

## **Appreciative Inquiry with Teams**

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### Executive Summary

This article describes the author's thoughts and experiences in trying to help people have conversations that generate new, affirming and generative images. A simple process for running an appreciative inquiry with a team is described. Differences in using appreciative inquiry with new teams and ongoing teams are discussed. Four different ways to use appreciative inquiry in team-building events run by an external facilitator are described. The author goes on to discuss the role of the consultant as wordsmith in an appreciative process with teams.

## **Appreciative Inquiry with Teams**

The question I have been thinking about is how do people come to have conversations in groups that generate new, affirming and generative images of the group? By images I mean phrases, metaphors and stories that people invest with shared meanings. By affirming I mean that these images call to the best in us, capturing our heart's yearning and our spirit's intent. By generative I mean images that lead to developmental transitions or that constitute a more developed group identity.

I have been experimenting with a form of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) that I think can help create those kinds of conversations and lead to productive, developmental changes in teams. Appreciative Inquiry is a form of action research that attempts to help groups, organizations and communities create new, generative images for themselves based on an affirmative understanding of their past. Working from a socio-rationalist theory of change, (Barrett, Thomas & Hocevar, 1995, Bushe, 1995, Cooperrider, 1990, Gergen, 1990) these new images are expected to lead to developmental changes in the systems in which they are created. The four principles Cooperrider and Srivastva lay down for appreciative inquiry are that action research should *begin with appreciation*, should be *applicable*, should be *provocative*, and should be *collaborative*. The basic process of appreciative inquiry is to begin with a grounded observation of the "best of what is", then through vision and logic collaboratively articulate "what might be", ensuring the consent of those in the system to "what should be" and collectively experimenting with "what can be

In this article I will describe findings from my empirical and clinical (in the sense of Schein, 1987) research in using appreciative inquiry with teams. First I'll describe the "best team" method I have developed and impacts I have observed. I will share my thoughts on the use of appreciative inquiries with teams at different stages of their lifecycle and with some of the different issues they confront. I will look at how the "best team" appreciative inquiry can aid team development even when it doesn't generate new images. I will discuss other appreciative inquiries that can be more useful for team building and other uses for "best team" inquiries in addition to generating affirming

images. I conclude by talking about the role of OD consultants in helping teams to craft affirming, generative images.

### **A “Best Team” Appreciative Inquiry**

I developed a form of appreciative inquiry that can be used in small groups. In its simplest form it focuses on developing a shared, generative image of team work and 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. 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. 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. 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. 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 one business team I worked with one member talked about a group of young men he played pick-up basket ball with and described why they were, in his opinion, such an outstanding “team”. He described their shared sense of what they were there to do, lack of rigid roles, easy adaptability to the constraints of any particular situation in the service of their mission. But what most captured the team’s imagination was his description of how this group was both competitive and collaborative at the same time.

Each person competed with all the rest to play the best ball, to come up with the neatest move and play. Once having executed it, and shown his prowess, he quickly “gave it away” to the other players in the pickup game, showing them how to do it as well. This was a very meaningful image for this group as a key, unspoken, tension was the amount of competitiveness members felt with each other at the same time as they needed to cooperate for the organization’s good. “Back alley ball” became an important synthesizing image for this group that resolved the paradox of competitiveness and cooperation.

An appreciative inquiry like the one I described can have a useful impact on a group even if it does not result in any clearly articulated, shared imagery. In an experiment I found that project groups that received this intervention scored significantly higher on task outcomes and group processes than groups that didn’t (Bushe & Coetzer, 1995). So there does seem to be some benefit to sharing stories and stepping into an appreciative space without requiring highly specialized facilitation.

Sometimes simply creating an appreciative space is all a group needs to produce its own images. But more often than not the process does not simply unfold by itself. It takes some skill on the part of the facilitator to frame, shape and embellish the images group members generate into affirming and generative ones. These skills include a poetic ear, an eye for beauty, a keen sense of what others find inspiring and an open heart that can feel the unconscious yearning in the group.

As a team development intervention, there are times when a more focused inquiry is required than the “best team” inquiry described above. In these cases some subset of teamwork, like leadership or conflict management, is what members need to talk to each other about. So in addition to the skills mentioned above, the facilitator needs to have a good sense of timing and sense of what is called for in the situation.

## **New Teams**

The “best team” appreciative inquiry is particularly appropriate for new teams and may help the team do some important “norming” without having to go through “storming”. When teams are first formed, members are trying to establish their personal identities in the group. Much of the “forming and “storming” dynamics come out of the clash of establishing personal identity and the role complementarities these create (Srivastva, Obert & Neilsen, 1977). Role complementarity refers to the fact that for any person to take on a role (e.g., leader) others have to be willing to take on complimentary roles (e.g., followers). Attempts to assert identity in newly formed groups create the unintended effect of forcing others into role compliments, some of which they may not like. This leads to the “storming” phase of group development.

Having the opportunity to tell one’s “best team” story provides individuals with an important opportunity to establish their identity in the group. It gives them a chance to tell others, in a somewhat indirect way, what is important to them in relating to other team members, what roles they prefer to occupy, what group characteristics they most value, and so on. This can greatly accelerate the team formation process.

Developing a joint statement of good group qualities makes some norms members want to operate by explicit. Generally, these lists are not much different from the list a group would develop without the first step of telling their stories. These lists, however, have much greater meaning for group members because each point is tied to one or more stories. So much time is spent in organizations writing up lists that I have found listing kinds of activities, by themselves, to have limited value. More often than not the list is soon forgotten. Lists generated after an appreciative inquiry, however, can stick a lot more if the process has real participation from those involved.

If an appreciative inquiry is conducted very close to the beginning of a group’s life the last step, appreciating other’s contributions, may not be appropriate. That step could be taken later as a way to reinforce the aspirations the group set for itself and provide a cohesion building intervention on its own. If the group has had more than 10 hours of meeting or work time together, however, the last part of the intervention is appropriate.

Sometimes members find it hard to think of anything to appreciate in others, especially right after the question is first asked. This is to be expected as we know that in early group dynamics, members are too focused on themselves to be paying much attention to other people's contributions. When we have finished making the list and I invite people to point out things others have done to help the group be more like the listed attributes, I pause for about 20 seconds and if no one is able to offer anything, I then alter the request. I point out that I am not asking them to describe actions that made the group like the listed attributes, just things that helped the group move in those directions. These could be little things, but small actions can, over time, have large consequences. I then ask them to spend ten 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.

This last step is an important intervention into early group life. It allows for further differentiation of the members. 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.

A common experience in newly formed teams is that people are looking for similar things from a good team. This can be a potent learning when one or more of the team members come to the team with a reputation that others are leery of. 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 this 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 development trajectory of this group in very positive ways.

## **Ongoing Teams**

Appreciative inquiry in ongoing teams is both more challenging and has the potential to be a more transformational experience. In newly formed teams a “best team” inquiry is always perceived as useful and appropriate. 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. If the intervention is not well positioned and/or does not help deal with an important issue members may feel that it is a pollyannish waste of time. Like any action research project, for an appreciative inquiry to be an effective change process key decision makers need to be intimately involved.

I have found some success in using an appreciative inquiry intervention with ongoing teams in four different ways, discussed below. Some of these interventions result in the kinds of processes and outcomes called for by Cooperrider’s and Srivastva’s theory. Others aid groups in different ways.

### ***A) Team building retreat where the focus is to increase effective relationships.***

One application of appreciative inquiry with 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.

In this case, it might be better to have members describe their “best experience in this organization” rather than their best team. This is a judgment call for the

facilitator. In either case, the main point is to facilitate a dialogue between individuals and the team where the team gets to understand the interests and aspirations of its members and where images that have a lot of power for the group are highlighted and played with so that they “stick”. I do not recommend members talking about their best team experience in that particular group, however. Times 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. The likelihood of all having the same “peak experience” probably depends on how long the team has been together.

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 centre of the room, told his/her stories, and replied to the questions of their peers.

***B) An inquiry that is appropriate to the issues the group faces.***

Appreciative inquiry can be a useful intervention when a team finds itself stuck in a rut and needs creative ways out. These can be task related or social process related ruts. When focused on task related issues appreciative inquiry can look a lot like benchmarking (and, unfortunately, poorly organized benchmarking). The difference is that benchmarking is an attempt to discover the best of what is in order to imitate it, while appreciative inquiry is an attempt to uncover the best of our experience in order to develop new shared meanings. It may be that benchmarking is a better process for task issues, especially when they are “closed ended” problems. Appreciative inquiry is,



after all, a theory of how to develop social systems, not how to improve efficiency. A lot of things that look like “task issues”, however, often have a social process component to them. I am not aware, however, of an example of effectively using appreciative inquiry to get a group out of a task related rut. I have, however, seen “appreciative process” (Bushe & Pitman, 1991) used effectively in this way.

Appreciative process is promoting change by amplifying the best of what is rather than attempting to fix what isn’t working. It begins with faith-based positions like you can have more of what ever you want, that there is a genius in everyone, that there is more than enough for everyone. In this case, a consultant, manager or group articulates what it wants more of, looks for any example of it already happening, and tries to increase the magnitude of it happening. Unlike appreciative inquiry, the change does not come from a change in imagery, discourse or meaning but from a change in attention and intention.

Appreciative inquiry is more likely to be useful when the group is in a social process type of rut. This is some pattern of dysfunctional interaction that has been identified and people are willing to put some energy into changing. Using the “best team” inquiry may or may not work well here. To the extent it takes the group away from what it needs to focus on, it will be less than useful and probably resisted. However, it is a good umbrella inquiry in that many different focal issues can be addressed within it. If there is some fear in the group around naming the dysfunctional issue, then “best team” can be a safe way to start broaching the topic. For example, if the relationship with the “boss” is a key issue for team members, but members are afraid to take this up directly, then it can be more safely broached by team members talking about “best team” experiences and the facilitator can ask questions about how the boss acted in each person’s best team story. Then when listing the attributes of a good team, the facilitator can pay special attention to characteristics of a good boss of a team. The facilitator can ask the boss about his/her best experience of a boss. Others may be surprised to discover the boss values the same things they do. When it comes time to giving others appreciation the consultant can ask the boss how s/he feels s/he

compares to the listed attributes and whether s/he is interested in getting feedback from others. This can be a very gentle and effective setup for a good round of disclosure and feedback.

More often than not, however, the appreciative inquiry will focus on the issue the team is facing. If the team feels there is a general lack of motivation and energy we can inquire into times people have felt most motivated and energized. If there is fear and distrust we can inquire into the biggest experience of trust building people have had. The result of the inquiry will be a new set of ideas and images for how to ameliorate the problem. Often, just the inquiry itself goes some way toward generating the kind of change people are looking for.

For example a senior team in one organization identified a “lack of leadership” amongst middle managers as a key problem. What they were not willing to tell themselves was that they also felt that lack of leadership amongst themselves was a key problem. As part of an intervention into the leadership development process in this company, this group was brought together to have an appreciative inquiry into leadership. They talked about the best examples of leadership within their company that they had witnessed. One key image that emerged for this group was that “great leaders love the people and love the work”. As far as anyone could remember, this was the first time that the word “love” had been used at work to describe a manager’s job. In fact it was the facilitator who introduced the phrase to summarize a number of stories but people in the group quickly accepted it as descriptive of their experiences. A whole discourse about what it really meant to “love the people” ensued, as well as a discourse about the barriers the organization created to managers “loving” their subordinates. This turned to a deep and intimate conversation about the barriers and fears they experienced in allowing themselves to love their subordinates. This intervention proved to have profound consequences for the entire leadership development process that was subsequently designed. It probably had an impact on these managers as leaders and as a team but I was not able to personally observe the after effects.

***C) Paradoxical intervention into groups stuck in undisclosed resentment.***

I have had a couple of experiences of consulting to groups where a major theme was undisclosed resentments members had toward each other. They were willing to tell me but were adamant that they were not willing to talk about this 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. I used to find these assignments very difficult and hadn't had much luck transforming such a group.

The first time I tried AI it was out of frustration and no better ideas to try. The results were a lot better than I expected. At the end of the first day of a two day retreat I led the group in the first two parts of the intervention: telling their stories and listing the attributes. I told them their homework that evening was to think of things that others had done to make the group 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 one woman 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 was a very cathartic session. A great deal of openness was restored. 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.

I look at this as a "paradoxical intervention" (Quinn & Cameron, 1988; Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974). In this case the intervention does not result in new shared images. Rather it creates a cathartic release by forcing people into a paradoxical tension. By focusing on what they are not feeling (appreciation for each

other) the issues that are causing the discordant feelings cannot be contained. This is a powerful intervention and not for the timid. But then so is stepping into the middle of a hostile, frustrated team.

#### **D) Resolving Group Paradoxes**

A perspective on groups that I find useful is that groups get “stuck” because they are enmeshed in a paradoxical dilemma (Smith & Berg, 1987). 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 (Billig et al, 1988; Hampden-Turner, 1990). 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 organizations. 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 an unconscious 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.

The first example I gave in this paper described such a situation. The group’s ability to develop further as a team was stuck because of the competition-cooperation paradox and the appreciative inquiry led to a new image that resolved the paradox for the group. This can be one of the most transformative results of an appreciative inquiry - the development of images that resolve underlying paradoxes for a group. If the facilitator is aware of the nature of the group’s unresolved paradox then s/he can be paying particular attention to stories and images that have the potential to help the group find a way out. Let me give another example.

An “empowered work team” of analysts was stuck over what Smith & Berg (1987) call the paradox of authority. The issue was that people were not willing to authorize

others to act on the group's behalf but at the same time some wanted authority to act on the group's behalf in dealing with others in and outside the organization. The group had not conceptualized the problem in this way. Rather, the group became paralyzed by the inability of members to take action without having to convene a meeting of the group to get sanction. This was experienced by all as very frustrating and a sense was developing that "this empowered work team stuff just won't work". During an appreciative inquiry into best team experiences 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.

The team I was working with reacted a little differently to this story than it had to others. Members were quieter and more withdrawn. It then dawned on me that this story offered a way out of the authority paradox (which, at the time, was one of a number of alternative explanations I had for their stuckness). I asked 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 groups 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 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 general objectives for individual initiatives.

This seems to be a common quality of generative images: they jostle conventional thinking by jostling up word combinations. In doing so they offer opportunities to find synthetic resolutions to paradoxical dilemmas. Groups stuck in a paradox may be where appreciative inquiry is the most effective OD tool available.

### **Culling or Crafting the Images: Beyond Facilitation**

In a team building contract there is an expectation that something “significant” will happen in the designated time. In an appreciative inquiry, that presumably means generating new, affirmative images. In this last section I want to take up an issue with the method itself, applied to teams by a hired consultant.

In an appreciative inquiry it is usually one person who comes up with the image that the group then adopts. I suppose consulting practice might vary along a continuum from those who feel their job is mainly to cull images from the offerings of members to those who believe their job is to help craft the images. In practice I find myself working at highlighting the maps of those members who seem to have the most complex, developed, affirming and generative maps of groups. If they are not able to, I will try to frame, shape and embellish their stories into phrases members use to talk to each other in new ways. I’m not saying this is the “right” way to do appreciative inquiry - its just what I notice myself doing when I have been hired to do team-building and I am trying to help people have conversations that generate new, affirming, generative images. I think the power of appreciative inquiry as a change method relies on someone who can wordsmith these experiences and stories into pithy statements (provocative propositions). If a member of the group can provide that, great. If not, I try my best. It may be that part of the role of the consultant in an appreciative inquiry is “wordsmith”.

I find myself paying attention to what most moves me in what others are saying, notice what moves others, and then work at helping people articulate it in “sticky language”. That requires using moist, juicy poetic language, not dry, technical or precise language. It is not often that I stumble across a new idea or image of group

health and vitality but people often find my ideas and images different from theirs. Am I putting words into their mouths or am I helping them to frame and embellish what is tacit in their stories? I suppose I'm doing both. Is that how appreciative inquiry works with a one consultant organization development intervention ? I think so.

## **Conclusion**

A simple process based on the principles of appreciative inquiry that I've referred to as the "best team" inquiry has been experimentally shown to effect groups positively. In this article I've tried to look at why. I tried to show how it helps members of new teams establish personal identity and differentiate themselves. New teams can also benefit from this way of generating "group guidelines" and appreciative recognition can help to build group cohesion. Ongoing teams can benefit from a "best team" inquiry in several ways. It can help to create a safe gateway into difficult issues for a group. When lack of appreciation is the issue, It can create so much tension in members that they deal up their resentments and expectations. It can aid the development of shared mental maps of group success. It can help create affirming, generative images that allow for a different discourse, a different set of understandings and opportunities to materialize for a group. This can be therapeutic for a group stuck in a paradox. In working with teams to develop affirming, generative images, an appreciative inquiry into something other than teams is often appropriate and can have very positive impacts on groups and their members. As a change process appreciative inquiry is a powerful "pull" strategy and can sometimes transform a relationship or a group.

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