Learning to Lead: A School for Senior Executives in the Federal Government in Canada

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This article describes the power of combining Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Open Space Technology (OST) in a leadership training program for senior executives of the federal government. The participants found these approaches to be innovative and effective for facilitating meetings, building change processes and managing teams.

Leadership training program: Looking Back at My Learning

For the last few years, I have been on a design team for the Canada School of Public Service, the service provider for the Public Service of Canada, who provides learning to build and maintain a modern, high-quality, professional Public Service. We designed and delivered a leadership training program for senior executives of the federal government. The program spanned several months with separate workshops, each addressing different aspects of leadership. In the last workshop, which I facilitated, participants had these objectives:

- To take stock of their learning, reflecting on what was most meaningful;
- To make links among the leadership elements identified throughout the program, building a synthesis of leadership characteristics that create conditions for an agile organization;
- To identify priorities for changing the way they lead in their work and life environments, creating an action plan to implement those priorities; and
- To develop a plan to sustain their learning.

We introduced AI's Discovery phase as a stepping-stone to build on the past and look to the future from a positive point of view. We chose AI to precede Open Space because of its power to reframe by exposing strengths, innovations, achievements, passions and hopes. The theme was "Looking back at my Learning". During the Appreciative interview, people paired up, asking each other affirmative questions about their experience in this learning program. Questions involved thinking of experiences where the learning felt like an "aha" moment; what you learned in your workplace about yourself; how learning from others contributed to your growth and three wishes that would support you in being a better leader.

After the interviews there was a dynamic exchange with the whole group. Participants found this informative and rewarding. The AI interviews broke the ice, enabling people to talk very personally without feeling threatened, even in groups of 25 or more.

Participants spent the next couple of days working with each other and external people to identify additional leadership characteristics and practices that create and sustain an agile organisation. They met leaders, front line managers and staff of different types of

organizations, including an international communications company, a prison, a financial institution, a back-to-work centre for disabled people, a national construction employee-owned company, and an aboriginal council. They learned that:

- Gaining self-awareness, having personal goals and demonstrating integrity increase your efficiency as a leader by creating trust which more effectively enrolls people than learned techniques
- Dialogue and an open mind are key to reaping the rich benefits of team synergy
- Seeing the whole and our interconnectedness leads us to consider and involve people from all parts of our organizations and businesses, internal and external
- Developing vision in a way that builds commitment is more powerful than the vision itself

A day in Open Space followed, covering the AI phases of Dream, and Design. Participants identified topics to explore their thoughts, questions and dreams about "leadership in an agile organization." With self-generated and self-managed discussions, participants followed their passion and developed their personal understanding of what leadership means to them, clarifying issues on implementing and leading while anticipating the next day's work of creating a personal action plan.

The next day, we moved into OS' convergence phase, corresponding with AI's Destiny. On this last workshop day, the group gathered again in a circle, and after a few instructions, dispersed to read the reports from the previous day's work. The guiding question was: "What do I now have passion and energy to act on to be a leader in an agile organization?" Participants developed a provocative statement encompassing their commitment, vision and action plan which they presented to the larger group. For example, "Team work is pleasant and productive for everyone in my work group. To accomplish this, I focus more on the human aspect of the team, openly communicate this intention to my team and incorporate feedback and reflection time at our regular staff meetings." People also identified collective initiatives for mutual support.

In evaluating the overall program, some mentioned the Appreciative Inquiry interviews as a revealing and meaningful experience, particularly listening and being heard without interruption. Open Space is always rated a program highlight for its freedom to identify and explore what matters with people who share their passion.

How to be a Leader in a Learning Organization

Approximately two months after the workshop, participants met for a day to tell stories and learn from each other about implementing their personal leadership plans. Some had convinced their managers of the value of real staff involvement in plans for change. Others had happier, more collaborative teams because of encouraging practices that created synergy. One replaced the traditional structured agenda for his annual staff retreat with Open Space, which he facilitated. A weight came off his shoulder, he said, as everyone started to share leadership and responsibility for outcomes.

"The openness and depth of conversation that participants explored professionally and personally amazed me", said James Clemens, Learning Specialist responsible for this program. "Participants developed tremendous ideas for their organization. It showed me that when you provide space for people to reflect and share their experiences, they generate so much more than you thought possible."

Reflections on the Process

My impression is that the Open Space would have been successful even without introducing Appreciative Inquiry. Yet the breadth of the learning, depth of the experience and breakthroughs were enriched by AI. It enabled a refresher of past learning, brought participant's best knowledge and experience of the program to the forefront, and began shifting their thinking towards an ideal future. Incorporating Open Space for Design and Destiny enables broad exploration of the implications of an emerging vision, to identify priorities and develop action plans. It empowers because it is simple and self-managed.

Overall Reflection on OST and AI

My experience has shown me that when the basic conditions and principles of OST are respected, results exceed the expectations of organizers and participants, a testament to its power and effectiveness.

AI and OST are front runners of participatory approaches. These approaches have a common objective: enhancing communication and creating enthusiastic commitment for more successfully implementing desired results. In AI, people connect quickly and safely with deep, positive and meaningful personal experience. This affirmative, constructive lens for seeing the future is a powerful tool for change. Open Space gives freedom and choice, as people work on what matters to them, creating conditions for real communication and deep, genuine and eager commitment. They are both innovative and effective approaches for facilitating meetings, conference, change processes and training. Combining them creates an even deeper experience.