

Changing the Inside to experience change outside

The Story and learning from an inquiry into Appreciative Leadership, October

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THE BEGINNING:

Appreciative Inquiry is one of today's most popular change methods. AI as it is popularly known has been traditionally seen as a model for transformational change in organizations and large communities. We have had great success with using this method for organizational change. However both of us come from the background of "T group#" which is a methodology for personal transformation. We have been working with AI for the past five years and also with T-Group. We have personally experienced the immense power of both these processes in the groups that we have worked as well as in our own lives. We had used AI for institutional change and T-Group for personal growth. This seemed like fragmenting the whole and hence felt the need to integrate the two together. We believe that no change can happen on the "outside" unless it has happened on the "inside". As Gandhi said "Be the change that you want to see in the world". Being a successful AI practitioner is not much different, for AI is more of a philosophy for living, which has been given a structure to become a tool for change.

In this article, we are sharing our experience of a successful attempt at blending the two methodologies (AI and T group work), to bring about institutional change *through* personal growth. We offered an experiential program on Appreciative Leadership at the ISABS winter event at Agra, India in December 2005 (ISABS- Indian Society for Applied Behavioral Science, www.isabs.org).

The topic of the inquiry was "Discovering the appreciative leader in you". This was chosen for a purpose. The fragmentation of the whole is marked in the realm of leadership. There is a lot of focus on what the leader can *do* to bring about institutional change. The focus is on leadership styles, actions, strategies and so on. While what the leader does is important, his/ her *being* is as important and this needs to be integrated with the *doing*. Then holistic change will emerge, you will not have to make it happen

Institutional change is not what you do as a leader on the institution to change it but institutional change emerges through your change process as a Leader. This was the basic concept behind our program.

THE POSSIBILITY:

This program would be a true test of our ability to "be" rather than "do". This was the focus of the lab. If we, as the facilitators and therefore leaders had to succeed, we would have to constantly walk the talk. To help us achieve this, we had designed the program so that our own being was as open to scrutiny and challenge as that of any of the participants of the laboratory.

We had to hold our belief in the power of these methods, allowing us to experience and "let come" what was emerging. We had to let go of any attempts to make the desired outcome happen.

We were also challenged by the possibility of constantly honoring and affirming “what is” in the group, as against focusing on “what is not”.

What follows here is an account of how we were, what we did, how we did and the processes that emerged and transformed us and the group.

THE STORY:

The story begins much before we started the program. Both of us have been leaders in our own way and experienced tremendous self-criticism between who we are and what we do. This has led to the search for integrating the two within us. The journey of this integration, we realized, is fulfilling and with so much of possibilities that the destination of holistic integration has become insignificant!

One of the aspects of this search has been to find a way for letting people experience the power of discovering who they are and then seamlessly blend into what they do. This program has been one of ways that we have discovered.

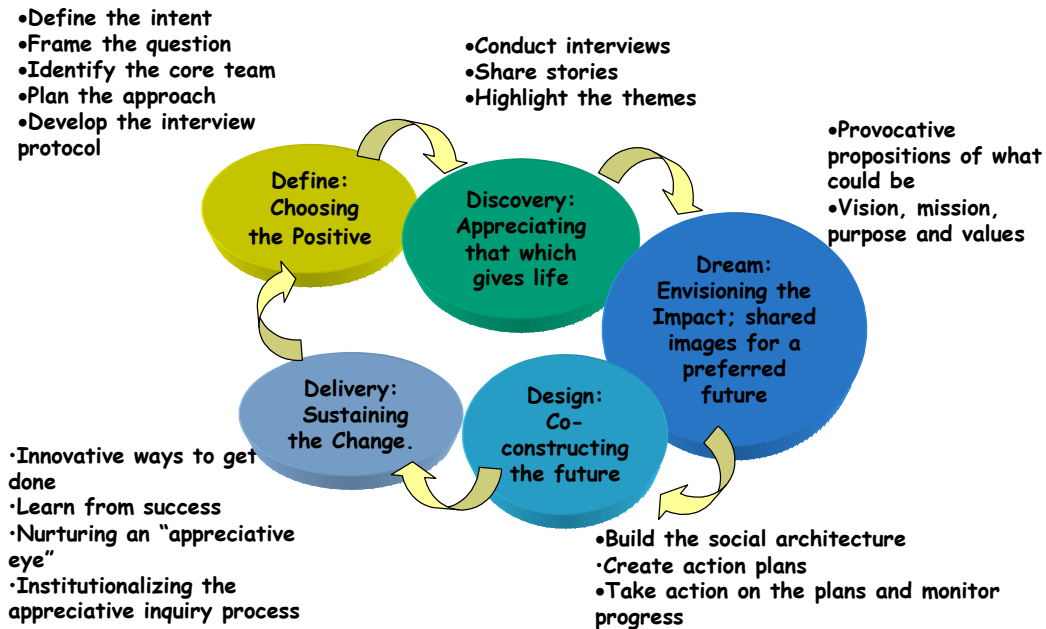
There were ten participants and two facilitators in the laboratory. It was a fairly diverse group. There were members from the development and corporate sector, there were professional members of ISABS, and some with no previous T group experience, there were some who had the knowledge and even practice of AI, and some who were new to the concept, there were men and women, different ages and cultural background! Of all these, perhaps the biggest challenge was the uneven level of knowledge and experience with using AI and T group methods. Probably this also added to the richness of the experiences that flowed in the days to come.

The other challenge was in using visual, aural and kinesthetic medium for experiencing through music, art, movement and so on in an environment where 10 T-Groups were being held in the adjoining rooms! The idea of keeping all channels of expression available to experience who we are, brought more richness and also fun to the whole experience.

THE FLOW:

AI goes through the 5-D process. For a detailed understanding of these processes, please visit www.aicommons.org.

The “5 D” Process



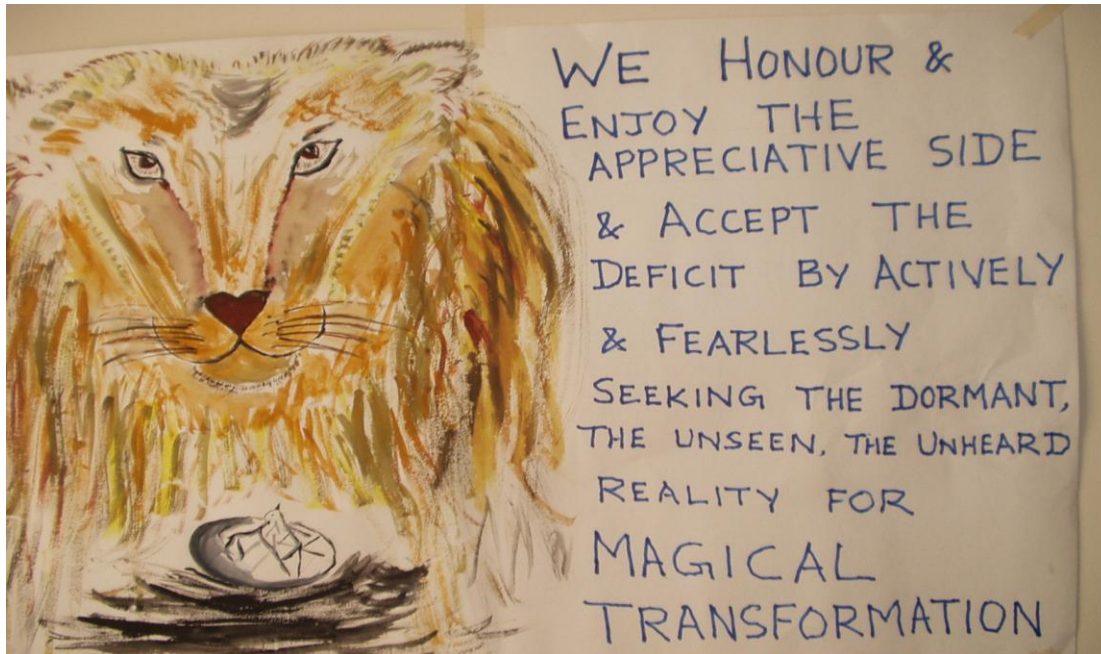
The program had been designed such that we would cover the first three “D’s” of AI in the first three days. We would also cover the theory of AI. After the “dream” had been created, we planned to move into a T group way of functioning to actually live the appreciative leader in each of us for the next two days. This would also address the last “D” of design for the group. The last day would cover applications of this method and address any questions and doubts that the participants had.

Reflections:

The first day tested our belief and allowing ourselves to be appreciative of what is to the extreme! Was this experiment going to fail? Each of the steps that were being followed highlighted all the differences that existed in the room. Interpersonal differences were also becoming obvious. There seemed little appreciation for each other’s strengths or of the facilitator’s competencies!

However, by the time the interview process (discovery) was over, there was a leveling that had occurred. The appreciative interviews brought each participant’s strength as a leader into focus. They also gave a glimpse into the person and her or his uniqueness. The context had changed. We could see possibilities emerging.

As we moved into a T group, it was easy to slip into deficit based thinking, addressing how the other person affects me, and focusing on the negatives. What anchored this process to the appreciative was the provocative proposition that emerged from the group. See below:



This provocative proposition statement along with the picture is very significant. The Lion and the emerging chick are both leaders here and both are enjoying and honoring each other. They are also accepting their deficits by fearlessly and actively seeking the "possible". This leads to the emergence of the dormant, unseen and unheard reality which is magical in its transformation. This also leads to the possibility for leaders to hold the aggressive, dangerous side of them along with the sensitive and compassionate side.

And as we tried to live this according to the design that was created to facilitate this process, magic did happen. The magic was not just in the transformation of the leadership of the group. The magic was also in the way serious interpersonal differences were sorted out. We realized that it is possible to do this while continuing to honor each other. This has been a revelation.