to have someone else to share their story with. I have no doubt that if they had been no time limit, most of the pairs would have continued to talk and process well beyond the designated one hour. It was interesting to note that most of the pairs did the Interview Summaries together as a collaboration. Instead of the interviewer just recording her observations at the end of the interview, the interviewee was also very investing in completing the Summary and pulling out the highlights. It was a very interesting process that drifted away from the original instructions but reinforced that when folks are given freedom within a positive structure, the investment is very high.

As a facilitator, it was incredible to see the energy in certain individuals increase during the paired interviews. Those who had stayed up very late the night before were suddenly more energized. The one gal who had a headache, noted that her pain was no longer there. The power of being listened to deeply and focusing on the positive perspective was highly evident.

## **Discovery 2 - Live-Giving Forces**

Following the paired interviews, I brought all eight participants together to sit in a circle as one group of eight to share their highlights and themes from the Interview Summaries. Because it was one group, I choose to facilitate the process and do the documenting myself. This allowed all group members to

continue to be equally engaged in the discussion, with equal responsibility. Each team took turns presenting their summaries and I documented all presented themes on paper. If presented themes were similar to one already documented, I asked permission to combine them. Once all the themes were documented from all four pairs, the flip- chart paper was placed on the floor in the circle. Each participant was then asked to identify their top 3 themes that inspired energy by signing their initial beside the themes.

Below is a list of the Life-Giving Forces that the team MOST wanted to create MORE of based on the themes that had the most initials beside them.

- Support
- Strong positive leadership leads to a strong positive team
- Personal connections and relationships between team members
- Humour
- Learning from each others' experiences

## **Dream**

Flowing into the Dream Phase, I instructed the team to take the life giving forces and work together to visually represent them through some sort of visual representation such as drawing, miming, or human sculpting. To give them the freedom to be creative, I did not observe their process, knowing that I would be the only one they would be presenting to. Within 15 minutes, they created an interpretive dance. The dance was performed for an audience of one; me, as the facilitator. It started with the eight women forming a circle and then each one taking a turn going into the middle of the circle and doing a solo dance. Each was encouraged and supported with applause. Once everyone had taken their turn in the middle and were again standing in a circle, they joined hands and did a “wave” motion, with one arm movement flowing from one person to the next (like the wave is done in a stadium). It was video recorded for future play-back but it not available to be shared for this report.

The creative expression of the life giving forces was the catalyst for developing the Provocative Proposition. The key images and words that the team came up with from interpreting the dance were *unique, talented, laughter, connection, and wave*.

## **Provocative Proposition**

The next instructions I gave the team was to develop the provocative statement. They were asked to use the images and words from their dance and reflect on the life giving forces to develop a statement that would create a positive vision for the future; a place from where they would like to function as a team. They worked on their own and I only acted as an observer for this process, while keeping them moving forward and on track with time. They took turns leading the discussion and moving forward until everyone was in agreement and inspired by the statement.

Here is the float team's Provocative Proposition:

*"We are unique, we are talented, and we are flexible. We create positive energy from our laughter, leadership, and connectedness. We are the float team, riding the waves."*

When they were comfortable with the statement, I asked them these questions to assess the quality of their Provocative Statement:

1. Is it bold? Does it stretch, challenge, or interrupt "habits"?
2. Is it grounded? Are there examples in the team that illustrate the ideal as a real possibility?
3. It is desired? If it could be fully actualized, would the team want to do it? Does everyone want it as a preferred future?
4. Is it affirmative? Is it written in the positive and in the present tense?
5. Does it provoke action?

To each question, the answer was "YES".

## **Group Intentions**

The final step for this AI process was for each individual staff member to commit to a personal intention to honour the Provocative Proposition, and share it publically with the team. I gave them a few minutes to think quietly to themselves about how they would personally bring the proposition to life. Once again, seating in a circle, each team member took a turn to state their commitment out loud to the group. These were the commitments:

1. Take responsibility to set up regular team lunches (Theresa)
2. Share more thoughts and ideas during team meetings (Cheryl)
3. Shift to a more positive perspective; re-frame problems as opportunities (Carly)
4. Reach out to team mates for support (Tracey)
5. Use more humour with team mates (Jenny)
6. Find opportunities for fun and laughter as a way to de-stress (Erin)
7. Take more initiative to share what's personally going on and contribute more positive energy (Guida)
8. Bring more humour, laughter, and positivity to team meetings (Chrissy)

## **Impact and Results**

I met with Chrissy several months after the inquiry occurred to get an update on any changes that were noticed. The impact of this Appreciative Inquiry was felt at an individual, team, and organizational level. Chrissy reported that each staff member has indicated at different times since the AI that they feel more connected with one another and make more effort to connect on a personal level. The

commitment to arrange for regular contact through team lunches has been happening and has resulted in more positive energy and a greater sense of connection.

According to Chrissy, one staff in particular continues to talk about the impact of that day, not only in her attitude at work, but in her attitude at home. She has reported to Chrissy on a number of occasions that she finds she is able to look for positives in her children and her relationships with them have improved.

In follow-up to the session, Chrissy, made framed pictures for each of the team members to have as a reminder of the provocative proposition. She has indicated that “the wave” is often brought in conversation during work related discussions and challenges.

I was also gifted one of the pictures and have included a photo of it at the end of this report.

At an organizational level, an article about this Appreciative Inquiry was included in the agency newsletter and some curiosity was stirred up. Chrissy has promoted AI to her manager and there is some talk of more facilitations happening within the organization.

As a matter of interest, this session was outside of the norm of organization development / team building opportunities. The typical course of action is for the management team of the agency to choose a training topic and offer it to everyone within the agency. The idea of a customized session that is team and need specific is not typical, nor funded. Since then, a new training procedure has been put into place which provides a training budget for each individual team to spend as they see fit based on what they most need. Although not confirmed, the supervisor I worked with (Chrissy) suspects that this training may have had some influence on this shift.

### **My Wishes for the Inquiry**

It was very exciting for me to have the opportunity to put what I had learned at the AIFT into practice. My wish was that everyone would have a positive experience and be opened up to a new way of looking at problems. Having worked with youth at risk myself for almost 20 years, I am aware of how overwhelming it can become to be exposed to stories of family breakdown, abuse, and neglect on a daily basis at work. It requires a great deal of effort to find the good. I was very honoured to be able to contribute to the well-being of the people who support these children.

I also hoped that I would build my confidence in facilitating an inquiry. I discovered that it is a process that matches very well with my life coaching philosophy and I was able to bring my own personality and be authentic throughout the process. The best part of the inquiry was seeing the energy shift in the participants. At the start of the session, there was some trepidation from the participants, and by the end of the sessions, there was full engagement and even excitement in the air. There was a sense of hope being taken back to their work.



Going forward, I would like to have more time with a team to do a more complete inquiry. I was pleased with how clear and powerful of a Provocative Proposition was created. More time to explore how to deliver the provocative statement would have been ideal. To get an inspiring Vision Statement in three hours is a great success. I believe a full day is a minimum amount of time needed to create the vision and also design strategies to implement and commit to the vision is necessary. I would also like to build into each inquiry a plan to follow-up and gauge to what extent the Vision Statement is being honoured by those who dreamed it.

## **Permission**

Permission has been granted for me to share this story with Company of Experts for the purposes of this report as well as for Company of Experts to share this story with others.

## Interview Guide – Child and Family Services

### Affirmative Topic: A Connected Team Creates Positive Energy

#### Instructions:

- Using the questions below, Person A interviews Person B for 20 minutes, taking brief notes in the space provided, and repeating or asking follow-up questions as needed. Note the approximate time you will have for each question. After the interview, take no more than 5 minutes to complete the Interview Summary.
- Then Person B interviews Person A for 20 minutes, following the same process and also completing the Interview Summary.

#### TRY TO GET THROUGH ALL QUESTIONS IN 20 MINUTES!

*(9 minutes)* 1. Tell me a story about the best experience that you have had working with a really terrific team. Looking at your entire experience with that team, recall a time when you felt most balanced, most connected, and most energized about your involvement in a team. What made it an energizing experience? What did people do to create connection? What was your role? Describe the experience in detail.

*(9 minutes)* 2. Let's talk about some things you value deeply; specifically the things you value about yourself, about the nature of your work, and about this team.

A. Without being humble, what do you value most about yourself – as a person and as a member of this team?

B. When you are feeling connected and energized at work, what do you value most about this?

C. What do you value most about participating in a team environment?

(2 minutes) 3. What three wishes would you make to increase the connection and energy of this team?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

### **INTERVIEW SUMMARY**

1. What was the most positive quote that came out of the interview?
  
2. What was the most compelling story that came out of the interview? What details and examples did the interviewee share? How was the interviewee and/or others changed by the story?
  
3. What was the most energizing moment of the interview for you as a listener?
  
4. Did a particularly creative and/or innovative example of positive team energy emerge during the interview? If so, describe what you learned about it.
  
5. What three themes stood out most for you during the interview?

***Appreciative Inquiry – half Day Workshop Agenda  
Energy”***

***“A Connected Team Creates Positive***

***June 20, 2013 Child and Family Services- Winnipeg***

***10:00 pm- 1:00 pm***

**10:00pm Introduction to the session** – introduction, purpose, agenda

**10:10 Tree Analysis** Two groups analyze the root cause of the same topic “morale”, but from either a positive or negative perspective. What are the root causes and how does it manifest in the growth of a tree/its branches? One person from the group present and discuss the difference in energy depending on the starting perspective.

**10:25 Define the Appreciative Interview – “A Connected Team Creates Positive Energy”**  
Supervisor to share her introduction

**10:30 Discovery – Part 1:** paired story telling (interview guides)

**11:30 Discovery – Part 2:** Share highlights (*surfacing the positive/life-giving core of CFS*) from the interviews with all participants and list themes. Select the themes that have the most energy for the group to take into the Dream phase.

**11:45 Dream – Part 1:** As one large group - imagine your ideal of THE CFS Float team being connected, energized and balanced. Using your Discovery theme create a visual image (human sculpture, skit, dance, song) to represent your preferred future for this theme.

**12:00 Dream – Part 2:** Translate the visual image you created into a Shared Vision Statement. This statement bridges the best of “what is” with your speculation of “what might be”. It is meant to stretch beyond the status quo, challenge the common assumptions, and suggests what is a real, positive possibility.

To develop a good Shared Vision Statement, ask these questions:

6. Is it bold? Does it stretch, challenge, or interrupt “habits”?
7. Is it grounded? Are there examples in the team that illustrate the ideal as a real possibility?
8. It is desired? If it could be fully actualized, would the team want to do it? Does everyone want it as a preferred future?
9. Is it affirmative? Is it written in the positive and in the present tense?
10. Does it provoke action?

**12:30 Design/Destiny Individual reflection – 1 min.**

“You have an opportunity now, as an individual, to publicly...

- State a simple commitment
- Make an offer

Be bold, creative and innovative!”

Share the commitment out loud with the team.

**12:45- 1:00 Close; Questions, reflections and thank you**



