

## Appreciative Inquiry: Enabling Desired Futures

"As for the future, your task is not to foresee but to enable it." ~ Antoine De Saint-Éxupéry  
Or as Peter Drucker would have it, "The best way to predict the future is to create it."

---

Dear Friends and Colleagues ~

Greetings for 2006! If you take advantage of the tradition of New Year Resolutions to reflect and refigure (no inference intended), here are two questions that might be useful: What is the future we most desire and what are we doing to enable it?

Embracing the certainty of De Saint-Éxupéry and Drucker, we are asking ourselves these very questions. Both suggest that power comes from transforming our relationship with the future from a reactive mode to an active one. We can actively engage in the creation of our desired future, and even though we cannot do anything about unforeseen circumstances that come our way, we have control over how we respond to them.

### CENTRAL TASK OF LEADERSHIP

What if enabling the future was THE central task of leaders, even as they are firmly grounded in the past and present? In our Appreciative Inquiry (AI) mailings we have been talking about how leaders might do just that. For us leadership is about being

- out in front—showing the way, enticing with a vision, courageously breaking new ground. In AI we call this Dreaming.
- in the back—motivating, encouraging, improvising, helping, maybe driving the organization forward when on those rare occasions it is needed. In AI we call this Delivery.
- in the middle—learning, listening, experimenting, co-creating. We call these Discovery and Design.

All of these leadership activities are rooted in 1) an appreciation of what the organization has already successfully created, and 2) an inquiry into what else might be created to enable an even better future.

### LEADERS AS STUDENTS

The leader, rather than being an “expert” on organizing, is a “student” of organization. The leader does not let what they know get in the way of new discoveries about how things might be done. And at the same time, they are always looking for and pointing out to the members of the organization what the members have created that is working. The leader knows that organizations, which are designed and created by humans, are simply ways of gathering people together to get things done.

A leader acknowledges that not every way people gather to get things done is desired or successful. For example slavery, in our definition, would not be called a successful way of organizing. By successful we mean not only getting the task done but also strengthening the relationships between the people gathered together for a life-giving purpose.

### CREATIVE PROCESS OF GATHERING

In AI, to generate the most fertile environment for the creative process of organizing, we focus on successful, life-affirming ways of gathering people together. Focusing on the successes ignites our imagination, frees us to think creatively about even better ways of organizing. Leaders, who use an AI perspective, enable the future by joining with the other organizational members to:

Discover what successful ways of gathering they have created

Dream about ideal ways of gathering  
Design new innovative ways of gathering  
Deliver test pilots and improvisations of gathering

Ironically, as organization members engage in the Inquiry about who they are and what they are doing when they are at their best, they in turn, enable the leaders. This highly relational dynamic, between the members of an organization and its leaders, is the heart and creative center of every organization.

#### ENABLING THE FUTURE

Consider a recent AI project we did with an elementary school. The school was already a high performing school. The principal's desire was to make sure that their tradition of excellence would be carried into the future. He was very clear that over the years many teachers, parents, previous principals and even the students had worked hard to create ways of gathering together. This made their school a place where everyone from the students to himself was eager to come and learn.

In addition, the principal knew that in the next few years many of the teachers would be retiring. His goal was to enable a future that built on their tradition of excellence and transformed tacit understandings of how it was created into explicit understandings.

#### MAKING THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE

The AI took just over one year to complete and culminated with a Friday evening and Saturday gathering of the entire school, parents, teachers, staff, administration, and students. Many innovations were created, relationships strengthened, and pilots started during the process.

One of the most moving innovations that came out of this year long focus was created by a group of three third grade girls who started a new club they expectantly called, "Make the World a Better Place."

With the optimistic simplicity of childhood, they determined that the only criteria for membership was for perspective members to do something that made the world a better place. It could be anything from picking up trash on the play ground, to feeding the homeless, to creating world peace.

As the project grew, the teachers added value by asking questions at the end of their lessons like this one, "How does what you just learned help make the world a better place?" As could be expected, this generated lots of discussion about things that could be done to make the world a better place.

The principal reached his goal. The school population would not only carry on its tradition of excellence, it was also asking itself what else it could do to be even better. It had transformed its relationship with the future.

#### BACK TO THE FUTURE

Which brings us back to our original questions. And because we believe that questions are the most powerful linguistic tool we have, we would like to pose them again to everyone who receives this mailing. As a leader, what is the future your organization most desires and what are you doing to enable it?

Enjoy! And let us hear from you. ~ Trish, Chet, and Skip

If at any time you wish to be removed from this "learning space", please hit reply and say, "Please remove" in the body of the email. Thanks!