

Funk to Fervor: Small Steps and Big Dreams One Nonprofit's Journey with Appreciative Inquiry

A small community — 4,000 residents — in Louisiana's East Carroll Parish was notable for being the second poorest county in the country. Racially divided and economically depressed, it struggled to maintain communal identity in the face of out-migration of young people. Citizens lived with little hope and few memories of a bygone era when the parish was comparatively prosperous. Fortunately for this town, what began as a small, Appreciative Inquiry effort restoring positive conversations, staff vitality and program quality in one early childhood education program, is now playing a major role in rekindling spirit and hopes for a more vital community future.

An established local nonprofit community agency lost substantial federal funding after years of mismanagement and deteriorating services. As a designated interim management entity, Community Development Institute (CDI) enters such failing programs with the mission of restoring fiscal integrity and the quality of program services, through providing staff development training and streamlined operating systems...but our world class training and development did not work here for the first eight months of operation.

The assigned site manager began to recognize that the organization was a microcosm of the whole community — depressed, resentful and backward-looking with the ever present reminders of a racially divided past in the charred skeletons of burned out buildings from the late sixties race riots still dotting the landscape of the community. Staff felt powerless to make the changes necessary to fulfill their mission. Traditional team-building techniques and staff development efforts had proven ineffective: they produced no permanent change in attitudes, improvement in staff interactions or most importantly, services to children and their families.

After achieving incremental change, at best, the CDI manager became inspired by the possibility of using AI to animate her disheartened organization. During a staff retreat, she asked positive questions to encourage staff conversations about what really mattered to them related to their best community memories and hopes for the future of their children. The energy generated during and immediately after the retreat was infectious and sustained through a variety of positive questions from the local director and a couple of managers who “caught the bug”. Subsequently, other AI processes were introduced throughout the agency. The organization came alive and the impact was felt beyond the program in neighborhood and community improvement activities.

One of the staff's biggest complaints: “people aren't being heard” — was in fact shorthand for a style of communication characterized by rumor, gossip, innuendo, complaints and sarcastic remarks. Through further use of AI, “provocative propositions” — *statements of possibility* — were developed by the staff to set the standard for positive communication becoming the norm. The resulting change is described by CDI's site manager this way : “One of the first things I noticed was silence, uncanny silence, except for the behind the back variety, as if people had given up talking to one another. Now

when I walk around, I hear the hum of conversation in every corner of the agency. To me, it's the sound of lively people engaging in activities that make a difference.”

A mental health consultant, who has worked with the children's program over a number of years, preceding, during and after the AI intervention, reported compelling accounts showing significant positive changes in staff interactions with children, the children's behavior and, most important, widespread gains among children in developmental outcomes during this period. A precipitous drop in problem behaviors in the classrooms occurred as teachers became more engaged in their work and enthusiastically sought out classes to increase their professional skills.

From the start, the organization's connection to the community left something to be desired...parent involvement was very low. AI had an immediate beneficial impact on how the organization functioned internally, but it soon resulted in positive engagement of the immediate neighborhood. A case in point: broken and unsafe equipment, installed in the 1950's, made up a dilapidated playground next to the classrooms. Through spontaneous neighborhood action, a local architect created a site plan, fund raising occurred, hazardous equipment was removed and a “yard party” cleared the ground, built a sandbox, installed a barbeque and brought in movable playthings: tricycles, wagons, and outdoor building blocks. This initial neighborhood effort later expanded into a complete playground upgrade.

Unexpectedly, an opportunity to positively impact the community at large arose. A new billboard reading *New Voice — New Vision* appeared one day: the newly elected mayor's promise to the people. The mayor promised to create a vibrant and cohesive community — one like the older residents described in compelling stories of the past.

Recognizing yet another application for AI, the CDI site manager met with the mayor, described how her organization was reinventing itself and asked to collaborate with him in applying these ideas toward community renewal. The mayor enthusiastically accepted her partnership and convened a small group of twenty racially mixed civic leaders and opinion-makers for a town meeting. The meeting included interviews using positive questions. As a result participants discovered that they wanted the same thing — to restore their community.

The mayor seized the opportunity of bringing people together to discuss community affairs in a positive, strength-based context as the path to renewal and has scheduled ongoing town meetings to talk and plan. Residents are enthused. A new local ministry sponsored coffee shop has become a cozy place for townfolk to gather and have conversations. Some of these conversations are undoubtedly about exciting possibilities for the future. And a small effort beginning in an early childhood education program has had a major impact on a disheartened community.

Author

Carolyn Miller, CPC Associate at Community Development Institute
cmiller@cditeam.org