AI Practitioner

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Using Appreciative Inquiry for Team Collaboration, Creativity and Innovation

This article gives an Appreciative Inquiry insight into 'team collaboration and high performance' that provides perspective on how we should leverage our strengths to enable system-wide continuous improvement for the organization, take full ownership for our work, and develop a deep collaboration when aligning the growth of the Company with our own personal and professional development.

Late in 2020, I was approached by a small/medium enterprise that had recently restructured to help with business growth, team collaboration, growth in market share and enabling their staff's professional development. Their Hong Kong office is small, with the sales team forming the core of their organization. At the time, they had just expanded their head count.

The objectives

After discussions with the managing director and the head of sales, the agreed focus for the two-day workshop was:

1. *Team bonding and team spirit*: Understanding and supporting one another in their roles and responsibilities. Creating a sense of togetherness as they work together.

2. *Sales ownership and accountability*: Having a sense of personal responsibility and personal ownership: "if it's to be, it's up to me".

3. *Decisiveness and problem solving*: Becoming influencers and leaders as they embrace their personal responsibilities. Each team member would ideally take stock of challenging situations, and think creatively of what they could do to bring about change and resolve issues.

4. *Confidence as a sales professional*: Confident and effective in building

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and maintaining relationships with clients; becoming trusted advisors; using strategic thinking and sales skills to really understand the entire "food chain". How can each employee enrich the customer experience?

I had been in sales for ten years in banking and had always looked at taking care of a client by understanding the entire "food chain". My experience when that was not done was that the salesperson put the relationship with the client and the firm at risk. That resonated with the MD of the SME. Enriched customer experience can be had only when the entire food chain functions well in terms of communication among the different departments, each understanding the role of the other and each doing their role par excellence. The MD seemed to find the working practices in his office out of sync and, given that they had to grow, enriching customer experience was imperative for him.

Making it practical

I sensed frustration and negativity during my discussions with the MD and head of sales. Having been a practitioner of strengths-based coaching and AI, I felt that taking an AI approach to team collaboration and high performance would set a strong foundation to amplify and grow further. Thus, I introduced Appreciative Inquiry (AI) into discussions with the two key people in the Hong Kong office. While I would have liked to undertake the discovery and define stages for the workshops with the entire sales team, I realized that I hadn't yet established a relationship. So I adopted the idea they proposed of team collaboration and leadership and suggested four modules, one for each of the objectives. I used the client's language as much as possible while submitting my proposal.

The timeline was really short: I had less than two weeks from the initial contact and deciding on dates to the workshop. I proposed two day-long workshops with a break between because I wanted them to practice what they had learnt on Day 1, experiencing what went well and where the challenges were. I would then be able to use this to further build their Day 2 experience. The client agreed to the proposed structure.

Getting a sense of the story

A colleague had previously given a sales training workshop for the same company. She introduced me to the head of sales, from whom I got a better sense of the "smell of the place". He gave me a sense of the individual team members: the number of years in the company and in sales, their styles and personalities. I got a sense of their attitude toward their role and comfort in it, their enthusiasm,

People were friendly, but that did not necessarily result in collaboration.

their knowledge of the company's business, how willing they might be to move beyond their comfort zone.

When asked about their market standing and the market pre-Covid-19, the head of sales indicated that they had been in a comfortable position; "low hanging fruit" was the phrase used. The onset of the pandemic and the toll to the retail industry meant the company had to think of new ways to keep growing. Collaboration and cooperation – not really embedded – were imperative. People were friendly, but that did not necessarily result in collaboration when they presented in front of clients or in internal meetings or brain storming sessions.

Change was felt to be essential, driven by the managing director who had arrived two years before. His management style and way of dealing with people was different from that of his predecessor. I sensed discomfort in discussing the predecessor: all I gathered was that he was a westerner who left after several years with the company. The current managing director's style is bottom-line driven. He believes in accountability and raising market share and revenue. This was a culture shock for the whole firm; the sales team probably felt it the most. The entire sales team (with the exception of two people, whose stories come later) had joined either on the day of his arrival or after. Despite the sales team being new, it seemed that the team's willingness to take on risks and accountability fell shy of the managing director's expectations.

Choosing AI

I realized that there were many things that worked well and needed to be recognized and amplified.

My immediate instinct was to use AI in helping them achieve their goal of creating a high-performing, collaborative environment. My discussions with the MD and the head of sales strengthened that view. The conversations highlighted an overarching negativity and yet, taking a "view from the balcony", I realized that there were many things that worked well and needed to be recognized and amplified for them to collaborate and grow.

One person, who had been with the company for over fifteen years, had been rotated through many jobs before she was moved to sales. When I met her for this workshop, she doubted her capability. She had held two different roles for a short time before being moved to sales. She attributed that to her performance not being good.

Another individual, who had been in business control, was also in the process of transitioning to a sales role.

What works? What can be amplified?
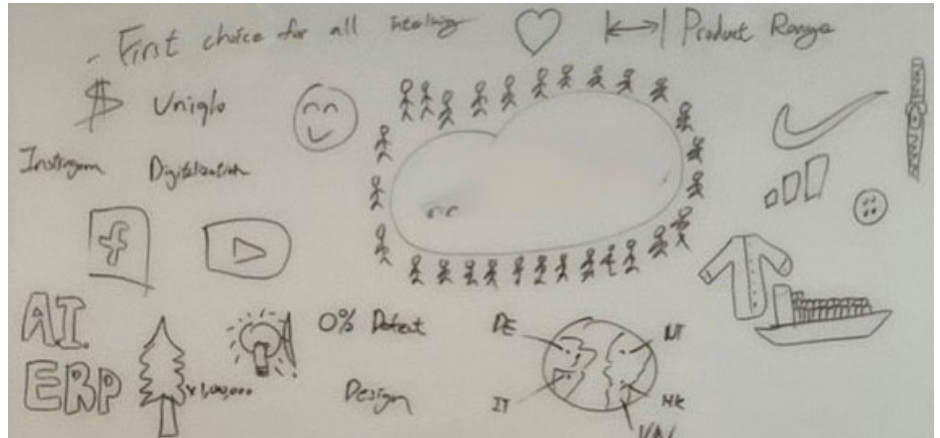
Given this backdrop, I wanted to start with what was working that could be amplified. I aspired for them to connect with who they were, what strengths they had and what they connected with. Once I had introduced myself, I started the workshop with the questions:

- What do you appreciate about yourself (1 to 3 things)?

- What can you amplify especially when you face challenges?

- What else could add value?

I observed pleasant surprise on their faces and the energy levels increased. Gradually, they smiled and began to enjoy the exploration. This helped establish my rapport with them. I felt comfortable going deeper with the group.

What worked?

I would like to use the same AI principles that I used when designing the workshop as an anchor to look at what worked in the workshop and what could have been different.

Based on Hammond, *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry* Bend, OR: Thin Book Publishing Co. 1996, pp. 20–21.

In every society, organization, or group, something works.

1. In every society, organization, or group, something works

What was working with this group was that they had an established rapport. As Day 1 went on, they were willing to explore with an open mind, and to discuss what was asked of them despite the discomfort some of them may have experienced with some of the questions. Language was another issue: some of them didn't understand the questions. They relied on the group to make sense of them. When I walked around, some clarified their doubts with me. The sense of comfort and eagerness to discuss questions increased on Day 2. There was an existing bond within the group which was easy to miss.

2. What we focus on becomes our reality

In the first half of Day 1, the woman who had been moved around in different roles was clearly focused only on that and her belief that she was no good. During the debrief of one of the questions, I shared a vulnerable moment in my life and I saw the difference it made to this woman. Her behavior changed: she started to open up more, to share more of what they had discussed in pairs or groups.

Also, when the pairs were combined into groups of four, the group selected one story that they agreed reflected all or most of the common themes, a story in which they saw a positive core. In two rounds, her story was selected; she started to realize that she was good enough, that she has been moved around in roles because she was seen as being adaptable and able to learn new skills easily. That made a difference to her self-confidence and the way she interacted with the group in the room.

3. Reality is created in the moment, and there are multiple realities

On Day 2, during the big group work in the module on innovative and creative thinking, I noticed that the discussions were in silos: the sales team, the product team, quality control (an important part of the chain). So, there were groups within the group of nine. Conceptually, they had agreed that the chain would work only if they collaborated and presented as one organization, whether discussing sales strategy internally or presenting to clients externally.

I challenged them: how would product and quality control contribute to sales strategy and to the final product sold to the client? Where would marketing come in? At the end of this long discussion, they clearly saw that they could be in a better state if they genuinely discussed together without bothering about each one's territory. Two of the participants shared that they had never had a discussion until then of that nature and said it brought a very different perspective to their roles. I saw reality being created in that moment and their realization that there are multiple realities.

The act of asking questions influences the group

The questions and the way I asked them set the stage for a shift in their thinking.

During the module on being a confident sales professional, I asked, when you are performing to your fullest potential, what does that feel and look like for you, and how will it look for others? The person who had said he saw himself in a business control role initially responded that so many ideas of his were turned down that he was discouraged. I asked what if he focused on things he could control and

We jump straight to what can we add and surround ourselves in self-defeating practice.

As there is diversity, so there is also inclusion by valuing differences.

performing to his full potential. His demeanor changed: his energy level shifted to being more positive.

4. People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known)

As they progressed from Day 1 to Day 2, from questions in pairs to groups of four, where they identified the positive core to identifying the dream, it became clear that in our journeys we carry a judgmental mindset. In our quest to do better, we see ourselves as gaps to be filled instead of asking "what do I appreciate, what can I amplify?" before asking "what can I add?". We jump straight to what can we add and surround ourselves in self-defeating practice. But when we consciously take time to ask ourselves, individually or within groups, all three questions in the order of appreciate, amplify and add, we realize that we can carry forward parts of the past, a past that has many positives.

5. If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what is best about the past

This comes only when we make it a mindful practice. It is easy to be swayed by the negative: I observed this with myself and with the group during the two days: in the last year, our maps of the world around us have been filled with negative news, experiences and much more. I have had to consciously manage my emotions and create that space between stimulus and response. When there is so much stimulus and we do not consciously create that space, we react in ways that may not be so desirable to us and people around us. Growth and development does not happen with that mindset.

6. It is important to value differences.

The group found that they each had strengths. They could complement each other without "stepping on anyone's toes". As there is diversity, so there is also inclusion by valuing differences and making conversations more inclusive. I sensed that the group as a whole had come to feel more of this diversity and inclusion as a result of being in conversation over the course of those two days.

7. The language we use creates our reality

The intensity varied among the nine participants. It was more pronounced in the cases of the woman who had been rotated through many different roles, and that of the man who had moved from a business control role to sales. Their narratives were dictating their reality, and they had a glimpse of how that reality could change when they reframed their narratives and the language they used.

Continuous doses of AI will take them forward.

The story continues…

I have had conversations with the client to follow up and follow through. Two significant things have happened: the woman who'd had so many roles found the courage to go to the managing director to say what she wanted to do and why. She is no longer in sales. She has moved back to sales administration. And the person who was unhappy in the sales role has left the company. I understand that his new role with another company is closer to his desire to combine roles in sales and business control.

I recently met five of the sales team to facilitate a workshop on presentation skills. I sensed that some fronts, like having discussions ahead of meetings with clients, were being undertaken more diligently. Unfortunately, I also got the feeling that collaborative language had taken a back seat. Continuous support and challenge is required to keep the momentum. The managing director, as much as he wants to do it and does to some extent, may not have the bandwidth to play that role on a day-to-day basis. No one else seems eager to take that role on at this time. It made me wonder if the current political situation in Hong Kong has influenced the silo nature, and if interest to go beyond the wider system is limited at this stage. I also wonder how much of the culture that exists in the city of "anyone who is not from Hong Kong is an outsider" affects the continuing the collaboration.

I still believe that continuous doses of AI will take them forward, though I would need to reflect on this more to determine how the commitment to sustenance despite our environment can still be nurtured. That, for me, is the mindset that each of them would need to be able to continue this journey using Appreciative Inquiry.

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