

THE INTEGRATION OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR PEAK PERFORMANCE APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY CASE STORY: NEW YORK CITY LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

Miriam Ricketts
Executive Edge, Inc
mricketts@executiveedgeinc.com

Jim Willis
Executive Edge, Inc
jwillis@executiveedgeinc.com

ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates how an integrated Appreciative Inquiry, AI, and Experiential Learning, EL, approach within a micro-world learning environment accelerates positive change, motivates teams and individuals, generates buy-in and engages people at all levels. By sharing and learning from experience, people attain the high levels of rapport, empathy, trust and mutual understanding necessary to risk and embrace change together. When integrated into each stage of an Appreciative Inquiry, Experiential Learning supports and illuminates the AI process, making AI "come alive" for all stakeholders. When designed into an AI process, experiential learning allows participants to actually experience "the best of what exist" (Discovery), creates opportunities for organizational "peak experiences" (Dream), provides opportunities to experience, practice and refine provocative propositions (Design), and builds critical mass as change is cascaded throughout the community (Destiny).

Keywords: Appreciative Inquiry, Experiential Learning, Social Construction

INTRODUCTION

Last Fall, we had the honor of hearing Dr. Rosabeth Moss Kanter from the Harvard Business School give a provocative talk entitled, "Building a Better World Just Might Be the Next Business Frontier." In her presentation, she called on for-profit business to explore the value of partnering with non-profits in order to address global environmental and social issues. Highlighting the abundant resources available to the business community and the growing investor expectation (in a post-Enron economy) that corporations "do right" by all stakeholders, Dr. Kanter made a compelling business case for reaching outside of the organizational structure— not just as a way to philanthropically "give" to external community stakeholders, but

also as a strategy for creating a greater ROI for the business organization itself.

While Dr. Kanter's business case for corporate-community partnership was persuasive in and of itself, within the context of the appreciative organization's vision and strategy, the conscious commitment to partner with external non-profits (or other organizations that may not appear to directly impact the business "bottom line") benefits the appreciative organization by providing many new opportunities for learning, skill development and growth.

Take into consideration the basic ideas around appreciative organizing—that people in organizations create "worlds of meaning" constructed and ordered through relationship with others; that this "meaning-making" guides and influences the organization's present and future actions; and that the act of appreciation itself generates new meaning that increases the value of individual and organizational relationships.

The mindful decision then for appreciative organizations to seek external community partnerships not only generates opportunities to bridge the boundary definition of what is "inside" vs. "outside" of the organization, but also demonstrates the value the organization places on those external community relationships. And that which is valued grows.

When an appreciative organization views its external community as stakeholders, outside "caring voices" who have the best interest of the organization in mind, then new possibilities emerge not only for the organization itself but also the surrounding community. The following case story shares how corporate-community partnership added value for the Organization Development function of a large consulting firm that wanted its newly hired executives to experience "inspirational community service" in order to live the firm's core leadership values.

THE NEW YORK CITY LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

At the time of this program, the Management Consulting arm of Ernst & Young LLP had been experiencing rapid growth (adding approximately 45% new employees per year, including executives) and turnover (almost 20%) for several years. Given the turnover, Ernst & Young leadership felt they had not been able to “satisfactorily inculcate” new executives with the core leadership values and skills important to retaining top talent and ultimately the sustained success of the firm.

The leadership in the firm’s New York City offices identified senior management as the group who could influence a new direction for the firm by establishing a more positive and inspirational leadership culture. And since the firm held community service as one of its core values, they also saw an opportunity to reinforce this value by using the surrounding New York City community as the learning environment for a new leadership initiative.

The head of HR for the firm requested a leadership learning experience that included a 24-hour community service challenge for 80 selected managers. Over a two-day period, the executives used appreciative interviewing techniques and experiential learning to explore the topic of “leadership that inspires positive community change”—both within the firm and in the New York City community—and to set goals and identify action steps for improving their individual leadership skills.

The experience for the New York City Leadership Challenge was to feed and clothe 2,000 people in New York City within 24 hours—all while conducting appreciative interviews of the leaders, volunteers, employees and beneficiaries of the service organizations contacted during the challenge. The experience actually represented a challenge to the senior managers to discover “the best leadership that exists,” both regarding current capacities and future potentials, and to bring said capacities and potentials to life over a two-day period (one day for the experience and one day to debrief).

During the first morning the participants interviewed each other about personal and organizational experiences around extraordinary leadership. In teams of 8-10, they then were presented with three tasks:

1. Feed and/or clothe 2,000 people in need within the next 24 hours
2. Interview community stakeholders—community service organization leaders, volunteers, workers, and recipients about their personal experiences with “Leadership that Inspires Positive Community Change”; and
3. Follow and complete the Self-Facilitated Learning Journals (designed to guide learning for remote teams) at the designated time milestones during the challenge.

At this introductory point, while we deeply believed that the challenge would be transformational, it was not immediately apparent. For many of the participants, the initial response to the challenge was fear, concern and outright refusal. We had a totally unexpected mutiny on our hands! Several of the participants argued that this was an unsafe, and even unethical activity (to ask employees to perform community service as part of a work training exercise). Many, naturally, were also

concerned about traveling to areas of the city they had been told to avoid all of their lives.

As the discussion progressed, leaders emerged who argued both sides—to pursue the challenge and to protest the challenge. Finally, they asked all facilitators and E&Y partners to leave the room so they could speak openly and candidly among themselves. Many of the protesters were uncomfortable openly expressing their concerns in front of their bosses. They also perceived ulterior motives in the people who were on the side of proceeding with the challenge—namely, “You are only saying this in order to get promoted. If the partners weren’t in the room I think you would take a different view”.

To this day we don’t know what was said in the room during the 45 minutes that we were gone. However, we can tell you what we saw when they invited the facilitators and Partners to return to the room. The tenor in the room had changed entirely, and interpersonal tension was noticeably reduced. New leaders had emerged and were being supported by the earlier leaders and the rest of the senior management group. As well,

- The group had divided into separate teams whose purpose was to explore various opportunities for accomplishing the challenge.
- Each group had been established based on personal interests, concerns and core values.
- Empathy for one another had prevailed over personal interests.
- It was obvious that interpersonal rapport had been established.

Within the first hour of the program, it appeared that the executives were well on their way toward meeting the leadership program’s learning objectives. Even before the actual 24-hour service challenge had begun, the initial group dynamics encouraged the “best existing leadership qualities” to emerge, to be acknowledged and to be applied. The entire group exhibited incredible leadership, such as carefully considering the concerns, values and goals of each person, identifying the potential benefits of proceeding with the challenge, and choosing the best course of action for satisfying individual needs while meeting the objectives of the firm. They created a compressed time learning experience in which everyone had an opportunity to observe and practice extraordinary leadership.

In order to address individual interests and concerns, the group divided into task teams. Some of their tasks included:

- Moving goods (clothes, food and medicine) to Honduras for hurricane relief. Donated goods were jammed up in an inefficient warehousing bottleneck and the Honduran Embassy was having difficulty locating, monitoring and shipping the goods to Honduras. The firm’s executives went to the Honduran Embassy’s warehouse, assessed the problems, created solutions, administered them and left the solution framework in place in a way that the warehouse staff could administer successfully.
- Volunteering as cooks, dishwashers and servers at the Bowery Mission’s soup kitchen.
- Creating a new foundation, supported by the firm and run by junior executives, to provide just-in-time resources for community organizations in need. This foundation still exists.

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- Packaging, transporting and delivering frozen food and clothing from Harvest For Hunger to homeless and impoverished families.
- Canvassing neighborhoods, family and friends for clothing and food donations, locating people in need of the donations and distributing the donations to them.

Upon returning from the community service leadership challenge (the group far exceeded the goal of feeding and clothing 2000 people in less than a day), the executives came together to share the output from the completed interviews, and to reflect on their experiences, many of which included “real time” collaborative leadership moments. Each person then created a personal plan with 6-month and 12-month goals for developing personal leadership qualities, to be reviewed by their mentor and included in their annual performance review. To close the program, and as a follow up for continued learning, the firm sponsored a Habitat for Humanity house building project to be completed with the firm’s New York “counseling families” (basically a vertical slice of the organization) as a means for cascading the lessons to others in the organization.

If “...collaborative participation is the key to leadership in the appreciative organization...” (*The Appreciative Organization* 24), the New York City experiential “learning laboratory” provided a rich environment within which the executives could collaborate to practice and demonstrate individual and group leadership excellence. The experience of working together not only to restructure the terms of the learning (much to the surprise of the external facilitators!), but also to complete the community service challenge itself generated peak moments for discovering the most effective “leadership that inspires positive community change”. As a result, the executives were able to experience firsthand how collaborative processes (like inclusion and coordination with others) help to construct an organization’s leadership culture.

Looking back on the experience, what is even more provocative is how the corporate-community relationship itself provided unexpected learning opportunities both for the participants and those in the community. For example, the team of efficiency experts who approached the Honduran embassy was able to quadruple the rate that clothing and medical supplies left the warehouse for Honduras. And through the experience they also learned that if they identified what was in each box (by efficiently listing the contents on the outside), chances were the content lists would draw the attention of street-wise opportunists in the Black Market, and the boxes wouldn’t reach their final destination.

The relational exchange between Ernst & Young and the surrounding New York City community also lived on after the Leadership Challenge. Not only did the firm adopt and complete a Habitat for Humanity house-building project, but several executives also initiated a mentoring program through which junior consultants offered the firm’s services to key non-profit community agencies— both to add business value for the agency and to provide client “face-time” for effectively training the firm’s newer consultants.

The New York City Leadership Challenge story demonstrates one potential when a corporate organization embraces its external community through a structured learning experience. By choosing to value the New York City

community-at-large as an inspirational leadership “learning laboratory”, Ernst & Young put into motion the possibility of new dialogic relationships and generative moments for “meaning making” in partnership with its surrounding community.

The combination of appreciative dialogue and storytelling, along with a challenging learning experience that coordinated with the outside community, all contributed toward the increased awareness, deliberate reframing, and co-construction of leadership excellence for a small, influential group within a very large organization. For this group, the firm’s leadership story was reinforced and even rewritten in the context of a powerful learning experience that reached beyond organizational boundaries in order to discover leadership that inspires positive community change.

For Author contact please send us an email to mricketts@executiveedgeinc.com, jwillis@executiveedgeinc.com, or visit our website at www.executiveedgeinc.com, or give us a call at 440.338.8308.

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