MEANING MAKING IN TEAMS:

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY WITH PRE-IDENTITY AND POST-IDENTITY GROUPS

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In this chapter, I am going to reflect upon a series of cases where I and others have used Appreciative Inquiry (AI) for team building. My interest in this began when, inspired by AI, I began using a more incidental, less systematic form of what I came to call an "appreciative process" in my change practice.[1] The success I had when I reoriented my clinical research from a problem-focused to a solution-focused one led me to even more interest in systematic applications to groups and teams. A series of experiments convinced me of the value of AI for team building and emboldened me to experiment further with it. I have found that an appreciative inquiry can have useful, even transformational effects on teams.[2] I wish to focus on a specific application of AI that I call the "Best Team Inquiry", discussing where it is and isn't useful, and why. I will make the point that there are two very different kinds of groups and they construct the meaning of events very differently. As such, AI has different impacts, and must be used in different ways, in both types of groups.

My use of AI with teams has led me to think differently about teams, team development, and most importantly, how meanings get constructed in teams that support the team's ability to survive and prosper in its environment. This paper is therefore a description of my work "in progress". I hope to add some new perspectives in understanding how an appreciative inquiry can be developmental for groups.

Some Initial Observations About Groups

To begin, I wish to explain the perspective on human groups in organizations that has come out of my use of AI so that what comes later will be clearer to the reader. A group is as much of a socially constructed reality as any other social system, and the constructionist principle of AI (see Introduction) applies as much to groups as to organizations. Groups go in the direction of what they most talk and ask questions about. The 'meanings' they share become their reality. The meanings that get socially constructed, particularly in the formation and functioning of the team, are there to support at least two sometimes complimentary and sometimes contradictory ends: 1) the ability of the group to survive and prosper in its environment and 2) the ability of each individual to survive and prosper in his/her environment. The relevant environment of a "team" consists of other individuals and teams in the organization, and sometimes suppliers, customers and other stakeholders outside of the organization. Interestingly, the relevant environment of each individual is far more complex, as it includes

individuals and groups, both past and present, that impinge on the person from outside, as well as inside, the work environment. Forces outside the work environment, like the family and personal history, can have much more influence on a person's meaning making than anything going on in the work environment. I find that the meanings that individuals construct are a function of their perceived self-interest and the meaning-web of groups they identify with, but it is not as simple as it sounds. The groups the individual identifies with are many and varied, past as well as present, and each can influence their meaning making at any moment in unexpected ways.

Before a person identifies with a group, the group itself is seen as a potential source of threat and/or opportunity for furthering that person's self-interests. It is outside, rather than inside, the meaning making nexus of the individual. From a social construction of reality perspective, the dynamics of group formation are best seen as a complex interaction of sometimes complimentary, often competing attempts to socially construct a shared reality that will support each individual's aims. It is only when the group has been constructed in such a way that a person comes to identify with it, that the group resides inside the person's meaning-making nexus. Now the group's needs to survive and prosper become a force in shaping the ongoing process of creating, maintaining and changing social reality going on in the individual's mind. For ease of exposition I will refer to these as <u>pre-identity</u> and <u>post-identity</u> <u>groups</u>:

- A <u>pre-identity group</u> is one in which most individuals are not identified with the group and so the aims of individuals are far more salient than the aims of the group in the meaning making taking place.

- A <u>post-identity group</u> is one where most individuals identify with the group. By this I mean that they see their personal and social identity as including their membership in this group, and that what affects the group affects them. Here individuals are willing to take the needs of the group into account, sometimes even willing to sacrifice their personal needs, in the ongoing processes of action and meaning-making.

Both kinds exist in organizations. While length of tenure probably has a small correlation with post-identity grouping, I have found that groups can exist for a long time in an organization and remain pre-identity. It is also true that well formed groups can develop into a strong post-identity state fairly rapidly. A key lesson from my experience thus far is that the consequence of any inquiry that seeks to influence the process of social reality (meaning making) will be very different in a pre-identity and post-identity group.

One more point before I delve into experiences using AI with pre- and post-identity groups. Because this is a paper on team-building, the bias is clearly that post-identity is what we are aiming for. From a larger perspective there is certainly room to debate whose interests are being served by identification with organizational groups, and I am sidestepping that completely. Rather, I will take the organization's and team's point of view that post-identity groups are more functional for organizational well being. This too can be challenged by those that worry about "group think"[3] and the "Abilene paradox.."[4] I think it is safe to say that

organizations are more likely to be undermined by pre-identification processes than post-identification ones. Furthermore, post-identification with organizational groups does not have to be at the expense of individual identity. It would take us too far a field to explore in depth the path through which a team comes to have "differentiated relationships", a state where people are *both* separate from yet connected to each other and so go beyond the self versus group paradox of human association. Let me just note in passing my belief that post-identity groups are the required platform for the most effective teams of all, "differentiated teams"; those where people are willing to tell each other the truth of their experience, and neither "group think" nor going on unwanted journeys to Abilene are possible.[5]

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY IN PRE-IDENTITY GROUPS

In this section I will look at two different kinds of pre-identity groups in this order: those that are newly formed and those that are created out of a merger of two or more past groups. The Appreciative Inquiry process that I'll be discussing throughout most of this paper is one I call the "Best Team Inquiry" and, used with newly formed teams, it goes like this:

> - First, group members are asked to recall the best team experience they have ever been a part of. Even for those who have had few experiences of working with others in groups, there is a 'best' experience.
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> - Each group member is asked, in turn, to describe the experience while the rest of the group is encouraged to be curious and engage in dialogue with the focal person.
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> - The facilitator encourages members to set aside their clichés and preconceptions, get firmly grounded in their memory of the actual experience, and fully explore what about themselves, the situation, the task, and others made this a "peak" experience.
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> - Once all members have exhausted their exploration, the facilitator asks the group, on the basis of what they have just discussed, to list and develop a consensus on the attributes of highly effective groups.
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> - The intervention concludes with the facilitator inviting members to publicly acknowledge anything they have seen others in the group do that has helped the group be more like any of the listed attributes.

In my experience, the BTI process can help a team to work through many of the pre-identification group processes normally associated with the "storming phase" in groups, to the point where they, in effect, skip the phase! While I still believe that a successful experience of managing conflict is useful for strengthening trust and cohesiveness in a group, I have also found that it is not necessary for developing into a post-identification group. Part of this impact can come from the content of the BTI (the stories and the vision) and part of it from the process (talking to each other appreciatively). Note a couple of important points about this process:

Public Sharing: Each member tells his or her story in front of all the other team members.

Dialogue: Other team members are encouraged to not just listen attentively, but to engage in dialogue with the member telling the story.   The facilitator models appropriate levels of depth and breadth in the questions s/he asks.

Meaning Making: The group summarizes what it has heard in the stories by developing a common vision of itself at its best.

Affirmation: There is an invitation to appreciate each other as a way to bring the process to closure.

I have used this intervention with about a dozen teams, early in their life. Each of these teams was a project team created to accomplish some objective. Sometimes there was a designated leader in the group and sometimes the group's "leader" was not a team member. Experimental testing of this intervention with pre-identity teams showed that they significantly outperformed teams that did not receive team-building interventions.[6]

Perhaps the most important effect of the Best Team Inquiry is that members get to describe their ideal social identity without naming it as such. As they talk about "what about themselves made this a peak team experience", they are, in effect, describing the roles and role compliments they most value. When they discuss "what about other" and "what about the team" they get to describe the character and process of a team that supports their ideal social identity. In the space of a couple of hours the underlying needs and issues that might take months to work through are surfaced, not as problems, conflicts, or highly emotional reactions, but simply as good memories, punctuated with deep emotion.

The questions that other members ask are, for the most part, coming from their personal agendas and therefore, they have an opportunity to clear up misperceptions and uncertainties about the other's motivations and character that impinge on the questioner's ability to get his/her interests met.   The opportunities for successful inter-role compliments are revealed as each person, in turn, gets to tell their story.

It is important to recognize the meaning that is being invested in each story. It is different for the tellers and the listeners. For the teller, a couple of things seem to consistently happen. First, people's "peak" team experiences are almost always couched in terms of highly successful teams. It is as though, in displaying the quality of the person's past experience, implicit claims are being made about the kind of resource this person can be for the new group. This is most noticeable in the discomfort shown by people who don't have a story of a wildly successful team to share. They often need to qualify and discount their stories as if to say "I know this wasn't a terribly successful team and I really am capable of more success than this story shows". Secondly, the teller is generally attending to the impact s/he is having on group members as the story is being told, looking to see if the impact is consistent with the ideal

social identity s/he is trying to establish in the group. If the story veers away from that the teller is usually quick to qualify how that part of the story might be less than "peak".

For the listeners, however, the nexus of meaning is in each of their own ideal social identities. They seem to be listening mainly for how the teller's story matches or conflicts with the kind of group they want to create for themselves. This is most apparent, of course, in the questions they ask. One real advantage of appreciative inquiry is that it allows people to ask each other questions about their values, motivations and interests without appearing to be confrontational. A question like "what are your real motivations?" is difficult to ask without the receiver feeling confronted and defensive. A question like "why was this detail in your story important to you" is much less likely to evoke negative affect. When they ask each other questions about their peak experiences, on the surface they are simply asking questions about a concrete event that can be answered by reference to that concrete event. This is at least a benign experience and can even have a bonding effect. Talking to each other about happy memories that are meaningful is a place where friendship can grow. Underlying that, however, much less benign meanings are being construed. Even if they are not fully aware of it, the questioners are asking questions that have big stakes. They are questions that allow them to gauge the extent to which this other person will support the "ideal social identity" the questioner is trying to construct in the group.

AN INTERLUDE INTO GROUP DEVELOPMENT THEORY

I have come to see much of the drama of early group life as a journey to establish one's social identity in a way that matches the beliefs and perceptions about survival and prosperity in that individual's unique environment. Let us call this an "ideal" social identity. Establishment of this identity requires that other individuals take on complementary identities and that the group take on consonant characteristics and processes. This rarely falls into place neatly (though occasionally does) because of the many possibilities for conflict amongst the differing ideal social identities of the different members. In unstructured, leaderless groups these issues are most visible. In structured, task oriented groups with an externally imposed authority hierarchy, these issues are much more submerged, but just as present. Early group life, and the sociopolitical constraints of corporate realities, result in a period of time when these conflicts do not get aired. Adults are willing to forgo immediate need satisfaction when groups first form in order to develop the credibility and alliances that will allow them to get their needs satisfied later. The first stage of group development is a "wait and see" time when people put their "best face forward" and look for opportunities to establish their ideal social identity in an harmonious and peaceful way. It is only after they have concluded that things are not going their way, and probably won't without aggressive action, that the next "stage" of group development may surface.

I have found that the main underlying issues in what we call the "storming" stage, a stage described in numerous theories of group development, comes from the "role compliments" that people get put into when others assert their ideal social identity.[7] Roles are the basic building blocks of social reality. It is here where the press of group norms and

expectations meets the individual's will to act. A role is a set of expectations held by the collective about the behavior of the incumbent. It contains the product of the meaning making process the group has engaged in, and is a mechanism by which meaning is made within a group, but is not fully determinant or static. The individual occupying a role will bring his/her unique set of abilities and motivations to the role and in so doing, shape the ongoing meaning of the role within the group. All roles, by definition, are inter-subjective. They cannot exist in isolation because they are an expression of the individual's place within the collective. As such, for any person to enact a role, others must be willing to take on the complimentary roles. In practice this means for me to take on the "boss" role, you have to be willing to take on the "subordinate" role. Conversely, I cannot act like a "subordinate" with out someone willing to play the "boss" role for me. For me to be the "wise one" you have to be willing to be the "respectful listener", and so on. Of course, roles are not always mutually exclusive or singularly inclusive, nor do all require well-defined compliments, but all do require the consent of the group within which the role is enacted. Without this consent the behavior of those trying to assert a role will be ignored or undermined. Within teams, the group's character and processes also have to compliment the individual's role. For example, someone whose ideal social identity entails "being creative" will not feel at ease in a group that eschews creativity. A person with a strong ideal social identity of "rebel" is only going to identify with a group that is, itself, identified as rebellious.

When groups are first forming, the social reality of the group is vague and ambiguous. Part of how it is constructed is through finding roles for the various members. The more ambiguous and indeterminate the existing social structure in which the group is embedded (it's environment), the more latitude individuals have to attempt to construct their own role identities, thus building the social order from the "bottom up". Of course, the obverse is true as well. The more structured the pre-existing social reality, the more social reality is built from the "top down", with individuals slotted into pre-existing roles.

To make this more concrete, a new "team" that is formed by a reshuffling in a company that has a manager and a number of direct reports who each head up their own departments, has a great deal of its role definitions pre-determined. In contrast, a task-force consisting of peers drawn from various functions is much less determined. If the prevailing role structure of the first team is well suited to the tasks and individuals, then there is little reason to expect a "storming" phase of much intensity. In such a case, the larger social structure has embedded within it an appropriate and harmonious network of role compliments.

The more social reality has to be created from the "bottom-up", however, the more likely conflict over role-compliments will need to take place for members to identify with the team. More often than not, the conflict is not of the "I don't want you to have that role" variety, but of the "I don't want to have that role compliment" sort. One irony is that the meaning given to this kind of role conflict is most often "personality clash". The process of constructing a social reality is not generally visible to members and being so self-oriented, rarely enters the meaning making nexus. Rather, one member will notice how upset she gets when another member talks in a certain way. Others will notice her *upset-ness* (if they notice anything at all). What they do not notice is that the other person's "way of talking" is putting her into a role compliment at odds with her ideal social identity.

Until enough people feel that there is a good fit between their ideal social identity and the social identity granted them through membership in the group, the team remains in a pre-identity state. In such a state, all interactions are primarily concerned with meeting the needs of individuals. Talk of group goals and tasks simply mask individual agendas. The meaning making process at play in the group is entirely at the service of individual survival and prosperity, and is therefore highly fragmented. It is probably more appropriate to talk about competing and contrasting realities than any kind of coherent group reality. If the group lasts awhile (because, for example, it is embedded in an environment that forces it to last) a social reality develops that covers for the lack of identification with the group, generally leaving such groups in a state of repressed tension and mediocrity.

The team moves out of the pre-identity state and enters the post-identity state only when a sufficient number of members believe that membership in the team aids them in surviving and prospering in their individual environments. I don't know what a sufficient number is but it is certainly more than half.

Back to the Appreciative Intervention in Newly Formed Teams

So what the BTI does with a pre-identity group is allow people to declare what kind of group and what kind of role matches their ideal social identity. As each person gets to tell their peak experience story it is not unusual for it to become apparent that there is a fair degree of convergence in the processes and character of the teams that all members identify with. This becomes explicit in the next stage of the inquiry when the group is asked to list the qualities of "highly effective teams".   Regardless of the question, of course, they are listing the qualities of teams that support their ideal social identity. A list will get constructed and people will agree that is what they want from the team but the listing and agreement by itself will have little impact on the team. People will still have to wait and see if others' behavior matches their good intentions.

I believe, however, this activity does aid development of the group beyond pre-identity stage because the meaning making process has been positively altered. What does it mean when John says so and so or Sally does such and such. Actions are given meanings by the perceivers. In a vacuum of information there is a clear tendency for people to perceive the worst. Even when there is information, caution and cynicism are common tendencies of corporate life. The BTI changes the filter by which group members perceive each others actions. Now that I understand more about the positive intentions behind John's behavior, and see how they can further my own needs and interests, I make a different kind of meaning out of his future actions, one that is more consonant with my own ideal social identity and one that makes me more willing to identify with the team. This is how I think the "best team" appreciative inquiry helps a group develop into a post-identity state.

It can happen, of course, that someone's "peak team" story is quite at odds with the ideal social identities of other members.

I recall one team in which a young man described in some detail his peak team experience where everyone else did whatever he told them and how grateful they were for his expertise and leadership. It was clear that others in the team did not think much

of that. Interestingly, this allowed members to bond together even more quickly through an identified "negative other" who was repeatedly "put in his place" in following meetings. This person did not have the personal or political clout to block the rest of the group from forming into a team they could identify with and, after "being put in his place", was able to find a role for himself that he and others could value.

More often however, people discover that they share similar beliefs and values about what great teams are all about.

In one team each of the stories people told were about teams that overcame great odds and obstacles in order to be successful, where members were under a lot of stress and were willing to put in long hours.   As members explored each other's stories they noticed that as a group they did not want to just meet expectations, they wanted to exceed expectations and that everyone liked pushing themselves to the limit. "No slackers here" was one person's excited comment, and it seemed to me that people left the session having already bonded through their stories almost as if they had lived through them together.

The last step of the inquiry, giving each other appreciation for what they have done already to help the new team be like the list of attributes, is only possible if the team has some history. If the group has had less than 10 hours of meeting or work time together, the last part of the intervention may need to be altered. In this instance members typically find it hard to think of anything to appreciate in others, especially right after the question is first asked. This is to be expected because in pre-identity groups members have been focusing mainly on themselves, not each other. If, after the invitation to appreciation there is a silence that lasts too long, I alter the request. I point out that I am not asking them to describe actions that <u>made</u> the group like the listed attributes, just things that helped the group move in those directions. I then ask them to spend a few minutes alone and think of anything they have personally done to help the group be more like the listed attributes and, if anything comes to mind, to note things others have done as well. Another alternative I have not tried, but could imagine, following the 4 D model, would be to guide the group into *dreaming* together at this point, to talk about how they could do more to become the kind of team they have just described.

This last step of declaring the positive intention behind previous acts is an important intervention into a pre-identity group. It allows for further differentiation of the members. In describing what they have done for the group, they are also making claims to roles that fit with their ideal social identities.   It gives people a chance to describe the intentions behind their past behaviors, increasing the level of disclosure and giving each other more insight into each person on the team. Often, in doing this, people remember things others have done as well and this recognition is important in building group cohesion.

One final point about newly formed, pre-identity, teams in organizations. It is common for some members of new teams to know each other or know of each other. This, of course, will have an effect on the meaning making going on. People may begin with negative views of each other based on stories they have heard, and this will, of course, skew how they interpret each others actions. The Best Team Inquiry can be extremely useful in overcoming this kind of problem.

In one team that used this process, one of the members had a reputation for being cold, uncaring and rigid. At first she refused to take part in telling stories of good teams. After others had completed their stories, however, she said she was now willing to do so and told an extremely touching story of a wonderful team experience early in her career at this organization. By the end of it she (and others) were in tears. The story also described how her peak experience team was poorly treated by the organization and helped to explain her fear of getting close to others at work. This event radically altered members' perceptions of this woman, the quality of relationships that developed and the whole developmental trajectory of this group toward much more positive ends..

AI WITH NEWLY MERGED TEAMS

A newly merged team is a special case of a newly formed, pre-identity team where two groups that were previously separate teams are now merged into one. This is a common phenomena in business where companies are merging and putting together new teams from parts of their old organizations. This also applies to internal restructurings that have the same effect. I have come to the conclusion that AI may be one of the most effective ways to begin the process of integrating two old teams into one new one. Let me note my debt of gratitude to Randy Evans, VP of North American HR and Quality at Compaq Computers who first got me thinking about the potential of AI in merger situations. During the merger of Compaq with Tandem Computers he contacted me about using AI and decided to apply the Best Team Inquiry process. Here is his story:

In August, 1997, two teams of operating executives from Compaq and Tandem met in Denver, Colorado to begin a business integration management process in anticipation of the merger of Tandem Computers and Compaq Computer Corporation. The twenty-seven executives supported the North American sales, marketing and customer service functions within their respective organizations, although at the time, the Tandem team also had responsibility for Latin America. Thirteen managers represented Compaq and twelve were from Tandem.

The two-day meeting commenced with each person presenting their personal histories. The areas covered were recommended in advance of the meeting, and included "peak career experiences," management style, and personal/family background. During the sharing process that lasted until 2:00 pm, "stories" emerged that informed everyone about what had been happening personally, in the company, the computer industry and society in the collective experience of the participants. For example, there was a common experience of career choices driven by rapid changes in technology, involvement with small entrepreneurial ventures, personal and business failures from company bankruptcies to divorces. The process was accomplished with a great deal of openness, humor and goodwill, and this grounding seemed to have a positive impact on the rest of the meeting.

Next, representatives of each company presented the mission, values, culture, organization structure, products and current operating priorities of their respective organizations. These information-sharing presentations brought each company group

closer together in recognizing common challenges. The presentations evoked numerous questions and open dialogue about business integration issues.

The first day closed with a "Prouds and Sorries" exercise whereby each company, meeting separately, listed and prioritized organizational strengths and weaknesses, and then presented the lists to each other. The total group discovered even more areas of common ground.

Before the scheduled start time on the second day, a group of volunteers from both organizations met to draft team operating norms to govern the post-acquisition integration process. Each member of the group was invited to sit back and recall images of integration practices in their experience that met or exceeded their highest expectations. The group shared their "best practices" stories, and based on this input, drafted the norms. The norms were then presented to the larger group later in the day, and were endorsed and referred to over the subsequent months. (The norms were not always followed, but when there were deviations, there was dialogue and reference to the pre-established ground rules. As a result, the North American organization appeared to resolve conflicts expeditiously, based on the norms and the overall teambuilding effect of the meeting.)

The balance of the second day served to develop top-level action plans with begin/end dates, clear assignment of responsibilities and agreement on the next steps for the total integration team. The meeting ended with a critique. There was general agreement that the meeting was productive. Over the following months, the North America integration team continued to work their action plans, and established a number of processes that were adopted by the rest of the Compaq organization.

I believe that the same pre-identity dynamics operate in a newly merged team as in a newly formed one. In addition, however, there are "ending" dynamics that are also playing out.[8] In a merger situation there is the loss and letting go of the past that must be managed in addition to the issues of ideal social identity that precede movement to a post-identity state. A good deal of attention has been given to the psychological dynamics of transition in the past two decades and we have come to understand that part of the letting go process is appreciation for what is being left behind. Appreciative inquiry, therefore, fits very snugly into the needs individuals have for appreciating and affirming the past <u>before</u> they step into a new future.

Some managers, in an attempt to move on with building a new team identity, try to forget or ignore the past too quickly. They fear that by constantly differentiating the newly merged team by referencing the two old teams, the divisions that exist continue to be reinforced. There is a time to stop referring to the two old teams but it is not when they are first brought together, especially if either or both have been strongly post-identification. The fact that people identify with the old team means that they are losing part of themselves in the loss of the old team. To let go requires that they first get to "eulogize" the old team, and then see that their ideal social identity might be found in the new team. Without proper endings, people have difficulty letting go of the past and this can account for a substantial portion of "resistance to change".

> ## AI WITH PRE-IDENTITY TEAMS
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> - Each person describes the best team they've been a part of, and all other team members probe and ask any questions they have about that experience.
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> - Once everyone has had a turn, the team "dreams" together it's list of the attributes of a great team
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> - People's sense-making is primarily aimed at their personal safety and success, not the team's even though their language will be primarily group centered
>
> - The focus of the intervention is on increasing personal identification with the team
>
> - People's stories will implicitly describe the kind of team and roles they want in order to

The exact design of bringing together a merged team needs to be customized to each particular situation, but let me offer a basic template. I do *not* think the basic BTI is appropriate. I suggest that newly merged teams begin by having members tell stories to each other about the best of their previous team/organization. This, in effect, allows them to do all the same things that happen in the "best team" inquiry in newly formed teams, and has the additional effect of allowing for an affirmative look to the past, a prerequisite for letting go. At this point, the structure of the intervention implicitly recognizes that this is not one team but two teams. After hearing the stories, each of the old teams goes off separately and compiles a list of the positive attributes of the old team/organization that it wants to bring into the new team and then shares this with the other team. This works with the psychological ending process by affirming the past and, in a sense, eulogizing it. Then, together, the two teams "dream" and "design", together, the new team's character and processes. At this point the team is now implicitly operating as one. Now some ritual demarcation, a symbolic transition point, is useful to bring closure to the identification people feel with their old teams. From this point on further work should focus on helping people identify with the new team.n the newly merged team, the pre-identity dynamics ensure that whatever is done, the meaning nexus of individuals constructs meaning in the context of threats and opportunities forregaining the positive social identity one had in the old team, and perhaps developing an even better one in the new team. At the same time, there is a post-identity meaning nexus that exists for the members of old teams, especially if they were strongly cohesive, that construes events from the perspective of the dignity and respect the old team deserves. Appreciative inquiry has clear advantages for beginning the process of forming a new team by working with, not against, the meaning making processes typically found in such situations.

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY WITH POST-IDENTITY TEAMS

Appreciative inquiry in post-identity teams is both more challenging and has the potential to be more rewarding than work with newly formed teams. In newly formed teams a *best team inquiry* is always perceived as useful and appropriate. In plain language, it is simple and almost always a winner. In teams that have worked together for some time and will continue to work together for the foreseeable future, this is not always the case. I have found some success in using an appreciative inquiry intervention with on-going teams in different ways, discussed below.

I suggest that the original purpose of appreciative inquiry, to create new, evocative, generative and inspiring images that aid group evolution operates quite differently in pre and post-identity groups. In a pre-identity group helpful images are those that create a vision of a team worth belonging to. The issue in the pre-identity team is the team itself. In post-identity groups helpful images are those that point to something more than the team itself. Concerns are less about being a team and more about what the team will do. In post-identity groups members are concerned with the team's need to survive and prosper in its environment, not just their own needs. Appreciative inquiry is experienced as useful and appropriate when it helps the team do that.

As a consequence, the BTI is generally not that helpful with post-identity groups, with a few exceptions discussed below. Instead, there needs to be an inquiry into the issues the group has constructed as meaningful to its purpose, flipped into the affirmative. This is the issue of "topic choice" endemic to appreciative inquiry and the same risks and opportunities associated with AI in organizational settings apply. It's easy to say that if motivation is an issue, the group can inquire into times of peak motivation. If unhappy customers is the issue, we can inquire into times of greatest customer satisfaction, and so on. Things are never quite so simple however. Consultants often have to probe behind the presenting problem to uncover what kind of inquiry might unleash real energy. Unless there is some real interest, particularly by the group's leaders, in the topic of the inquiry things get pretty flat fast.

Often, in post-identity groups, the inquiry needs to gather stories from outside as well as inside the team. At the same time as the intervention is addressing the expressed need of the team, it is making an impact on the process by which meaning is constructed, turning the prevailing deficit group consciousness into a more affirmative group consciousness. This is a well documented intention of appreciative inquiry and I don't have much new to say about it. I would emphasize, however, that the leadership of the group must understand and support the attempt to shift the group's consciousness in this way or the intervention ends up looking, at best, like poorly organized benchmarking and, at worst, like a "pollyannish" waste of time. Benchmarking is studying the "best in class" of what others do so that you can copy it. There is quite a discipline to it and if that is the purpose of the exercise, then I encourage doing benchmarking well. Appreciative inquiry, however, is about gathering, and understanding anew, stories of peak experiences in order to go beyond them. It is as much an intervention into the social process of the team, changing the meaning making process and the self-identity of the team, as it is about influencing group outcomes and the content of the inquiry.

I have used the BTI with some success in post-identity teams in three, specific and different types of situations:

1. a team that doesn't have an identified problem but simply wants to do some group maintenance.
2. teams that are stuck in undisclosed resentments.
3. teams stuck in a paradox.

 1) GROUPS DESIRING TO INCREASE EFFECTIVE INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS.

One application of the best team inquiry with post-identity teams is where the team, or team's manager, wants to spend some time building relationships amongst team members. This kind of team building request is often served by having members fill out a personality inventory and then learn about each other's styles and differences. Appreciative inquiry is a good alternative, especially if the team has already had a personality inventory type of workshop. If "teaming" is not all that important to the team, it might be better to have members describe their "best experience in this organization" rather than their best team. Depending on the amount of time, other kinds of peak, personal experiences can be included in the inquiry too. I do not, however, recommend members talking about their best experience in that particular team. In times where I have done something like that, I have found that members will recall a similar experience and after 2 or 3 people have talked about it the process loses steam and members who haven't spoken yet have little to contribute.

Generally I would suggest leading off a retreat with this activity. In this kind of format there is little need to explicitly do anything other than listen to the stories people tell. A post-identity group will know how to use this experience to further the group's survival and prosperity in its environment without the need to have this designed into the retreat. In a typical 2-day retreat, time is set aside to work "issues". The way in which these get worked will be deeply affected by the prior experience of appreciative inquiry. It is likely to impact not only the content, but also the process of how the team decides what it wants to do and how it goes about doing that.

In this kind of environment, the team is likely to construct a meaning for this process that is about relationships, intimacy and celebration. I think that is a wonderful thing and would plan to organize the space and related activities to work with that to make it a bonding event.

One of the most powerful examples of this process I am aware of concerned the senior executives of a large utility. This group of eight spent a whole day simply listening to each other's stories about their peak experiences in the organization. Most of them had 30 or more years with the organization. Most of them had spent many years working together. Yet few of them had ever had such an intimate conversation with each other. Even the consultants were amazed at the level of intensity and focus in the group as each member physically went into the center of the room for at least an hour, told his/her stories, and replied to the questions of their peers.   The impact on the group lasted well into the night as members continued to

deepen their intimacy over dinner and afterwards. The internal consultants told me that use of more appreciative approaches began to be used by these executives in managing the organization after this retreat.

2) GROUPS STUCK IN UNDISCLOSED RESENTMENT

I have had a couple of experiences of consulting to post-identity groups where a major theme was undisclosed resentments members had toward each other. In both cases these were groups of managers who had worked together for more than two years. Individuals were willing to privately tell me about their resentments but were adamant that they were not willing to talk about them at a team building session. In these cases I believed that discussion of the resentments could lead to clearing up misconceptions and fuzzy expectations but I was not allowed to tackle these issues directly. Clearly, a pro-longed period where members have undisclosed resentments will damage a post-identity group and may reduce the ability of the group to meet the individual's ideal social identity needs, causing it to revert to a pre-identity state. As well, the energy that is repressed can cause the group to be less able to survive and prosper in it's environment. In the past I have found this a very difficult situation to be helpful in.

The first time I used an appreciative inquiry in this kind of situation was out of frustration. I thought it might help members remember what kind of team they wanted to be in and start a virtuous cycle. The actual results were better than I expected.

I had been working with the CEO and his direct reports for about two years. The organization was in a remote, northern location and so all employees had strong community identifications as well as organizational ones. Most members of the administrative team had personal relationships outside of work. This organization was very prominent and visible in the community and this added pressure on the administrative team whose construction of reality had the team needing to appear harmonious and effective to the outside community.

It had been 9 months since my previous work with the organization and I had been asked to facilitate a 2 day team building retreat with the Admin team. The CEO had described it as a pretty routine maintenance and planning exercise. I arrived two days before the event and spent the first day meeting with all the team members, whom I had developed very good relationships with. When I asked the Head of Production how things were going he said "terrible" and went on to tell me how and why his relationship with the Head of Marketing, a formerly close personal friend, had soured considerably and how he couldn't understand things the Head of Finance was doing. I was surprised by the stories he told me as they did not fit my picture of the Head of Marketing or of Finance. When I met with the Head of Marketing, she began by focusing on what had happened in the organization over the intervening 9 months. When I asked her how things were going with Production, she got tense and as we talked more about it she began to weep, describing the pain she felt over the loss of her friendship with the head of Marketing and not knowing why. When I suggested she and he needed to get together and talk about it she refused, saying that she did not believe talking would

help, only make things worse. When I talked to the Head of Finance, he told me how he felt the Head of Marketing and CEO were undermining him. When I suggested this was an important issue to bring out in the team building session he told me that there was no way he wanted that discussed and if I brought it up he would deny it was an issue. Both he and the head of Marketing also had an issue with the newest member of the Admin Team, the Head of Materials, who were concerned that others inside and outside thought he had gotten his position because he was the CEO's hunting buddy. They didn't want that brought up either. When I went back the next day to the Head of Production to suggest he go talk about his perceptions of what was going on with the Head of Marketing he could not see how that would do any good and reminded me that he had told me in confidence and would be very upset if I betrayed that confidence.

So the scenario going into the team building retreat was that there were a lot of resentments, misperceptions and confusions amongst this team of 6 and I was not allowed to talk about any of them. Given that, I had worked with the CEO the prior afternoon to design a day where the real issues might come out themselves, saying just enough to the CEO to make him aware things were afoot without violating confidences. We designed the day to start with task issues and hoped that socio-emotional issues would surface, leaving time later to work those.

Unfortunately, the team members were quite adept at pretending that everything was just fine. The past year was reviewed, successes and failures noted, opportunities and threats identified without anyone going near any of the issues bubbling under the surface. Toward the end of the day I was getting frustrated as none of the socio-emotional issues was surfacing so I decided to try a best team inquiry, hoping it would at least open up more intimate dialogue. I led the group in the first two parts of the intervention: telling their stories and listing the attributes of a great team. I told them their homework that evening was to think of things that others had done to make this team more like the listed attributes and to come back tomorrow ready to share their appreciation's.

The next morning members came into the group with a lot of nervous energy. Then the Head of Marketing led off by saying that she had not been able to sleep all night because of how angry she was with the group and how little appreciation she was feeling. Others quickly agreed that they had found the exercise difficult for similar reasons. The issues that had been simmering under the surface came boiling up and the group spent the rest of the morning leveling and working through past hurts and resentments. It turned out most were due to misperceptions and misinterpretations of past behavior. It was a very cathartic session. As the session wound down members felt that my intervention had failed and expressed some regret for not having done what I had requested. I thought that was pretty funny and we all had a good laugh as I described my undisclosed frustration of the previous day and my appreciation for what they had just done and how that had moved them much closer to the kind of group they wanted to be.

I look at this as a "paradoxical intervention".[9] In this case the intervention did not result in new, shared images of the team or its future. Rather it created a cathartic release by forcing people into a paradoxical tension. By focusing on what they were not feeling -- appreciation for each other -- the issues that were causing the discordant feelings could not be contained.

It is intriguing to me that, while appreciative inquiry led members to re-appreciate each other, they first had to ventilate their resentments. It does not seem to me that it had anything to do with the "stories" people told – these were quickly forgotten, nor with the list of attributes the team generated – there was not a lot of life or energy to the list. It was the contradiction between the task they were being asked to do, the feelings they actually had, and the needs of this post-identity team as a team. They had constructed a reality where the team needed to appear cohesive and affirmative to prosper in its environment, which included all the employees in the organization and members of the community. The call to give each other appreciation, therefore, was totally legitimate within this reality. To not be able to appreciate each other was a threat to survival of the team. They could not simply brush it off as an irrelevant or illegitimate request as a pre-identity group might well do. Unable to avoid it, they were forced to confront the contradiction between their espoused and actual state. Fortunately, there was a lot of real appreciation for each other lying latent, and a clear wish to be in affirmative relation to one another, so that catalyzing this kind of process had a very positive outcome.

I'm less sure what the impact would be in a group that did not see a need to be appreciative in order to survive and prosper in its environment. Again, the way in which a group constructs that heavily influences the meaning it makes of any event, and certainly influences the impact an appreciative inquiry will have on it. Of course, it could be that an appreciative inquiry will change the group's perception of what is required to survive and prosper – in fact some might say that is the whole point. But I think there must be at least an initial bias toward appreciation/affirmation within the meaning nexus of the group, or at the very least the group's authority, for much impact to be registered.

The third and final example of using the "best team" inquiry with a post-identity group does, in fact, alter the group's perception of it's own needs. But it works in a very special instance: when groups are "stuck".

3) GROUP STUCK IN PARADOXES

A perspective on groups that I find useful is that groups get "stuck" because they are enmeshed in a paradoxical dilemma.[10]   Paradoxes are endemic to group life and for the most part do not result in stuckness. Rather, they are experienced as "dilemmas" that frame a continuum of choice in decision situations. For example, "staff up projects to best utilize the talents of the staff" and "staff up projects to provide staff developmental opportunities" is a common dilemma in project management. In most cases such dilemmas are dealt with on a project by project basis, with succeeding decisions balancing off these mutually exclusive values. But when a group becomes stuck, unable to make a decision or take action, it is often because such a paradox is operating at a subterranean level in the group. This does not mean that members are not conscious of it (some probably are) but that the group, for whatever reason, is not able

to talk to itself about it.   Stuck groups can appear visibly dysfunctional or just normally mediocre. A post-identity group can be stuck in a paradox for quite a long time and as long as it is able to meet the demands of its environment can continue on operating in a "business as usual" style. Sometimes the stuckness is only apparent in retrospect after the group becomes unstuck.

I have found that using the BTI in a stuck group can reveal an image that resolves the paradox for the group. It is like a projective technique. The best team inquiry provides a blank screen for the post-identity group to generate new images that the team needs to survive and prosper in its environment. In this case there really is a generative image that emerges from the inquiry, one that helps the group become unstuck. When a group becomes unstuck, there is a clear, visible change in its energy and behavior, and the group can be seen to move along the path of achieving its potential and accomplishing its purpose.

I first became aware of this using a best team inquiry with a group that I did not realize was stuck until after the image that resolved its paradox surfaced and I observed the group go on in the following months to re-create itself into a much more effective and innovative team. But let me illustrate this with an example of using an appreciative inquiry with a group I was pretty sure was stuck.

A very large company I have worked with for many years had called on managers to experiment with creating self-managing teams. The company did not give much more support than that and attempts to create such teams were fragmented and spotty. In one part of the company, a senior manager had looked for professional departments where a group of people had operated well together for a number of years, had professional values and where the supervisor was due to retire. Once the supervisor retired, he was not replaced. Instead the team was henceforth "self-managing", and reported as a team to this senior manager, who had little time or inclination to supervise them.

This was a fairly successful department in this organization. Members were highly skilled both technically and as business people. Their job was to come up with customized solutions to major customer needs that were more efficient than current practices so that they would cost less and undercut the competition. Problems were brought to them by in-house sales and marketing people and they would work with the in-house people as well as customers to devise creative solutions. Prior to the change to self-management I had some interactions with this team and found them to be in a strong post-identity state. They were cohesive, proud to be members of their team and able to work team issues well. After the shift to self-management problems began to brew. About 4 months into the experiment team members were complaining to the senior manager that "this empowered work team stuff just doesn't work" and were suggesting reviving the supervisory role. The senior manager, whose main objective appeared to be not to increase head count, asked me to get involved.

I began by talking to each member separately and what emerged was a series of complaints about problems getting work done. It was unclear, at times, who was responsible for what. The amount of time and effort going into group meetings had ballooned and this was annoying for everyone. People were afraid that the group was

becoming less able to accomplish its purpose. Meetings had been held where all the issues they were describing to me had been hashed out and discussed. Plans for overcoming them had been made, including some pretty complicated resourcing processes, but they didn't seem to be working. It was clear to me that this group was "stuck", but I was not clear what the core of the stuckness was about.

At that point I asked them to meet with me for one afternoon to try an experiment to see if by exploring what they each knew about effective teams, they could develop a better process for managing their team. There were advantages to being self-managing and they were willing to try and make it work so they agreed. That afternoon I led an appreciative inquiry into best team experiences. After a couple of members had told their stories, one member told the story of working on a charity fund-raising drive with people who had been loaned, full time for 3 months, from their respective companies. Each person had pursued independent, creative initiatives in raising funds while at the same time fully supporting the initiatives of others. There was a program of activities to be done that had built up over the years and was fully documented for them. Over and above that, individuals pursued the group's core mission however they thought best.

This team reacted a little differently to this story than it had to others. Members were quieter and more withdrawn. The usual energetic enthusiasm was absent. At the same time, they did not seem to want to hurry on to the next member. It then dawned on me that this story offered a way out of an authority paradox (which, at the time, was one of a number of alternative explanations I had for their stuckness). The authority paradox occurs when members want to be authorized by the group to act on the group's behalf, but don't want to authorize others to act on the group's behalf. Members don't want others to obligate them to do things they have not agreed to, but want to be able to make decisions and take actions without always having to come back to the group for authorization. A group stuck in the authority paradox is one where members can't do anything without getting approval of the group.

Noticing the possibilities, I then highlighted them by asking this person how the group was able to let others have free reign without fearing someone, due to inexperience or eagerness, would get them into a bind? He said "we decided we had no way of knowing if we could trust each other so we figured we had more to lose by not trusting than by trusting". At this another member piped in "so trust costs less". The image of "trust costs less" blended this group's bottom-line business identity with the essential element for the resolution of the paradox. Because it was such a novel combination of those words, it opened up new gateways to emotional issues in this group. They agreed that the "problem" was that they were trying to agree as a whole group before anyone could do anything that effected the group, making it difficult for people to operate. If members always had to "check in" before agreeing to anything, it was easier to have 1 person (a supervisor) to check in with than a whole group. They were able to explore what the "price of distrust" was. Some were angry about how much other's distrust had cost them. People were able to admit that they hadn't felt trusted, hadn't been trusting others and that they believed trust would cost less. From there it

was easy to decide on the "core program" and ground rules for what people could do without seeking the group's prior approval.

I made sure that the group stayed with this set of issues and ideas until the discussion wound down and then the remaining members were asked about their best team experiences. Interestingly, they often referred back to the preceding discussion in their descriptions and explanations. After the stories were finished instead of listing attributes of effective teams I asked if there were any additional ideas about how to support trust costing less and the group listed the new set of processes it would use and how it would try to manage future trust issues. The team became even more successful thereafter and came to highly value its self-management. A year later it was transferred to another division during a major restructuring and a supervisor was assigned to the team. They were able to reverse that decision and retain self-management status.

A BTI can help a stuck, post-identity group by allowing for a generative image to emerge, one that offers a way out of the paradox. A common quality of generative images is that they jostle conventional thinking with uncommon word combinations, like "trust costs less." In doing so they offer opportunities to find synthetic resolutions to paradoxical dilemmas.

I am less confident that this kind of intervention would work with a pre-identity group stuck in a paradox. I doubt the members of the pre-identity group would (unconsciously) chose stories that aid the group to resolve the paradox. Remember, individuals in pre-identity teams do not identify with the team and are not very concerned with the team's needs to survive and prosper. Only in post-identity groups are members truly concerned about the team's needs as well as their own. The meaning of the BTI in a pre-identity group is most likely constructed as an opportunity for individuals to advance their interests and agendas. If an image emerges that resolves the group's paradox it will probably only be by chance and will probably not have a lot

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Using Best Team AI with Post-Identity Teams

A) TEAM BUILDING WORKSHOP

- Can be used instead of personality inventory type workshop

- Ask for stories from outside this particular team

- Allow the team to use the material that comes out of the stories as it sees fit

- Expect to build on a mood of intimacy

B) PARADOXICAL INTERVENTION

- Best used when people are very upset with the team but not willing to talk about it

- Allow a good amount of time between listing attributes of great teams and giving each other appreciation so the pressure of the contradictions become too much to hide

of impact on other group members.   But in a post-identity group, any team building intervention is construed as an opportunity to further the team's needs and interests. If an image that does resolve the group's paradox emerges members will notice it even if they are not aware of what they are noticing. It helps a lot if the change agent has some hunches about what is causing the stuckness and stays alert to changes in group energy, searching for the brilliant idea in the stories being told.

CONCLUSION

The "best team inquiry" is simple and effective in helping individuals in pre-identity teams move toward greater identification with the team. This occurs less through "design and deliver" than through changing the perceptions and interpretations, the meaning, that members assign to each others' past and future actions, and through the opportunities to describe the kind of team and social roles members want in order to identify with the team. Post identity teams, on
the other hand, are more able to utilize the appreciative inquiry process to truly dream, design and deliver phases of appreciative inquiry because members are concerned with the team's success. For the most part, then, the inquiry with a post-identity team needs to be customized to an "affirmative topic" that captures the team's needs as constructed by its members. The best team inquiry is not as appropriate with a post-identity team but there are some exceptions. I have discussed three: group maintenance team building retreats, paradoxical intervention into a group with undisclosed resentments and with a group stuck in an unconscious paradox.

Teams offer an excellent microcosm for studying the effects of appreciative inquiry on the process of social transformation. I suggest that the distinction between pre-identity and post-identity, which is so easy to see in groups, also operates at larger system levels. If this is true, then we should find that the impact of appreciative inquiry is quite different with social systems where individuals do not identify with the collective than those where they do. For example, using appreciative inquiry with multi-stakeholder groups, diverse communities in conflict, or fragmented organizations may, at best, aid these groups to develop a common sense of identity, helping to move them into a post-identity state. If I'm right, I'd expect the "design" and "deliver" phases of appreciative inquiry to appear less robust and inspiring and the follow through to be weak. Indeed, a well customized, appreciative inquiry might not worry about spending too much time on these phases with pre-identity social systems. Again, if I'm right, it is in post-identity systems where appreciative dialogue and dreaming can lead to powerful and evocative new ideas for how the collective can create a better future and the will to follow through will be found.

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