



"Problem to Opportunity Exercise"

Mac Odell shares with us a process which he has used to help people understand the power and potential of working with Appreciative Inquiry even on large-scale "problems".

I ask participants to give me the absolutely worst, most horrible, difficult, hopeless problem they can think of -- anywhere in life or work. Often they come up with things like HIV/AIDS, urban violence, corruption, civil war (as in Nepal)... things like that. So we do a quick 'problem tree' analysis of root causes and its impacts/fruits... and I ask them the chances of solving it, and to draw a face that represents their feelings about... from which I usually get miserable sad face with tears...

Then I say, "OK, let's flip this into an opportunity.. What's the opposite look like?" Defining the 'problem' as it's opposite, we take that as the topic and go on to do a 40 min. 4D analysis coming up with action plan and personal commitments... always full of energy and fun... sometimes even skits and dances... Whereupon I do a quick "Opportunity Tree Analysis" and ask for new pictures of faces reflecting how they feel about it all... for which I get, of course, lots of smiling, happy faces and great optimism. Then I ask, "OK, what happened? Did the problem go away? Did the world change during the last 40 min.?" And that opens a lively discussion on the heart of AI, how changing our language, our questions, changes reality... that we have the power to change the world through the questions we ask, through the approach we take... and that leads us into taking their organizational 'problems,' issues, hang-ups, headaches, and hopeless situations and building an AI workshop around them.

It's an eye-opener... powerful stuff... and I can assure you that I never get any further questions about how AI doesn't really deal with problems....

We have incorporated this activity into our Appreciative Trainings. Below is a simple step-by-step so that you may weave it into your Appreciative sessions/trainings/workshops:

- 1) I use two flip charts side by side
- 2) I draw a tree with roots. Like Mac I ask what is the problem? Sample tree (real world tree)
 - a) I ask them to define what the problem is and I write that on the trunk of the tree (lack of Communication).
 - b) Roots: I ask what are we feeding our lack of communication tree? What do the roots look like? They start to toss out what contributes to the lack of communication. I add as many words as they come up with, usually between 10 and 15 issues such as fear, disrespect, etc. Then, I draw leaves on the tree. So,

what if this is what we are feeding our tree what will our tree bear? They toss out what they envision that this tree will bear.

- c) I then draw a second tree, next to the first tree – what is the positive opposite of Lack of Communication? They will shout out a few and in this case they agreed upon Strong Communication. So what if add miracle grow to our tree? We seek out and provide the best nutrients. What roots would support Strong Communication? I then draw lines for the roots.
- d) Roots: They begin to share and visually see how words and our focus of inquiry are so important. In this case they saw that the roots for Strong Communication would be trust, transparency, respect, information sharing, inclusion, encouragement, etc. Again, then, they can visualize and verbalize what the tree of Strong Communication will bear.
- e) This allows them to move from the problem analysis to possibilities. This may be the positive opposite of the problem. But, let's go further. Let's seek out the Affirmative Topic or Generative Topic. Looking at the leaves on the possibility tree, what is that topic that will generate enthusiasm, energy and life for our inquiry?

Problem: Lack of Communication



Opportunity: Strong Communication

