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After investigating a number of possible practicum projects, I chose to work with my team in our Process and Project Management Office, plus a few additional colleagues. Our mission is to provide process analysis and enterprise project management to the IT, Administrative, and Academic Affairs divisions of the University of Utah. There are five of us currently assigned to our team, so we invited another three former colleagues to join us.

My sponsor and primary stakeholder was our Director, Paula Millington. She and I discussed our positive topic at length, and we reviewed my modified interview guide several times. We disagreed somewhat on the nature of the positive topic; Paula thought we should choose something practical, but I felt drawn to define a topic that might be more elevated and inspiring. Because I was only able to arrange a half-day inquiry, I did not have time to explore the topic beforehand with the entire group. But as a member of the team, I felt I had insight into the issues and challenges we face, so I felt confident that I could identify a topic that would work well. I chose "Creating Exceptional Working Teams" as the topic of our inquiry.

Our initial four hour session took place on Thursday June 11th. We gathered in our Dumke Executive Board Room. My initial intention was to provide a brief overview of Appreciative Inquiry before moving into the paired interviews. Some of my teammates were aware of my work with AI, and some were not, and I thought a short introduction to the core concepts would help frame the work to come. However, I was counseled out of providing any overview material by an AI consultant Paula and I met, who encouraged me to move the group directly into the paired interviews. This turned out to be a major mistake, and I should have trusted my instincts. Because I had not adequately prepared my colleagues for the work ahead, they struggled to find a purpose for engaging the work. Most of them were expecting one of our traditional strategic planning meetings, and were not prepared for what unfolded.

Because everyone attending knew everyone else, I decided to randomize interview partners and teams using cards from a Go Fish deck. The paired interviews and sharing of the stories went mostly well, but the subsequent work to identify life-giving themes fell quite flat. My associates just did not understand what I was hoping would be the outcome of the experience. The stories and themes remained very mundane, and were simply a rehashing of the same issues and challenges we face daily in our work.

Because the work of identifying life-giving themes was moving along so slowly, I chose to allow it to continue longer than I should have. I tried to coach the two teams into elevating their discussions. But again, because I had not provided any context for the work, they just didn't know how to give me what I was asking for. After too long of a discussion, the teams finally were able to list the various themes that came up for them. I hoped that using colored dots to map the positive core might reveal a single group theme, but it didn't.

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Working with the whole group, I led a discussion of the two sets of themes, and tried to guide the group toward defining one or two discreet statements that could represent their positive core. The three themes they were able to articulate were:

1. Team synergy and communication
2. Trust in a clear vision
3. Creative control to achieve and succeed

At the three hour mark, I realized I wasn't going to be able to move the group into a meaningful Dream exercise, much less be able to do any Design work. Instead I decided to present the AI overview I had originally planned to give, but had been talked out of giving. Providing the conceptual framework made a big difference, although it prompted some resistance from a few of my colleagues. I realized several of them see themselves as expert problem-solvers, and focusing on the positive wasn't a very appealing concept.

I was not able to bring the Discovery phase to a successful close that first day, much less move on to the Dream or Design phases. Other challenges to my success that first day were people who came late and left early, left in the middle to attend other meetings and calls, and were generally quite casual about keeping to the schedule. This is typical for one of our regular strategy sessions, which can be very informal, and I understood that I had not done a good job setting the stage for our work. Between the overall poor experience, and the resistance I encountered at the end, I wasn't sure if this group would want to continue with the work. However, after a frank review of our first day's efforts, Paula and I quickly scheduled a second session and made sure everyone knew it was a priority to attend.

Looking back on that first session, I realized how poorly I executed several of AI's original and emergent principles. There was a powerful dissonance between what I planned and anticipated, and what the team expected and anticipated. I did not offer any choice of whether or not to engage in the work, or what to study, and I should have been more aware of the value several of my associates place on being expert problem solvers. My own focus on the positive was overshadowed by our general lack of wholeness. During the time between the first and second session, I looked hard at my mistakes. I realized that the themes that emerged out of that first session, a clear vision and sense of creative control, were precisely what I had failed to provide. As I planned for the second session, I made sure to include a clear vision of the goals and objectives of the work to come, and I invited my attendees to be co-creators of the session with me.

In order to keep a sense of fun and informality, I presented the second session's agenda as a pirate treasure map. I began the session with a very short review of the previous session, and shared how I felt I had not adequately given the clear vision and creative control which was the theme of the previous work. But instead of trying to pick up where we had left off, I decided to use the Two Trees exercise as an entirely new Discovery process. Because the Two Trees exercise allows problems and pain-points to be described, everyone present seemed willing and able to engage. Several people said the Two Trees was their favorite part of the entire process, and talked about ways they could use it in other aspects of our process analysis work. The Two Trees exercise also allowed each team to select its

own positive topic based on the issues most present in their current work. I was surprised how often I heard the phrase “positive opposite” spoken during the remainder of the day.

Team One’s problem tree was “ineffective IT governance;” and its positive opposite was “holistic IT alignment.” Team Two chose “inability to make data-driven decisions” for their problem tree; and “informed strategic decision making” as its positive opposite.

In addition to describing the positive opposite of the problem statement, I coached the teams to use the exercise to define their core theme to take into the Dream phase. Everyone found it interesting how similar the core themes turned out to be. Team One’s core theme was “informed strategic decision-making based on visionary leadership.” When the words “visionary leadership” were first mentioned, Team One wasn’t sure how to build them into their theme, so I helped them find a way to include it without feeling the need to start the exercise over. Team Two chose “we have a strategic vision, plan, and goals, and IT is part of that vision” for their core theme.

The team discussions during the Two Trees exercises were very productive, but still somewhat on the serious side, so I encouraged everyone to really play during the Dream phase. Because they had already started sharing images of a preferred future during the Two Trees, they were able to move pretty quickly into creating visual representations of their themes. In addition to drawing materials, I also provided blocks, tinker-toys, and a variety of other creativity tools. Both teams created visual representations rather than songs or skits. Team One did a 3-D sculpture using blocks and tinker-toys, and Team Two started out with a drawing but then placed all sorts of toys on top of it, making their own 3-D presentation. The crafting of the provocative propositions went very well. People initially referred to the instructions and examples I gave, but then created possibility statements entirely out of their own creative ideas.

Team One’s provocative proposition: **Build a foundation >> to fulfill the aspirational vision >> to meet the changing landscape of Higher Education.** They originally presented their proposition on the wall face down, so that it had to be read backwards. They felt this helped highlight its importance and challenging nature. Their sculpture of blocks represented the structure of data collected at the university, surrounded by the customers who need excellent data management, with visionary leadership and a holistic view. The colored blocks on top of the data pillars represented strategic decisions about which projects get the green, yellow, and red lights. Customers are all able to see and appreciate the solid data structure and decisions about projects, but the visionary leader can see the entire landscape as well.

Team Two’s provocative proposition: **We are a caravan of diverse vehicles traveling together to reach the same [blank] destination.** They explained that the blank was to allow different stakeholders to describe their destination in their own unique way, while still holding a cohesive vision for everyone involved. Their drawing represented the road forward toward a glorious future, leaving behind the graveyard of broken dreams. Even though everyone might have their own unique vehicle, they all knew they were headed in the right direction.

My idea for the Design phase was to repurpose some of the methods and practices we use to do process analysis, and create a method for doing “possibility analysis.” We had about 45 minutes for this part, which also included a short break for lunch. Everyone brainstormed their ideas for how the provocative propositions might be made into reality. They wrote their ideas on sticky notes and placed them on large sticky sheets on the wall. Then working together, we grouped all the ideas into similar categories or “possibility families.”

The possibility families that were identified were: culture, measurement, data, strategic planning, services, and tools and implementation tactics.

My original hope for this exercise was that we would get to this point, and even though we were scheduled to conclude at 12:30, the group continued to work on it until almost 1pm. There was enough interest in it that I scheduled a follow-up meeting to continue exploring. The group feels that this exercise might become a playbook of sorts for finding ways to move forward in our process work when good ideas are identified, but clients don’t know how to turn them into practical strategies. In a way, this naturally flowed into a Delivery/Destiny phase.

The purpose of this inquiry was as much to introduce Appreciative Inquiry to my colleagues as it was to address specific problems or issues we might be having. As much as I felt I failed in that during our first session, I know I succeeded, and exceeded my own expectations, after the second. The group appreciated the clear vision I laid out at the beginning of session two, and felt like every exercise naturally moved into the next in a way that allowed them to succeed in the work. Several post-session conversations have taken place, including ways that we can bring these individual exercises into our regular process work, as well as when we might be able to engage more formal inquiries with our clients.

The story we told in the second session was much more of a co-construction. I’m very pleased that I was able to guide the group through the entire AI process toward a meaningful end. The one thing I wish I could have done was to better prepare the group from the start, so that the paired interviews and shared stories might have flowed more naturally into the Dreaming and Design work. But looking back, I realize this group of people needed the work to be grounded in practicality in a way that required starting with problem statements, then moving toward positive opposites. The Two Trees exercise was the perfect bridge that allowed everyone to freely choose to study and move toward a more positive vision of our work.

Because of the challenges I faced in session one, the interview stories didn’t translate directly to dreams of a preferred future. Permission is granted to use my story and the details shared in this narrative, as well as the included session materials. What I look forward to in my future AI work is to brilliantly bridge my own passion for Appreciative Inquiry with my clients’ readiness and receptiveness for the power and beauty of the work.