

Developing Vision, Values and Strategy through Appreciative Inquiry

Case Study of an NGO

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Setting the Context

MITTRA is a non-profit development organization promoted by BAIF, implements multi-pronged comprehensive rural development programs in different parts of Maharashtra. MITTRA, which is an acronym for “Maharashtra Institute of Technology Transfer for Rural Areas”, also means ‘Friend’ in Marathi. MITTRA is also the ancient Sanskrit name of the Rising Sun, which brings new life to the world.

BAIF Development Research Foundation, was founded in 1967 by Dr. Manibhai Desai, an associate of Mahatma Gandhi. BAIF worked on developing various approaches and instruments for providing gainful self-employment to the rural communities through sustainable use of natural resources. As BAIF programs spread to different parts of the country, various development organizations were promoted by BAIF to intensively continue the work in specific geographical regions.

MITTRA was founded in February 1992 to take up development programs in Maharashtra. Presently MITTRA programs are implemented in over 20 districts in Maharashtra. The head quarter is located at Nasik, Maharashtra.

MITTRA’s **mission** is to create opportunities of gainful self-employment for rural families, especially disadvantaged sections, ensuring sustainable livelihood, enriched environment, improved quality of life and human values.

MITTRA’s first strategic plan was prepared as a ten year plan in 1997. Since then, there are many changes evidenced in the organization and the environment in which it operates. The staff composition, working culture, program design has changed quite dramatically. The programs which were more delivery oriented have now become more open ended and evolving.

The Board and management of MITTRA was keen to develop a Strategic plan that factors in these changes and enables MITTRA to look beyond its current program and to take up greater sectoral leadership.

The organization appointed Vartika Jaini as an internal consultant to lead and coordinate the process of the strategic plan development using an Appreciative Inquiry approach. This Consultant was coached and shadowed by R Sankarasubramanian, AI Consultant and Change Management Expert. Dr. Wasundhara Joshi later joined in the Appreciative Inquiry Summit where the Strategic Planning process was completed.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastava at Case Western Reserve University, USA, in the 1980's. (Cooperrider & Srivastava,1987) It was primarily conceived as a method for systemic intervention and transformation. It is now used in large corporations, educational institutions, social and community organizations as a paradigm for change management.

It is a philosophy to change the way a system functions, based on appreciation of what "works" as against "what's wrong". The fundamental philosophy of AI is to shift the focus from a *problem-oriented* approach to a *possibility oriented* one. It looks at the existing strengths of an organization or community to focus on positive attributes as a basis for creating a co-constructed desired future. It is also highly participatory and democratic, both of which encourage ownership and sustainability.

The main intervention model that has come to be associated with appreciative inquiry is the 4-D cycle (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999). The 4-D cycle is an elaboration of the principles for the practice of AI described by Cooperrider and Srivastava (1987). It is shown as an action research cycle begins with *discovery* (appreciating what is, what gives life), then goes onto *dream* (imagining what could be), which is followed by *design* (the action plans for the dream to become a reality), and then *destiny* (the actual delivery or execution phase).

For more details on Appreciative Inquiry, please go to www.appreciativeinquiry.org.

Strategic Planning Process

The Internal Consultant contracted with the organization to follow the strength based approach to Strategic planning based on discussions with their key Directors and support provided by the Coach. This approach enabled the organization to focus on the following processes:

1. Learn from the peak experiences of the organization as experienced by both internal and external stakeholders.
2. Identify the strengths that hold the organization and help in meeting and surpassing goals.

3. Help the internal and external stakeholders envision the trends of change that are emerging in the communities and beneficiaries that the organization works with.
4. Dream about the various possibilities for engagement for the organization based on the emerging future and existing strengths.
5. Incorporate them into the strategic planning summit where the final plan will emerge.

This process was initiated in June 2007 with an initial workshop of a cross section of participants across the organization. The themes of a) participation; b) growth and c) quality emerged as organizational strengths from the stories.

Smaller working groups on a) innovations; b) human resource development; c) quality assurance; d) administration and finance; e) liaison were set up. These groups were to make a self assessment of where we are and get feedback from stakeholders on their experiences of MITTRA and what more it can do as an organization to build on its strengths.

Further, regional (broadly 2 or more districts) workshops and further block level workshops were organized to get feedback from stakeholders. These were conducted in all regions and subsequently across blocks on a sample basis. In this exercise, government officials, bankers, media persons, educationists and community representatives were consulted on the following questions: a) what do we see as the development scenarios in 2017; b) what do you see as the role for MITTRA in these; c) When have you experienced MITTRA at its best , both as an organization and the interventions that it does in the communities and d) what would be your dreams for MITTRA.

The information from these regional workshops and the working of the different groups was brought together in the mid point review workshop in October, 2007. This focused on internal opportunities and the internal change agenda in the organization. Further regional plans were developed based on response to questions: a) who are our clients in 2017; b) what are their needs in 2017; c) what is unique about our approach and d) what are the internal changes needed for the same.

The final summit was planned on February 14-15, 2008 at Nashik. The agenda developed for the summit was:

1. Revisit our vision/mission statement
2. Create strategic focus areas and goals for the ten year period
3. Prioritize by region while giving space/flexibility for regional needs
4. Generate Internal values and change agenda

The organization decided to invite R Sankarasubramanyan and Dr. Wasundara Joshi to facilitate the Summit. These consultants then had a series of meetings with the Director, Senior Management, a cross- section of

Staff and the Internal Consultant to finalize the agenda and process for the Summit meeting. These meetings were also used to help the organization become familiar with the Appreciative Inquiry process.

Appreciative Inquiry Summit

This summit was the culmination of a six month exercise aimed at creating a strategic plan for MITTRA for the next ten years. 30 key members from the regions and the Central office participated in this process.

Given below is an outline of the design of the Summit, the processes that unfolded and the outcomes.

DAY 1:

OPENING:

The context for the two days was set. It was emphasized that this was a time for celebration and joy. It was up to this group to determine if how the next ten years would be, for themselves, the communities they worked with, others who would be impacted by the work, as well as the future members who would join the MITTRA family. It was hence important that the approach be one of participation and making the years ahead joyful. A senior Director opened the session and emphasized that this was to set a direction and create a living document which was open to change. He reminded the participants that the last exercise had greatly underestimated their strengths and they had achieved much more than anyone had dreamed of.

The workshop began by having a traditional and auspicious beginning with a prayer, song and breaking a coconut.

SESSION 1: Setting the context:

Method: Café Approach.

The room was set as a café with 6 tables, and five chairs around each. Chart paper and pens were provided. The participants were invited to sit with less familiar groups. They had to choose an anchor who would "host" the table. The discussion was aimed at understanding "if we are to see the MITTRA of our dreams in 2017, what is the question that we need to ask of ourselves?" they were encouraged to write/ draw/ scribble on the paper provided.

After 10 minutes, the groups were asked to move to new tables randomly. The anchor stayed back, and updated the new members on the previous discussion at the table. The group then built on that with the ideas they brought from the previous tables. They went through 3 such rounds. Then all the papers were displayed, everyone contemplated their creations.

New groups were formed. Each table was then asked to form two key questions that seemed to emerge. Finally these three themes seem to emerge:

1. How do we define our role, which remains relevant to a changing environment? (Who we are and What we do?)
2. How can we create structures that support this role? (how we will do it)
3. What are the values that will drive these two? (Why we will do it)

This process helped the group to anchor on the process that they were embarking and focus on the aspects that are most significant to them. This process also helped to create a consensus while appreciating the diversity of thoughts that was present in the group.

SESSION 2: Bringing in the individual dreams

Here participants were asked to design a book jacket. The book would be about their own journey in the next 10yrs., which would be about their individual contribution to MITTRA and achieving their vision for it.

This session energized the group, brought in possibilities, hopes as well as aligned their personal visions with that of the organization.

SESSION 3: Aligning personal dreams with mission of MITTRA & Creating regional Strategies:

Participants were asked to sit in their regional groups. They were to create the vision, strategy and values for the next 10 years. For this they had to use the output of their books, the questions asked in the morning, the internal discussions of the various task forces and the regional plans created in the last six months in consultation with the stakeholders.

Different groups created their own visions and strategies that believed will bring alignment to the MITTRA's mission. These were presented to each other with highly engaging discussions. A core group was created to work through the night to synthesize and converge on a set of vision, values and strategic drivers for MITTRA based on all the inputs received.

DAY 2

The second day began with a check in from the participants. Some of the comments were:

"The discussions were rich. We need to learn to move out of present context to the future."

SESSION 1: Presentation by the Core Group:

This group that had worked overnight on the consolidation of inputs from various small groups, presented their output to the whole community. Their output was as follows:

VISION STATEMENT:

A dynamic effective learning organization positively impacting 500,000 families across Maharashtra, that:

- Implements multi-disciplinary innovative programs through its regions
- Plays the role of a resource organization in the development sector.
- Promotes and nurtures thematic and community based institutions.

In the discussion it emerged that "resource organization" needs to be defined. It needs to include research, advocacy and consultancy. The programs will also be implemented through other NGO's and PO's which are community based.

It emerged that the organization is clear that

1. It cannot have a large impact on its own, it has to work in partnerships and empower others to implement.
2. Implementation is the core strength. Advocacy needs to be built and research and implementation needs to continue.
3. The wording of the statement needs to be inspiring even at the field level.

VALUES:

INTEGRITY: Meaning Commitment, resilience, sincerity, consistency, professionalism

DEMOCRACY: Meaning Openness, communication, transparency, accessibility

PIONEER: Meaning Innovation, foresight

LEARNING: Meaning Pragmatism, value in experience, collaboration

The discussions that followed were very inclusive, building on each other and working towards a consensus. A gist of the issues discussed is given below to illustrate the breadth and depth of the dialogue:

"The vision defines the target, and the roles. What the roles are for, is not defined...how we will respond to a continually changing world. For e.g., global warming, seed laws, which will impact our poor. Are we addressing these in our vision statement?"

"Will we become thought leaders? Or do we continue to be "responders" to a situation? This needs to come in the vision statement as well."

"Positively impacting includes 'livelihood' as we do also work with health etc."

SESSION 2: Presentation of Regional Plans

The presentations of the regional plans were done in a café style, with one person acting as an anchor for that region. These presentations were followed by clarifications, suggestion and identification of common threads across the regions that could form part of MITTRA strategy at the state level.

SESSION 3: Large Group discussion to finalize the plans

These were the final set of discussions that were done and then a task force was created to document the plans with the recommendations included. Some of the inputs that were provided were:

1. All aspects of the vision have not been covered
2. All members have not participated, the members who were absent need to be brought up to date including the external stakeholders.
3. Nasik team needs to match plan to the strategic direction- they stated that some aspects are transformational. They need a trial period.
4. We need a rolling plan, which reviews the changing situation, and how the organization will use it. A periodic review at the organization level is essential.

The discussions then organically moved into areas of capacity building required to make these plans a reality. The group discussed various aspects of capacity building including HRD Policy, Monitoring and Evaluation, Audit, Documentation of successful projects, Linkages with external agencies – funding agencies, government, other partners and so on.

The group broke into sub-groups and created action plans against each of the areas identified for capacity building. There was a sense of completion and closure among the members.

CLOSURE

Since the transformation required within the organization needs to begin with the people who were in the room, we wanted the participants to identify few areas that they need to change that will facilitate the process of living the vision and strategy. For this purpose, we asked Participants to form two lines facing each other.

Each person to give feedback to the person in front about one thing you like about the person, and one you wish that person to change. People, then gave and received feedback and identified areas for change within them.

The session closed by inviting participants to state their feelings, feedback. Some of the comments were:

"The forum was Open and the experience was enriching and learning oriented"

"I felt trusted by management and allowed us to speak openly"

"The participation was good"

"Happy, looking forward to work ahead"

"It was a stimulating experience"

"We need to do further work"

The summit ended with a round of thanksgiving from the Director of the organization and others.

Epilogue: Learning from the Experience

The success of the Summit was the culmination of more than eight months of work within the organization that involved more than four hundred people. Many external stakeholders were also invited on various occasions to contribute through their intimate understanding of the organization as well as the socio-economic trends in rural Maharashtra.

One of the Consultants, Vartika Jaini, was on the frontline working continuously for the success of this project. R Sankarasubramanian, acted as Vartika's Coach and Shadow consultant ensuring that she got perspectives that are not contaminated by experiences within the system. The process of dialogue between the frontline consultant and the Coach was enriching to both of them and also helped in developing better understanding, diagnosis and design of interventions for the client system.

When the client invited R Sankarasubramanian and Wasundhara Joshi, we decided to conduct an independent diagnosis and understanding of the client and not get colored by the more intense experiences of Vartika Jaini. This helped in maintaining the role boundaries as well as creating a sharper diagnosis.

During the Summit, the internal consultant continued to play that role and the Summit container and its boundaries were held by the other two consultants. This helped in containing the psychodynamics of familiarity and association that the client system has developed with the Internal Consultant.

The journey from June 2007 to February 2008 was also filled with roadblocks, failures and other difficulties. The internal consultant was also emotionally impacted by these issues. But she constantly dialogued and documented these issues with the Coach and Shadow Consultant. This

helped the Internal Consultant continue the work with passion as well as provided a vent for her to express her feelings in a constructive way without impacting the client system.

All of us also continuously believed that the client system has the strength to go through this process and come out successfully and we saw that happen.

Looking ahead, we offered the following thoughts to the organization to continue their journey which they started in June 2007. The following recommendations were documented and given to the Client post the Summit.

1. The energy generated from this process needs to be leveraged to provide a big boost to the organization.
2. We believe that the organization can take up much more than what is being planned now, there is a need to stretch more.
3. The entire proceedings and the outcomes needs to be communicated to the entire organization and their opinions should be sought.
4. The management team, including the regional heads should attend a strategic vision and leadership program to build the competencies to lead the change.
5. The organization should start a process of competency mapping of all critical jobs and conduct assessment of incumbents and help create a developmental plan for the people who manage these jobs.

Post Script: The process continued beyond the Summit with the core group creating the final document for acceptance by the organization. These consultants also gave inputs to the same.