

LESSONS
FROM THE
FIELD

**APPLYING
APPRECIATIVE
INQUIRY**

APPLICATION OF THEORY

**LESSONS USING AI IN A
PLANNING EXERCISE**

BY MADELYN BLAIR

**EDITED BY SUE ANNIS HAMMOND
AND CATHY ROYAL, PH.D**

Lessons From Using Appreciative Inquiry in a Planning Exercise

by Madelyn Blair

Executive Summary

American Writing Corporation (AWC) and Communications Development Incorporated (CDI) are twin companies that share staff and facilities but offer distinct--although mutually supportive--products to a sophisticated and demanding client base. This paper describes an exercise based on Appreciative Inquiry principles to help these companies take stock and create a new set of possibilities for themselves. The approach was new to the client and had to be first sold to him and then adapted to include looking at negative issues. Managing the negative information presented a valuable challenge. Several lessons came out of this exercise:

- **Explanation of Appreciative Inquiry theory must begin from personal experience and conviction.** Nothing beats talking from personal experience when describing Appreciative Inquiry to those who have never heard of it before.
- **A group can define a common ground quickly through Appreciative Inquiry.** Even the staff of a company that had never formally defined its image quickly came to consensus on what energizes them.
- **People whose work centers on the use of language find the vocabulary of Appreciative Inquiry to be off-putting.** Those who use language with high precision demand more clarity in the language of Appreciative Inquiry.
- **The characteristics of the group directly contribute to the product.** The group's facility with language contributed to quick, clear articulation of their ideas.
- **Watching the energy levels in the room during the process is a means to gauge the effect of the process.** When negative information is being used consciously, watching the group carefully is a must.
- **Negative comments are not needed but can serve a creative purpose if managed.** Negative information can be used to reinforce or test the work of the group if it is conveyed at the right time and the group is given time to process it.

This paper documents the entire process, from selling the approach to the final set of actions. Client interviews to gather the context for the work started the process. The work of the staff was done in two retreat days separated by a month to allow staff to interview each other. Interviews with clients and staff since the planning activity round out the process and provide insights into the impact of the process and its results.

Background

American Writing Corporation (AWC) and Communications Development Incorporated (CDI) are twin companies that share staff and facilities but offer distinct--although mutually supportive--products to a sophisticated and demanding client base. Both companies have been growing for several years, and their growth seems only to be accelerating. Quality is important to them, and Bruce Ross-Larson, president of both companies, sees a danger that the companies could suffer if this growth leads to diminished quality. This concern led to a review of where the companies are and how they could improve quality as they continue to grow.

Bruce enjoys talking with his staff about their ideas and concerns, but the day-to-day work doesn't allow this kind of discussion at the depth he would like. He called upon me to help design an approach that would help him and his staff have a discussion on quality as they grew. When I talked with him a bit further, I learned that he loved to help his staff do more, develop more skills and generally feel better about themselves. Here was the best of all worlds -- a group that wanted to talk before it had problems. The question for me was how could I help a great group become better without jeopardizing its enthusiasm and high morale and help the staff learn something new in the process.

I was fortunate. Bruce and I have worked together for years and there is a deep level of trust between us. So I didn't have to prove I was trustworthy, but I did have to deliver. He was confident that I would meet his needs and objectives. And the trust allowed him to deal with any initial discomfort with the different approach I had in mind--Appreciative Inquiry.

I had been introduced to Appreciative Inquiry several years before, when I had a planning session for my own company. The facilitator who conducted the session did so based on the design on Appreciative Inquiry principles, and we found the approach

enjoyable, effective, and powerful in guiding our actions for about 18 months afterward. I watched it energize an already highly charged group. I also knew that the theory behind Appreciative Inquiry was something that I had been committed to in my business from the beginning. So much so that when I described the "new" theory to a colleague, she said, "But that is just how you do things!" So Appreciative Inquiry not only proved effective, but was natural for me.

As I learned about Appreciative Inquiry more formally, I began experimenting with the techniques in my own studies for companies. The approach allowed me to gain all the information I needed without the usual negative impact of an intervention designed to "fix a problem." I liked what I saw with the approach and I knew that it never dampens enthusiasm.

The approach allows staff to be highly involved and to practice skills that they may not use often in their work--interviewing and listening--always in short supply in any human system. Thus choosing the Appreciative Inquiry approach for AWC and CDI would mean their staff could learn new skills as well as a new theory.

I presented the approach to Bruce, relating the benefits to what he wanted to accomplish and contrasting them with the results of a traditional approach (*box 2*). I also noted that the risk of using Appreciative Inquiry is higher than the risk with traditional approaches, since Appreciate Inquiry opens up the discussion to the staff in a way that makes it impossible to put their ideas "back into the box" once they are out. For some managers this might seem too risky. Bruce embraced the idea as consistent with his philosophy of helping his staff grow in every way. I think he was also interested in doing something new. We agreed that Appreciative Inquiry would be used, and I had only to shoehorn a long process into two days of group work--a schedule required by the work loads in the two companies. I decided that the process could be completed usefully in less time than usual if we set our expectations right from the start.

American Writing and Communications Development

American Writing Corporation and its affiliate, Communications Development Incorporated, provide planning, editing, writing, desktop publishing, Internet publishing, and communications management services to clients in the domestic and international policy arenas. With 20 employees and 20 regular consultants, they put together teams to meet the needs of their clients' projects. Among their clients are the Benton Foundation, the United Nations Development Program, the Millennium Group and the World Bank.

Approach

In the rest of this paper, I refer to AWC and CDI as “the company.” While the company is successful and growing, it is also relatively small and depends on every minute being productive. The budget had to be smaller than usual. This immediately affected how much I could do and how much time the staff could be put into the work. But it also challenged me to create an effective way to work within this constraint.

Feedback from clients served as a test of how well staff know their own strengths and the forces driving them.

The approach I developed for the company involved several steps. The first was to interview a subset of clients of the company, to introduce myself to the work of the company from a perspective unbiased by the relationships among staff. The interviews proved more effective than I could have guessed. The clients were open and willing to share fully with a third party. I quickly found a new language about the company’s products and how they are delivered. I discovered what the clients valued most about the company and why--a rare look at a company. And I gained something to offer the staff in the retreat that went beyond process. (See annex 1 for the questions used in interviewing clients.) Had the staff conducted these interviews, they would have certainly benefitted from exposure to the clients in the role of listeners. This option just didn’t work for the company.

I wanted to do the project entirely from the appreciative perspective, but Bruce asked that I also explore the concerns of the clients. I had some reservations about this. On the positive side, asking clients about problems told them that the company was concerned about how to share with the staff the negative information that I was bound to receive from the clients. Incorporating potential negative information into the design was a diversion for Appreciative Inquiry theory. I had to design into the retreat a way to share the negative information that added to the process and would not disturb the positive energy. I hoped to engender through the retreat. (I will describe later how I did this.)

Box 2.

Proposal: Helping CDI and AWC Keep Quality as They Grow

Following are descriptions of the two approaches. Both involve my interviewing clients, and both will be designed using appreciative inquiries.

Traditional Approach

I conduct all the interviews, synthesize the findings, and present them to the staff in a retreat setting. I facilitate discussion of the findings and development of actions.

- The staff’s interviewing experience is uniform.
- Staff are interrupted in their work for only an initial hour and a half (for the interview) plus the retreat day.
- Staff learn less about themselves and the process.
- Easier of the two options: I do the synthesizing; I control the process.
- Results: some new perspectives and an action list that will serve you and your team well.

Developmental Approach

You and your staff participate in the interviewing and the development of the new perceptions as well as the actions desired. The approach gives you and your staff experience in conducting interviews synthesizing the findings in a group process, and creating together a new perspective or perspectives that the actions will achieve.

- There is more interruption: two retreat days (one at the beginning of interviewing and one at the end) as well as time for staff to conduct interviews of one another (they will spend at least 3 hours interviewing).
- It is harder, it is more fun, and it creates a learning environment. It is a richer experience for you and your team. It is riskier because control is much more in the hands of your team than in the first option.
- Results: an action list that is enhanced by an *internal* understanding of the why.

I summarized the information from the clients in two short briefings. The first reported what the clients believed the company did very well and what they valued most about the company. This positive feedback from clients would serve as a test of how well the staff know their own strengths and the forces that energize them. The second briefing reported the clients' concerns and wishes. I held on to the second briefing material until after the staff had fully defined the possibilities for their future. Given at this time, the information acted as a test of how robust the possibilities were. (See annex 2 for selected client feedback.)

The real work was done in a two-day retreat.

The retreat was designed as a two-day event, with the second day separated from the first by a month to allow the staff time to interview one another, including those who would not be participating in the retreat. Both sessions were held outside the office, although not out of town. The setting was comfortable, the food was good, the supplies were adequate, and the work was hard.

Day 1: Discovering and understanding what energizes them.

Day 1 began with pairs of the staff interviewing each other using a set of questions typical for learning Appreciative Inquiry (see box 3 for the interview questions). For some, it was the first formal interview that they had conducted. So before sending them out to do this task, I gave them brief guidance on how to conduct the interview. After the interviews, I made a brief presentation on the basis of Appreciative Inquiry. Then the staff shared the results of the interviews with the group. Although the staff are young and normally vibrant, they found it hard to share from these interviews. They seemed uncertain about why they were talking about themselves and not their work. And they were wondering why they were only talking about what was good. They seemed to be saying, why have a retreat if you don't have problems? Perhaps as editors, proofreaders, and desktoppers, they are so used to looking for errors that they couldn't help but bring this habit to the retreat.

To help them, I suggested that they share what they had learned in single words that could be explained if someone wanted more detail. This broke

Box 3.

Interview Questions for Day 1 of the Retreat

1. What attracted you to your work and to CDI or AWC? What excitements? What initial impressions?
2. Describe a specific time, a specific situation, when you felt most alive, involved, and excited about your involvement in this work?

What made this situation or time a peak experience? Who were the others significant to that situation or time, and what made them so? How were they working with you?
What was happening at that time in your life? What kind of project was it? What kind of timeframe were you working in?
How did you learn what to do for this situation or time? In general, what factors in your work make for peak experiences?
3. What do you value deeply about yourself? When feeling best about work? About the tasks you undertake in your work? What is the single most important thing your work has contributed to your life?
4. What is the core factor that gives vitality to your existence?
5. If you could transform your life in any way, what three things would you wish for to enhance its vitality and

the logjam. A long list of words quickly appeared on the flip chart, and the energy in the room began to grow--they were beginning to see the picture. (Annex 3 lists these words.) As they continued this exchange, they began to see trends in what was being said. And suddenly the forces that energize this group to high levels of excellence came right off the page. The staff narrowed the list down to six factors. They began to feel more comfortable as they recognized words that they had said, saw that no one was going to edit their choices, and saw their choices confirmed by repetition of the words on the list. Light bulbs went on as the exercise began to seem meaningful to them.

I then briefed the group on the positive things that the clients had said about them. I reminded them that this was the positive day--no negatives on day 1. But we did use the positive feedback to check whether the clients saw the staff as they saw themselves: did clients see the energizing forces that

the staff felt? The staff discovered that there was a remarkable convergence of impressions. They were relieved (although they had growing curiosity about the negatives). I'm not sure this convergence would always happen. The company is small, very close to its clients, and delivers high-quality products. But the confirmation that their words--identified through this strange process--were similar to those used by clients gave credence to the process. (See annex 3 for the energizing forces identified and the descriptive words that define them.)

“It was more enjoyable than I expected because it was thought-engaging.”

As the staff heard the comments from their clients, they began to see new dimensions and new meanings in the words they had chosen. (When I presented the client feedback to them, I used full sentence quotations and even small stories, as I had hoped they would do in their initial sharing.) They began questioning, “But what do *we* really mean by quality?” They were beginning to see the complexity of the meaning behind each word they had chosen. The staff’s recognition of this complexity was a good Lead-in for the next activity, in which they were asked to design questions they wanted to ask each other about the words they had selected for use in a second round of interviews. This task was harder, and they broke into small groups to do it. Some struggled with how to ask a question in an appreciative way. Remember, they had had only about three hours of working with Appreciative Inquiry on which to build. But even though they were unsure about what it all meant, they willingly gave it a try.

At this point, I was feeling stretched. I wanted to work with every group through this entire exercise, but I was only one person for three groups. Having a facilitator for each group would have made the exercise much more effective. A facilitator hearing the entire conversation would have been able to give continuous, on-going feedback. This would have made a quantum improvement in the questions developed. (I might add that there was a real temptation to allow the staff to ask questions that might have not been appreciative. But I felt that that would rob the process of all its advantages. As David Cooperrider says, “The questions are fateful.”)

At the end of the exercise, all three groups brought their questions to the full group, which refined them. The time limits (the day began at 9:30 and had to end at 4:30) again constrained the discussion of the questions.. With more time, the questions would have improved. In the end, they tended to be repetitious because people didn’t have enough time to develop alternate wording--despite their facility with language. (See annex 4 for the questions developed by the group.)

After the group had broken up to go back to the tasks still waiting at the office, all the work done during the retreat--from the long list of words to the questions to be asked--was captured electronically and delivered to the company by 5:30 that afternoon. I didn’t want the staff to lose any momentum.

If there was one more thing that limited what the project achieved, it was the lack of time to refine these questions. If I were to do this step over, I would ensure more time to develop the questions for the second round of interviews. Developing questions for an interview protocol is hard to do at best. Since these questions were developed by several small groups using a single set of example questions, though each worked with a different set of words, the questions contained overlapping content and approach. Making the questions more effective by refining them into an integrated set of questions dealing with different content and challenging in presentation was not possible in the time allowed.

What I liked about the approach taken was that it allowed the staff to use the questions they had developed and therefore reinforced the trust in their ability to learn the concept of Appreciative Inquiry. In addition, interviewing skills were also among the things I was trying to help them learn, and designing an interview protocol and then using it is an important opportunity for learning about interviewing.

All this said, at the end of the session, the staff still had not accepted the concept of Appreciative Inquiry, nor did they feel fully comfortable with the process. But they all agreed that they were tired.

Between day 1 and day 2 of the retreat, each staff member interviewed three others, using the questions developed during day 1. This ensured that all staff members (including those not at the retreat)

would be interviewed and therefore become a part of the activity. A month was set aside between the two days of the retreat, the first of which was in December and the second in January. This schedule allowed time for the holidays as well as interviewing. But one staff member remarked that “one month was too long between. We lost resonance.” Staff were allowed to spend whatever time they needed to conduct the interviews and were asked to write up the responses to aid their memories during day 2 of the retreat. Some of the staff immediately took to this exercise. Others were less enthusiastic. As employees of a company for which editing and writing are key products, they performed the task of writing with ease and alacrity. But not all of the interviews were done.

According to one member who interviewed others, those who did not participate in the first day of the retreat were a little uncertain about the meaning of the questions. But those conducting the interviews began to gain some excitement about what they were learning and became curious about what others had learned.

Day 2: Creating the possibilities of their future

Day 2 was a different session altogether. By then the staff were beginning to see that they were in control of what was done in the work sessions. My job was only to give them a structure in which to do it.

The first activity of Day 2, reporting out from their interviews, started slowly. They rarely questioned one another during the report-out and they did not appear curious about what was said. And although there was much agreement, there was more disagreement than they admitted. Or they all assumed that they understood perfectly, and the truth was whatever was in their minds. Or they thought they had to appear to be united.

Any of these theses is troubling. They are all thinking the exact same things, so where does creativity get a push from different perspectives? Or they are unwilling or unable to entertain the idea that truth might differ from what is in their minds, so how do clients know they have been heard? Or they felt unsure about disagreeing in front of the company president or the facilitator, so how free are they?

They dove into the task of defining the energizing forces with real enthusiasm once the report

out time was over, however. And even though a month had elapsed between the two sessions, it didn't take long for them to be up to speed and running at high energy. As one participant said, “This gave me a forum to say some things that couldn't be said otherwise. And it hasn't created a problem subsequent to it.”

The discussion after the report-out showed that the staff had lots of ideas about what those energizing factors meant to them as a group. (Energizing forces can be found in annex 3.) They learned that they had remarkably consistent definitions of what energizes them even though they had never talked about them before.. They were naming the common ground on which they were standing and working, and were feeling very comfortable.

“Yes, [after the retreat] we banded about the six words [the lifegiving forces], but it was in humor.”

After we completed the information exchange, I assigned them the task of defining some possibilities for themselves. I asked them to consider what they might learn (or what to learn) if they were to do these same interviews one year later. What would they hear in those interviews? I described the exercise on a handout to make it easier to understand and remember what they had to do. (box 4). And I gave them a short list of possibility statements from organizations that seemed similar to the company. This time, they grasped the idea quickly. Again, they were divided into three small groups with two energizing forces each.

They worked hard in developing their possibility statements. Despite their ease with language, they struggled to say the right thing without losing important nuances, though clearly the task was easier for them than people who don't work with language as a profession. On this day, I did not feel the need to be with each group throughout this step. They understood much better what they were supposed to do, and so needed less help. Again each group presented its ideas and the full group refined them. The possibility statements were gems of clarity and filled with purpose (see annex 5.) More time would have made them even better and maybe a bit more provocative, but not more powerful.

At last I briefed them on the negative comments from their clients. They were on the edge of their chairs while waiting to hear them, hoping they were perfect. The news that they were not hit them visibly. I almost wanted to say, "But you don't need to hear this! You are going in the right direction to answer all of these. Why do you want to torture yourselves?" But they felt that they needed to hear this negative feedback. They wanted to know that they had turned over every stone in their search for excellence.

What I saw was a group of highly motivated people who were running a superb race hit a wall and almost stop. It took about 20 minutes of explaining to one another that the client just didn't understand before they realized that the client perhaps understood very well, but from another perspective. At this point I asked one question: "Would you change any of these possibility statements now that you have heard from your clients?" They reread their work and thought about it and realized that they didn't need to change a thing. If they achieved the propositions they had laid out for themselves, they would address all their clients' concerns and desires. Now, they only had to make those possibilities happen! As they realized this, the energy in the room began to recover. By the end of their discussion, they were sailing again. Suddenly the group was back where it had been about an hour before.

Armed with the knowledge that the possibilities they had defined would address client's concerns, the group developed a list of actions needed to make the possibilities happen. In about an hour, they had developed a set of actions that were all practical and achievable and would directly affect quality (see annex 6). And the actions are all based on the propositions that support those things that energize them as a company. That means they are sustainable. They had seen the truth about themselves and had defined a successful way of achieving not only excellence, but also client satisfaction. Day 2 left them exhausted from the creative process but very satisfied.

Several products were produced after the retreat.

When the day was done, the staff began to see how effective their discussion had been. We gathered up the flip charts and took a day or two to write them up, putting them into a notebook along with the other

Box 4. Developing Possibility Statements

Imagine that it is 1997 and that you have been given a special assignment in your organization. The assignment is to do an analysis of company performance, operations, morale, communications, management and the like. You are now putting together a snapshot of what you have heard in interviews with employees and managers at all levels. You know that we have six life giving forces here, and you decide to give your report to management in these terms. Sum up what you have found each of the energizing forces in three to four sentences. What do you anticipate reality will look like then? Write in the present tense as if it already exists.

Examples of possibility statements

The structure of ABC International is based on the image of organization as a circle rather than a series of links in a chain of command hierarchy. In operational terms, the circular structure involves a project-based system of temporary networks and project teams. There are no superiors and subordinates. Instead, there are those who convene, chairpersons, colleagues and partners.

ABC is known around the world for being a learning organization. We continue to dare to experiment with advanced techniques. ABC is an organization that shows the capacity to transform itself and is constantly open to the newer and better things that come along. We seek opportunities to see new approaches, and we demonstrate ours at appropriate opportunities.

ABC's dedication to quality is reflected in its exceeding the expectations of its clients on timeliness, error rate, responsiveness, and leadership. We achieve high standards in these areas by ensuring that client representatives help the client understand our minimum standards of quality for ourselves and the responsibilities we expect the client to pick up. And we achieve high standards by challenging the client to do more than he or she would have done alone.

products from the project: the client feedback, the interview protocol used, the list of words, the final definitions of the energizing factors and the possibilities for their future, and, finally, the action plan. This notebook was to serve as a tool for the staff to refresh their memories on what had happened. The few staff who for one reason or another had never been interviewed would easily be able to see all that was produced, and discuss it with those who had shared in the process.

The group felt good about day 2. They saw the results of their work and that there was a logic to what they did. And they felt they had turned over all the stones in their search for excellence. This last point was an important one for them. As editors, proofreaders, and desktoppers, they are judged on their thoroughness. The pattern of behavior expected in their work extend to other parts of their lives. Again, the process had to recognize the culture and the norms of the group.

There were several products from this work. The first was the list of words that describe the common forces that energize their work -- their desire for personal freedom, the drive to produce only the best quality, the need to retain perspective while knowing that their work has some impact. The second was the list of possibilities they had defined for their company that gave them direction. The third was the list of actions they would use to achieve those possibilities. In addition to these product that the staff created, there was the client feedback that had been captured in writing. Finally, there was the experience of seeing the world through an appreciative lens that legitimized and valued something other than problems.

Reactions after the Retreat

Clients valued having an information broker in the process

Some of the clients who had been interviewed as part of the project were interviewed again two months after the retreat. They were asked to remember their interview and comment on it and to think about how they had been served since the retreat (see annex 7 for the interview protocol for the clients).

“There has been absolutely no deterioration of service.”

The most striking comment from a client was that “There has been absolutely no deterioration of service.” Given the objective to design an intervention that would do no harm to a good group, this response was gratifying. Beyond this, the clients had little to say about changes since

the retreat. The lack of any positive change reported two months after the retreat seems reasonable, however, given the company’s already high performance. The clients did have some things to say about the interview process, which was designed using Appreciative Inquiry principles. They felt a “little surprised about the questions used.” One client said, “I felt like this was a little bit of a game but played it as a willing player. I have learned not to be surprised, but rather to expect the unexpected from you. I figured there was a rationale.” They felt it was appropriate to have an “information broker.”

Staff most enjoyed and valued their interviews of one another.

I also interviewed some of the staff a few months after the retreat. I wanted to know what their perceptions of the process were after they had had time for some thought and whether they saw any changes to the business as a result of the retreat. (see annex 8 for the interview protocol for the staff).

The staff’s reactions to the process in the retreat were mixed, ranging from feeling fully engaged in the process to feeling removed from it. Those interviewed seemed to think that the feelings of removal had something to do with the preparation for the retreat.: they felt that they had done none. Early communications about the retreat had lead staff to think that they were going to a retreat similar to past retreats, where they had just sat around and talked about things. When they arrived at this retreat and discovered that they had to do something very different, they felt unprepared. I had told them that no preparation was necessary but because they expected one type of activity and found another, the lack of need for preparation didn’t really matter to them. For some, the retreat was the first fully facilitated working session they had participated in. All this led to a feeling of uncertainty and may have affected their receptiveness to Appreciative Inquiry.

Despite feeling unprepared and being expected to use a theory they had never heard of before, the staff all expressed a sense of joy about interviewing one another and discussing what they had heard in these interviews.

“I enjoyed the interviews best - getting to know those people better. I also liked the easy-going tone to a lot of it”

Offsetting this joy is the staff's disappointment stemming from a perception that there has been no follow up to the retreat. This perception has made them feel as if their work of the retreat does not matter. The irony is that some of the most important items of follow-up have been and continue to be acted on. But because the actions are not linked to the retreat, staff don't perceive the commitment to the actions. As a result, some of the return on the investment in the process is being lost.

The staff's sense that Appreciative Inquiry is not serious because it begins with the personal continues to be a barrier to their seeing the value of the approach. The staff's perception of Appreciative Inquiry may also relate to their statement about freedom. In their culture, privacy is part of the meaning of freedom, and the questions of the first Appreciative Inquiry instrument used may have felt too personal for this group. Interviewing staff beforehand would have identified this preference. I will not omit this step in the future.

Impact of the work on the company

Some real actions have been taken by the company to achieve the possibilities define at the retreat

After the retreat there was a follow-up on several of the actions. The most important was giving staff the option --rarely used--to tell a client that they needed two days to review a product before delivering it. Quality standards were being upheld.

The company began posting congratulations and other good news from clients on the back of the office's front door so that anyone going out of the office can quickly see what clients are saying and why. The sense of perspective was being reinforced. People planned a few activities for the staff that were not business related. Solidarity was recognized as a need. “yes,” said one staff member, “we are moving in the right direction.”

Some opportunities are being lost

But some things have not happened yet. A “welcome box” to help new staff get off to a good start has not been assembled. The notebook of the products of the retreats was not made generally available--or people didn't know that it was available. These failures have led to a feeling of disappointment. Although some actions are being taken, they are not referred to as coming from the retreat, so the connection and the synergy is being lost. One staff member captured the staff's feelings well when she said, “I wish I had seen the notebook. The ideas are valuable but don't have meaning because they are not visible. The ideas need to be used consciously.” Another said, “If we could just get one thing worked out, it would give more of a feeling of accomplishment.”

No company can stop conducting its business to focus entirely on internal matters and expect to survive. But even if only a few things on the action list can be done at a time, a reminder of what still remains to be done would signal that all the actions are important and will be attended to as soon as the resources allow. “I wish we could continue the momentum to bring about improvements and make everybody more comfortable,” remarked one staff member.

Lessons about the process and the approach

Explanation of Appreciative Inquiry theory must begin from personal experience and conviction

The Appreciative Inquiry theory is only complex in the telling, and so telling about it should come from personal experience and conviction, to aid the process of learning. Academic references may be important to some groups, but not to all. A lesson for

me from this project was that I needed to size up the group and explain only what needs to be explained and do so from myself first and then from others only when necessary. With Appreciative Inquiry, it is important to move confidently beyond the theory to its use--where learning is easier.

A group can define common ground quickly through Appreciative Inquiry

The group was made up of very bright people whose work focuses on the use of language. Once they had grasped what we were trying to do, they created real, quality products. They defined energizing factors that included some unexpected ones. *Quality* and *challenge* and *impact* were to be expected. But who would predict *perspective*, *freedom* or even *solidarity* would all come from the same group? Yet once the words were in the open, the fit was comfortable, although this group had never before discussed what “made their company tick” or what it was about. As one member put it, “This was more difficult for this group. There is a lack of identity. We don’t have an established image, so we were having difficulty seeing our identity and how we wanted to change it.” The possibilities they defined for themselves were challenging but real and achievable. These possibilities described a dynamic, responsive group of people who can do nothing less than make the clients love them.

People whose work centers on the use of language find the vocabulary of Appreciative Inquiry to be off-putting

This was a group of very young individuals who found the expression *life giving forces* to be simply too much. But then they found *Appreciative Inquiry* and *Provocative Propositions* difficult to use as well. The new names they have given to these concepts--energizing forces rather than life-giving forces and possibility statements rather than provocative propositions - have been used in this paper. They liked them better and felt they would tell their story more effectively.

The characteristics of the group directly contribute to the product

Three things helped the work of this group. First, the group had good working relationships among themselves, which came out clearly as they

discussed points with quiet openness. One said, “It is nice to take time to focus on the individuals and experience of working together rather than just seeing yourself as a part of the patchwork.” Second, the group members had a strong command of the English language and so were able to express complex ideas through simple English statements that were easy to understand even for someone not a part of the discussion that created them. (This was a gift for a group asked to do something in far less time than it normally takes to do well.) Third, the group has clients who value it just as it is and appreciate the good services it provides, while at the same time desiring more. Clients who want the company to succeed are the right kind of clients to have. The challenge for the group is to keep listening to the quiet feedback that even happy clients give and to be willing to respond.

Watching the energy levels in the room during the process is a means to gauge the effect of the process

As the group members’ comfort grew, so did their energy. When negative information was finally shared with them, they flagged visibly. I gave them time to get out their thoughts and feelings, allowing this time to let them process what the information meant. Skillful facilitation is important here to catch the point when the energy has just bottomed out to quickly capitalize on the upward movement of energy. Managing this renewal of energy after negative information is shared is critical. Scheduling another exercise after this briefing gave them time and distance to recover their energy.

Negative comments are not needed but can serve a creative purpose if managed

Most remarkable was that the negative comments from the clients did not change the possibilities that the staff had defined before hearing the comments. Instead, the negative comments sharpened the actions that the group developed to help achieve the possibilities. Without the client feedback, my speculation is that they would have defined an action plan fully effective in meeting their clients demands. But the client feedback gave them confidence in their action plan, and prompted them to make some of the actions more specific. One participant felt that “most useful were the possibilities

and developing solutions.” Another said, “I did feel the possibilities would solve our problems.”

Closing

Appreciative Inquiry increases the probability of creating a good working climate for the group, or, said in reverse, lowers the risk of creating a disruption in the work

The objective of not dampening the group’s high level of enthusiasm appears to have been achieved. As one of their most conservative clients said in a post-interview, “There was absolutely no degradation of service.” And this is a real compliment in their arena of work and the company’s client base. While the staff were not always happy with the process until they understood it, they always felt that they were in control of the outcomes. And the positive feedback they received about themselves from one another and from their clients appeared to strengthen the solidarity they named as one of the factors that energizes them. A staff member remarked, “I liked the collaborative exercise the best—just coming together as a group to do things, including the interviews.” “The day to day actions haven’t changed, yet there is an awareness that can be tapped for further work. The activity has now ‘primed’ us for further organizational development activity.” was the comment of another.

Annex 1: Interview questions for clients

Introduction

Project to help CDI (AWC) plan for the future.

Background

1. Just to give me some context, describe briefly what ___ is all about and what it does. Describe the work you do here at ___.
2. How long have you used CDI's (AWC's) services?
3. What is the typical project for which you call CDI (AWC) to do something?
4. Describe the project from your perspective. What does it mean to you? Where does it begin for you? What are the major steps for you? What is the last thing you do that means that the job is completed to your satisfaction?

Selection

5. What major experiences influenced your decision to try the services of CDI (AWC)?

Performance

6. Have you had any problems with CDI's (AWC's) services? Have you let the company know it? How did it respond? Did the responses satisfy your needs? What could it have done to do so?
7. Describe a time when CDI (AWC) performed in a way that made you feel totally satisfied. What made you so?
8. If I were to give you three wishes relating to the way CDI (AWC) performed for you, what would those three wishes be?
9. If there was an opportunity for you to be present at CDI's (AWC's) planning session, what would you say to the staff?
10. What is your perception of CDI's (AWC's) long-term planning comparative advantage? What would be your vision for the company? What would you recommend it do to get there? Are there gaps it should fill? What is one thing you would recommend it not change?

Annex 2: Feedback from clients

Describe a time when CDI (AWC) performed in a way that made you feel totally satisfied. What made you so? What three wishes would you make for CDI or AWC?

When we were working as partners; the communication between us was a comfortable give and take.

Personal relationship
Collaborative process.
Commitment to listening.
Client could shape the product without having to save it.
Effective client relationships

Partnership.
Personal relationship.
Being on the same intellectual wavelength.
Personal, professional assistance
Flexibility

When the work looked good and read well.

Good work.
Reads well.
Looks good.
Quality high
Excellence.

Good job.
Layout professional
Reasonably high professional product (reliable).
Quality

When the deadline was met regardless of the amount of lead time given.

Speed.
Responsive.
Good on deadlines.
Early warning of problems.

Deadlines.
Responding to needs.
Delivers.
Competent judgement.

When they showed real leadership and were able to more than we could do alone.

Leader to the client.
Do something the client cannot do for himself or herself.
Giving solutions that up the ante.

Setting standards.
Setting expectations.
Growing together with the client.

When they do things that are ahead of the crowd and are willing to take that risk.

Balance point between creative chaos and organizational rigidity.
Intellectual leadership.
Investing in new ways of doing things.
Vision (especially of information management).

Understanding the utility of information
Sense of being a learning organization (experimentation, flexible about the budget and deliverables).
Making transformation from print to on-line.

When they are just being the knowledgeable, competent, and good-spirited people they are.

Thoughtful.
Competent.
Interesting people.
Talented.
Strong on electronic architecture.

Very credible.
Knowledge of the bank.
Knowing their work.
Good spirit.

When I work with Bruce.

What is AWC and CDI's comparative advantage?

Their style shows a real willingness to meet me wherever I am.

Generally good spirit, real sense of willingness to do what is needed.
Do not change the effective client relationships.
Flexible.
Accessibility.
No arrogance.

Understands the client's situation and wants to help.
Treats clients like sensible people, deserving of respect.
Figures out your message and doesn't want to change it.
Personal, professional assistance.

They are dependable -- for delivery, for quality, for need.

Quality.
Reasonably professional product.
Dependable level of quality.
Deliver high quality.
Speedy.

Reliable.
On time.
Meet deadlines
Responsive to client and needs
Competent judgement.

They bring new and multiple perspectives to the work while understanding my work well. They see the whole picture.

Knowledge of the bank.
Knowledge of the client's work.
See the whole picture and don't look at things in one dimension.

Bring different ways to look at things.
Very good at problem-solving.
One stop shop with a lot of breadth.
Always learn lost of expertise and views.

They understand what it means to manage information.

Utility of information (making it utilitarian).
Making transition from print to on-line.
Have real theory and vision of information management.
Keeping up to the future.

They have an impressive client list.

Credible clients.
Have budgets to allow new ground breaking.

There is a sense that you are always willing to experiment and take a risk.

Sense of being a learning organization (experimentation, flexible about the budget and deliverables).

Have you had any problems with their services?

When performance is uneven.

40% is seriously wrong, 40% is competent,
20% is brilliant.
The editing is uneven, sometimes the
desktop publishing is.
Copy editing is not light enough.
Needs stronger team of substantive editors

Some individuals are erratic.
There needs to be a reserve capacity of high
quality.
Not getting anything at all.
It is not on time.

When they are not responding to what I am saying.

When the job does not evidence that the
individual heard comments and thus the
product is not even getting closer.
Long sequence of quality control problems
of a flat hierarchy and unclear who is
responsible for the product.

Sometimes snippy with clients.
Sometimes moody.
When I can't communicate with them in a
timely fashion.

When I have to manage them.

The more fussy you are, the better the product you get.
I must chase them on deadlines.
I must spend as much time as an editor to get a proper job.
There are management problems when Bruce is not around.

When my bills are unclear or they have billed me incorrectly.

Bills reflect time for making corrections to the work, even the time to explain the problem.
It is unclear what we are paying for.

When they don't show leadership.

They are too passive and should take active responsibility.
They never come back and say it is time to rethink old communication decisions.

When you do what I could do for myself.

I want you to do what I can't do for myself.

If you had three wishes for AWC and CDI, what would they be? What would you tell them if you could say something to them at their planning session?

Don't lose your willingness to take a risk, but make sure that my work is done according to some standard.

CREATIVE CHAOS OR STRUCTURED PERFORMANCE

Find a new balance point between creative chaos and organizational rigidity.
Being unstructured means that a lot of energy is not channeled to quality.
Need some recognition of some shared focus of well-articulated goals.

QUALITY

Think about quality management in all processes.
There still needs to be an early warning system for identifying potential problems.
Still lower error rate.

LEVEL OF STAFF

Need better editorial capacity, including understanding of economics.
Too dependent on people who are at too low a level.
There is a fear that immature staff might use time unproductively because they are trying to fix something that they should not be trying to fix since it can only be decided by the client.
(Client relations deteriorate) when the too young appear truculent or have lack of clarity and show little leadership with client's problems.

SETTING STANDARDS -- SOME CONTROL

Working with small businesses is not the same as working for a large organization.
Putting pressure to track budgets.
Must set expectations and standards.
Must get clear on identity, standards, and judgement.
Need to be able to say where you are in the middle of a project.
Cost less.
Timeliness distinguishes you from others in the bank; clients can't always measure your quality but they always know the date.
Must make it easy for your client to defend his choice of you.
Like it to be cheaper.

Have a strategy for the company.

Must determine if you want to be massive or a small outfit; a mega business would not feel as competent because it would lack the personal relationship and ability to assure that all are on the same intellectual wavelength.
They are really a boutique. Everybody has to take please and pride and sense of the work being done.
Need a complete range of services.
Should build partnerships and alliances with editors and companies like his in developing world as well as with publishers
Offer a global service where the countries would benefit from Bruce's skills

Make bigger.
Play a bigger role in the bank.
Make AWC the publication department of the bank.
Do more training for training division.
Where is Bruce's backup?
More of Bruce and less of others.
Get better staff or do less work.
Important for Bruce to keep up with what is happening on the web scene.
Uncertain about their ambitions, who are the stakeholders? Do junior staff feel junior? Do they have a sense of the judgement gap?

Be the leader. You can do it.

Project leadership in all areas and not just be responsive. "Be an active participant in the creation of the client's presence."
Make your motto, "What the client wants is not right."
Take a more visible leadership role; do more writing and speaking; seek out more awards; develop more CDI products.
Push to the frontier.
Be excited by your work and not become cynical.
Be connected with the larger picture.

Make life electronically easier for me.

Need ability to transfer things electronically to allow client's tendency edit late more easily.

Give me a bill that I can understand what task was done and for which document (project). And I want to understand it quickly and thoroughly. And could I know what things will cost beforehand?

Needs greater transparency in billing. It must clearly separate out products worked on and for doing what. It needs to be down to the document as well as the task level.
Billing is too complicated.
Client never gets billed the way he asks for it.
I get billed twice, can't get at the project level, needs to be transparent.
Must be very clear up front on the costs (not everyone has budgetary flexibility).

SUMMARY OF WHAT CLIENTS ARE SAYING ABOUT YOU

You have a **strong image**.

By and large, people **like working with you**, because it feels very personal and because you respond to their needs. And they really value when you can be a leader for them.

They see you **growing**, but they want to make sure that in that growth, they do not lose any of the great services they have received in the past.

They feel you have **more to give** if only you could figure out how to do it. They recognize that you are in transition. They want very much for you to succeed.

Their concerns are where you are **working on the edge** (especially individually) or where you are not responsive.

You give them an **opportunity** to take risks, feel loose and free when they can't be. They value this so long as you deliver.

Real challenge is **managing client expectations**.

Annex 3: Energizing Forces Defined in the Retreat

QUALITY

On-time.
You can go to the next step and trust it was done right.
Consistency of right choices.
Common understanding on both sides.
Care.
You know your role and are responsible for your part.
Realistic deadlines.
Enemies of quality -- late changes, budget constraints, uneducated clients, lack of control.
Balance.
Going beyond the expectations.
Amazing people--dedicated.
Small projects; easygoing clients; well-defined, small team--these facilitate producing quality results.

FREEDOM

Free to make decisions, take charge.
Need to know where you stand (clear understanding of all important factors).
Allowed to make mistakes.
Absence of control and punishment.
Clear goals.
Flexibility.
Freedom from nonsense.
Some need more guidance.
"Billable hour."
More likely to ask for help when we need it.
Free to say or do or try.
Flexibility to work at home so we can balance other responsibilities.
Feeling trusted -- gives confidence.

IMPACT

Even one more person.
Eliminating bullshit.
Indirect by helping our clients.
Introducing technology.
Hard to gauge because we don't know what happens to our products.
We don't get much feedback from clients (tends to be only to one person if given).
We create really serious products (of substance).
"Built the Taj Mahal".
Enables the client to see more clearly.
Our role is to extend the client's impact.
Partnering.
Help the client see more and wider.

PERSPECTIVE

Graciously appreciate feedback from authors who don't understand.
Never hear a raised voice.
Clients enjoy working with us.
Sense of disengagement.
Deadlines are more flexible than they appear.
Almost always feels a sense of perspective.
Important to have other interests.
Sense of security.
Bonding with co-workers.
Keep a sense of humor.

CHALLENGE

Helping clients say what they want to achieve.
Any deadline.
Freedom to improvise--especially when you don't know what to do.
Makes you think to produce something extraordinary.
Good challenge--well defined problem.
Bad challenge--poorly defined problem and is not satisfying.
"See what you come up with"--dare to challenge yourself.
"Reading Bruce's mind."
Learning the changing environment.
Always jumping out of the box.
Healthy when you have a sense of security to take a risk.

SOLIDARITY

Having well-defined team.
Clearly defined project.
Clear ideas of process and good sharing of information.
Comes out of creative chaos--always flexibility and fluidity.
Working with someone gives you a place to bounce ideas.
Small team under high stress creates solidarity.
Have to trust in the capabilities of team members.
Physical separation works against solidarity.
Caring that what you do reflects on the company.
Takes time for new people to learn.

Annex 4: Questions for Improving Quality as AWC and CDI Get Bigger-Developed in Day 1 of Retreat

Quality (includes control)

Think of the projects that you have worked on.

Which product (publication) best exemplifies quality? Describe it.

What does *quality* mean to you?

Describe a particular project (process) that worked well for you in producing a quality product.

What things are needed to meet your expectations for a fine product?

Freedom

How does freedom affect your performance? Your work environment? Your relationships with clients?

Describe a situation in which freedom played an integral role or facilitated your work.

Describe a situation in which you were in control.

Impact (making a difference, effort)

Describe something you've done that's made an impact.

How do you feel that you have made an impact on yourself? On your co-workers? On the company? On your clients? On the world?

What kind of impact could (or should) we have on these five categories?

Describe any kind of feedback you've gotten on an impact you've made. How did you go about getting that feedback?

Perspective (wit, humor, connection to the world and clients)

Why do you think perspective is important?

Give an example of a time that perspective was important (when executing a task or working with a client).

How have you sharpened or strengthened your perspective?

Challenge

Describe a challenge that you found satisfying.

How do you define a good challenge?

What elements make for an environment in which you can feel you can rise to challenges and take risks?

How can we keep our jobs challenging?

What are the sources for challenges in your job (yourself, clients, company, world, peers)?

Solidarity

When do you feel most like a part of a team? What was happening that made you feel this way?

How does solidarity enhance the way we work?

Describe an instance in which solidarity helped when responding to client needs or when it contributed to the quality of your work.

How do you get solidarity?

Annex 5: Possibility Statements--What AWC and CDI Might Look Like

- We and our clients have an explicit understanding of what quality means and we are vanquishing the many enemies of quality.
 - We insist on a two-day window for quality assurance.
 - We communicate in writing the tradeoffs between meeting deadlines and ensuring quality.
 - We train all rookie editors and desktoppers in our style.
 - We have a list of enemies of quality.
- Our commitment to freedom is enhanced by a comprehensive tracking site. This backbone tracks the details of each project -- its team members, scope, budget, client contacts -- so that everyone involved has efficient access to a project's status.
- This tracking frees AWC employees to focus on substantive work and skills-building.
- AWC's strong reputation allows it to set limits at the start of projects with regard to timetables, design, and scope. We understand the time it takes to produce a quality project. We decline or reshape those that do not allow us the time or freedom to produce to our standards.
- We contract more mundane tasks, allowing employees to develop their own skills.
- We follow up with clients and ask them how the product was used, whether it was effective, and whether they would have done anything differently. We put their feedback on the tracking system.
- Whenever we get feedback from a client, we send e-mail to everyone.
- Cool heads prevail -- clients come running.
- Our work reflects our awareness of clients' perspectives and the feedback we solicit helps us refine our work.
- Sabbaticals and employees' pursuit of outside interests enrich our lives and work environment.
- AWC has established a reputation for quality. We continue to expand our range of projects (taking on projects outside our traditional fields). This allows employee to:
 - learn new subjects and fields
 - work with new clients (and old ones in new ways)
 - expand imaginatively
 - build new skills
 - spend more time working directly with clients
- Within our traditional fields of expertise, we find new ways to expand our clients' reach, exploring new platforms of communication. We bring our clients into new technologies while expanding our own knowledge base.
- Project leaders organize teams with well-defined tasks and goals.
- Cooperation, collaboration, and communication come out of creative chaos. Mentors give feedback and guidance to fellow employees. Trust grows from this experience.
- Frequent social functions--like parties--increase collaboration and bring together our widely dispersed employees. Despite recent growth, AWC keep the closeknit, small-company feel.

Annex 6: Actions for Improving Quality as AWC and CDI Get Bigger

1. Have a party
2. Appoint a project leader for each project
3. Begin to introduce clarity in bills -- attach notes
4. Create a proofreading checklist
5. Create a desktop publishing checklist
6. Create a list of “what’s expected”
7. Call clients at the end of each project to ask a few questions on satisfaction and use (Amy)
8. Disseminate feedback from clients
9. Solve Benton website problem
10. Start web site meetings and announce them (Debbie schedules)
11. Check the web site for possibilities of tracking (everybody)
12. Feed data and information for web site tracking
13. Determine whether Anna can be proofreader for bank site.
14. Determine whether Meg can be proofreader for HQ
15. Prepare “welcome boxes” for new people
16. Type results of this retreat and have each person augment it for medium- and long-term actions.
17. Let clients know about recent products
18. Communicate schedule changes to clients in writing and cite implications and options
19. Write list of enemies of quality
20. Assign names and dates to each item above
21. Prepare notebook on products of this retreat

Annex 7: Interview for Clients After the Retreat

Thank you for being willing to be interviewed again. This time your feedback is for a paper that I am writing about the process I used with Bruce's group. According to Bruce, the process was successful. I would like to see whether it was also effective for you.

- 1.** Thinking about the original interview, how did you find it from your perspective?

What was it about that interview that you found useful, enjoyable, of high quality?

- 2.** Did you receive and feedback from Bruce on what happened with your feedback?

Did he share with you any other feedback he received?

- 3.** Is there any way you wish we had done the exercise differently?

How could we have made the exercise more useful to you?

- 4.** I realize that it has been a very short period of time since our exercise, but have you seen any change in the way your work is being handled?

Describe it to me. What works better? Has anything suffered?

- 6.** From your perspective, do you think the exercise was successful?

Annex 8: Interview for Staff After the Retreat

Thank you for being willing to be interviewed. The purpose of your feedback to me is for a paper that I am writing about the process we used. According to Bruce, it was successful. I would like to see whether it was also effective for you.

1. What did you like best about the planning process we used?
2. When you were the most comfortable about the process, what portion of the process was it, what were you doing, and what was happening around you?
3. If you were given three wishes about the exercise, what would they be?
4. Since the exercise, do you see any changes in your work? In the way you work? In the work environment? In your colleagues?
5. The purpose of the exercise was to give you a chance to develop a plan for change that would help AWC and DCI to keep quality while growing and to learn some new skills. From your perspective, do you think that the exercise was successful? How?