

Appreciative Inquiry for the Energy Research Centre (ERC), University of Cape Town, South Africa

Facilitation and reporting by Stephen Davis (*supervised by Ezelle Theunissen and Luke Younge*)



The Organisation

The Energy Research Centre ([ERC](#)), University of Cape Town ([UCT](#)), South Africa is an independent research group located within the [Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment](#) at UCT. The ERC is a multi-disciplinary energy research centre that conducts high quality, targeted and relevant research as well as offering postgraduate opportunities at the Masters and PhD levels.

The organisation consists of 29 staff spread throughout four main research groups (Energy, Poverty & Development, Energy Efficiency, Energy Systems Analysis & Planning, Energy Environment & Climate Change, plus operational support staff). The work centres on the themes of each group however there are many instances of collaboration between the groups.

I worked with the centre as whole thereby including the four research specialisations and including administrative and support staff. There were also two postgraduate students who contributed ideas for the process and participated in the interview process. In April this year I – in my dual capacity as a staff member, and a trainee Appreciative Inquiry (Ai) facilitator – approached the organisation's director and the five team-leaders with the suggestion of conducting a strengths based approach to the organisation's development. I discussed individually what they each saw as the key challenges facing the organisation, explaining that Ai is an approach for discovering its strengths and core values, as well as for identifying and implementing ways of improving the health and vitality of the organization. The team leaders and director independently expressed some concerns about conducting a process of this nature, as previous attempts in the past had failed to produce a positive set of outcomes that could be implemented. In total I had informal conversations with about half of the staff of the centre and found an overwhelming support for the idea of conducting the process. Reasons for the interest cited included – among others – that staff wanted to achieve greater coherence around the centre's focus as a unit, improve communication between the various groups, increase opportunities for personal academic development, and obtain clarity regarding the succession of the director, who is due to retire at the end of next year. By the time the final summit was held on 14 September 2011, I had resigned from the organisation, which placed me (and two others who had resigned) in unique position, and also allowed us to personally benefit from the inquiry (as I describe in my reflection at the end of this report).

Core group

Since the organization consist of 29 staff, some of whom are part-time, and many who travel extensively, along with the concerns about the cost of staff time that was required for the process, management agreed to allow 1 day of each staff member's time towards the process, with an extra day for the facilitator and core team. I chose (by consultation with all staff) a core team that is represents the various levels of management with at least one staff member from each group. At a later stage in the process 2 of the core group members could no longer be part of the group for personal reasons, so two additional staff were approached, given a brief introduction to Ai, and tested the interview between them. The core group were very committed to the process, and contributed energetically and creatively, in spite of work commitments and time pressure. The group were also very committed to get the most value out of the process, and to make it a fruitful experience for the organisation, and contributed with questions and suggestions about the content of the inquiry, and ideas of how to create a productive and welcoming summit

Process

The entire process consisted of the following steps:

1. I initiated meetings with director, the team leaders and I had informal discussions with several other staff members about what they felt were the strategic challenges facing the organisation and to assess willingness to engage in a collaborative strengths based approach to organisational development.
2. In consultation with the management and staff I selected (although some volunteered) a representative core group and we held a 3-hour meeting to introduce Ai, test the generic interview guide and brainstorm a topic (see attached *pdf* of the Power Point presentation used at this meeting, including pictures of the brainstorm)
3. The core group reconvened after a few weeks to modify the generic interview guide.
4. The core group were pseudo-randomly allocated 3-4 staff members each, and they conducted interviews using the modified interview guide (and guidelines for conducting the interviews). All staff was included in the interview process, including three who were in their resignation notice period.
5. The core group met once the bulk of the interviews were complete to give feedback on the interviews, and we designed a program for the summit.
6. A 3-hour Ai summit was held with 22 staff (including the facilitator) in attendance.
7. A report compiled and distributed to staff, including action points and volunteers for the tasks that emerged from the workshop

The core group of 6 staff met for 3 hours in which I introduced Ai by means of the a short presentation, including a short video illustrating the power of positive reframing (see [Lost Generation](#)), and an opportunity to test the generic interview questions and brainstorm a topic for the inquiry. The session was energising and the team stayed beyond the initial 2 hours allocated. The core group then tested the generic interview guide in pairs in their own time and we reconvened to discuss how the guide could be modified.

The topic identified in the initial meeting was "A unified and progressive ERC". The topic served as a background for the inquiry rather than a direct line of questioning, and the core group also expressed their preference to keep the topic open in the testing phase, so as not to limit the scope of the inquiry. After several iterations the team agreed that we stick with the topic we originally selected as the one that had the greatest appeal. We decided to design a questionnaire that discovered what motivated people to join the ERC, identify and share some of their best experiences, and wishes for the organisation, and also what they appreciate about the place they work.

The group tested the generic interview guide with each other (in pairs) and found some of the questions to be useful but everyone requested that we modify them to be more applied and accessible to the academic culture of the organisation, and increase the focus on the tangible relevance of the questions to the ERC's development. The group agreed that the questions should be positive and that the focus should be on uncovering the strengths of the organisation. The core group recognised in the initial meeting that there were many positive attributes of the

organisation that are often overlooked in the everyday activities. In particular people enjoyed the absence of a command-and-control type director (which they saw to be a trade-off for coherence of the organisation, and strong leadership). Employees also commented on the friendly working atmosphere and fellow employees, with the flexibility to pursue individual areas of research interest. A list of themes and sub-themes emerged from the interviews, and is included in the appendix. The themes were summarized as follows, with the remarkable realization that from these themes embodied the best experiences AND (simultaneously) the wishes of the staff for the organisation. In other words, what many staff saw as missing, or desired were the same things that they shared as their best experiences! Since many of the staff travel frequently, or have work commitments off-campus, a [Doodle](#) calendar link was sent via email in order to determine the most popular date for the summit, and to maximise potential attendance. For the summit, the core group decided that we should split the attendees into three groups (using randomly selected coloured confectionary) and allow staff the freedom to change groups at designated times during the summit. The room was set up with three circular tables and each table was prepared with stationery and a set of 7 coloured cards for the summit. The coloured cards contained the themes that had been distilled from the interview feedback, with each set containing the following text (the underlined words indicate the key value in each theme):

1. Opportunities for growth training and development
2. Visibility through publications, seminars and outsider opinions
3. Open channels of communication within ERC and with external stakeholders
4. Trust in leadership, structure, strategy, and freedom to pursue individual areas of interest
5. Sustainable organisation and friendly environment, and a work space reflective of our values
6. Diverse, skilled, enthusiastic and dedicated people who interact freely
7. Contribution to the workings of the organization, to academia, students and society

In groups, each person had the opportunity to read the themes, and was then instructed to talk about one of more of the following with each person in the group allocated a maximum of 3-minutes to share:

- Their experience of the interviews themselves and/or
- The stories they shared of their best experiences in the ERC and/or
- Their hopes and wishes for the organisation

The groups then had the opportunity to discuss the themes that represented the core values and wishes for the organisation, and they could then modify, or add to the seven originals. For the most part, very little was needed, indicating that the interviews had indeed given us accurate data. (One humorous addition that spanned the groups was the wish for a decent coffee machine, and regular muffins!)

I then put all the modified and additional themes on the wall, and 3 sticky stars were given to each person to develop a scattergram of the themes that were of greatest interest or excited them the most. This resulted in an even spread among five of the (slightly modified) versions of 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6 above. Interestingly the main concern / challenges around leadership and contribution had appeared to wain in importance. From my initial discussions with staff – and from the data gathered in the interviews – the leadership of the organisation and visibility in the world were highlighted as major challenges of the organisation. It seemed to me that what emerged from the appreciative inquiry was that the current “flat” leadership structure (absence of hierarchy) was something that people appreciated about the ERC (although they saw the lack of coherent vision and a strategic direction as challenges). When the focus shifted to the positive though the interviews and summit, it highlighted the fact that the flat leadership structure and the coherent vision can exist simultaneously. Linked to the leadership is the wish that employees had for outside recognition of the ERC as an institute that makes a contribution to society (which the interviews helped to demonstrate that many such examples did in fact exist in the organisations history). I think it is for these reasons points (4) and (7) did not seem to emerge as high energy themes at the summit, and that perhaps the examples of the desired future already exist in the ERC’s history.

After a coffee break, we reconvened (in different groups) to draw a picture or metaphor of the desired future for the organisation in view of themes 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6.

The imagining exercises, and possibility statement development took place in new groups. The groups (very quickly) came up with provocative propositions and images outlined below. Since there was limited time, and many of the staff had other commitments they had to attend to, we did not have the option of continuing beyond the 1 pm closure

Even though there appeared to be sufficient energy to do so). I stopped the exercise before the groups had an opportunity to polish their statements and visual metaphors, with confidence that they had applied substantial creativity and consultation to the exercise. I was also encouraged by my supervisor to move the process along, trust my colleagues, and ensure that they were not attached to getting this part of the inquiry “right”.

Group 1

- A home for bright happy minds that are well paid
- A place that makes a difference to society, and is recognised for cutting-edge research
- A place that embodies out energy, environment and energy efficiency
- Unique
- Energy think tank
- Fitting the needs of country



Figure 1. Group one's visual image of the ERC

Group 2

This group chose to write a poem to describe their possibility statement:

Ode to the ERC

*A vibrant tree buzzing with life
 Delivering research as sharp as a knife
 Sustainably growing and forward thinking
 That engages a cup of coffee when our brains are sinking
 An organisation of diversity that makes a difference
 Full of well-travelled people that are going the distance
 (And we like muffins too!)*



Figure 2. Group two's visual image of the ERC

Group 3

We are a free, coherent, communicative, **strategic**, proactive, unified, flexible, academic, energy efficient, multi-disciplinary, and sustainable ERC.

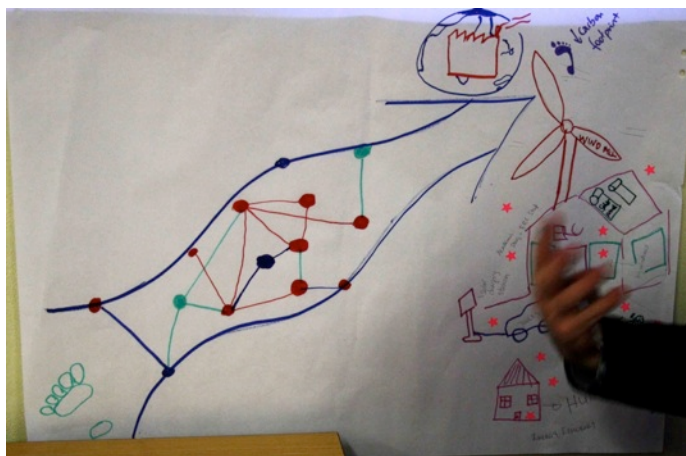


Figure 3. Group three's visual image for the ERC.

The final part of the summit was about brainstorming and improvising ways of making the desired future a reality. Staff members were invited to join the table that they felt most drawn to from the ¹world café, and at those tables they brainstormed actions in view of the possibility statements and images. I then asked for feedback on the brainstorm and wrote the actions on a flipchart. I then offered everyone the opportunity to volunteer for one or more of the activities. At first the response was slow, but the enthusiasm increased after the first few volunteers signed up, and in many cases more than one staff member volunteered for each action. Some of the ideas overlapped, and in these cases the tasks were combined. Almost all of the actions that were brainstormed were assigned a staff member (see the Appendix for a list of actions and volunteers).

¹ I have previously participated in workshops that have used "World Café" and found it to be a flexible and fun methodology for sharing and appreciating the work that has been done by individual groups with members of other groups. "Open Space Technology" (OST) is another method that could have worked well for this part of the summit.

Impact or Results

What organizational, group or community attitude, process or structure changes have people already made as they move toward realizing the Provocative Proposition(s)? What progress have people made toward their Strategic Intentions or Initiatives or Pilot Projects? What stories of success can you share?

In many cases people had suggested some of the action points early on in the inquiry, either in the interviews or the informal discussions. However, these ideas had greater meaning for the staff in the context of the summit, and having explored past experiences, wishes for the future, and shared the stories. The actions were a natural next step after having completed the imagining exercise and sharing the images of a desired future in the world café.

The staff that attended the summit has already started fulfilling on the actions they volunteered for (see Appendix). The director and operations manager urgently (the day after) requested a copy of the actions list from me so they could discuss some of the action points that management staff are accountable for. People have requested that the process be written up, and the action list distributed as soon as possible. One of the staff mentioned to me that she felt there would be value in conducting such a process on a regular basis.

One staff member has taken ownership of revising / updating the ERC's vision and mission statement, to update it, make it more grounded in the present, and to consult with staff on the process. One colleague suggested that we create a poster documenting the outcome of the inquiry (rather than a report), and the editor responsible for our publication design has agreed to compile a poster presentation of the inquiry.

What will you do to ensure that people continue to move toward realizing the Provocative Proposition(s)? How will you help them gather stories of success? How will you help them celebrate? How will you, as the AI Facilitator, support their ongoing success?

I have already expressed my willingness to continue supporting the ERC with any further work that emerged from the inquiry. One colleague asked for some further information on Appreciative Valuation for one of her research projects. I will post the themes from the interviews in a place visible to all staff, and communicate my willingness to continue with the process if wanted, and distribute the action points and outcomes of the process to all staff for future developmental work they wish to undertake.

What did you wish for in the inquiry?

My wish for the inquiry was that it would allow the staff of the ERC to begin a process of fulfilling on its remarkable potential as an organisation of dedicated and passionate staff, and that the channels of communication would open up in the organisation

What did you learn from the inquiry about yourself and your facilitation?

Firstly, I learned that I did not always hold an appreciative space as a facilitator. In one instance, the core group openly told me they had experienced me as being resentful of the fact that we were struggling to arrange a meeting time that suited everyone, and that my attitude was not very appreciative. I swallowed my pride, thanked them for the coaching, and acknowledged that what they had perceived was true! I learned that it helps to be vulnerable, and that I need not be perfect to be a good facilitator. I also learned to let go of my attachment to a particular format for Appreciative Inquiry, and that the process of development will be more successful if the contributors feel like they are making a contribution and owning the process. The result is that the outcome was not a perfect 5-D process, as I originally imagined, but it took a (much more interesting) life of its own once I could give up my own ideas of how the process "should" be.

I learned that Ai is about creating a safe place for the people in an organisation to talk about what really matters to them about the organisation they work for, and is a great way for starting a generative conversation about what is possible for the organisation. Coming from a positive position doesn't mean that the negatives are not allowed to be mentioned, it merely removes the past-based threats that people perceive and dissolves their cynicism about the effectiveness of organisational development work. Even if nothing physically changes about the working environment, the focus on what is already working improves peoples' experience of themselves and their

organisation. The one-on-one interviews are a powerful way of influencing an organisation. Reconnecting people with their positive experiences, and what they appreciate about the organisation, impacts the organisational mindset in a positive way.

Being a staff member of the organisation, I really enjoyed my interview with the core group member, and although I had already resigned, I was able to reconnect with the many great experiences I had, and the wonderful opportunities I've been afforded as an ERC staff member. It also emerged for me that the organisation is indeed very committed to the generation of knowledge that contributes to sustainable energy policy nationally and internationally, AND that my interests in contributing to that goal have shifted as I have grown in my 4-5 years with the Centre.

I also learned (with the support my mentors) that there is no need for the staff to get any of the propositions or images "right". Indeed there is no "right" and that it is more important to be engaged in the process. Once the staff felt free to draw or devise possibility statements without judgement, the process of delivering on the desired future is natural, and people volunteer freely for the various action points that they suggested.

I realised that there are also times when I'm not fully present in the process, and I miss many of the stories that are being shared. I know that I ought to pay more attention to the content, and not take a break while facilitating merely because people are engaged in the process, and doing what they're supposed to. I also discovered that the best way of holding the various tensions that may be in the room is not to look for them! Focussing on the conversations and getting people, by creating a safe environment, and gently encouraging participation is much more important, than trying to be intuitive about the various interpersonal dynamics that may be present in a group.

What was your "personal best" experience related to facilitating the Inquiry?

My personal best experience was when the director congratulated the facilitator (me) and the core group at the end of the summit. He closed the session by saying that he had expected that the summit would deteriorate into a session in which he would be severely criticised (as had been the case in the past). He was pleasantly surprised by the outcome and acknowledged that we had done such great work in creating a developmental process for the ERC. I wish to add that seeing the majority of the staff in the same room was not a common site during my time with the organisation was very rewarding, I enjoyed seeing my colleagues – who are usually very serious in most staff gatherings – having fun, being creative, and afterward receiving feedback from many of them that it was a positive experience. For me it was very rewarding to have initiated and followed through with a process that I had initially doubted would come to fruition. I was also satisfied knowing that I may just be leaving a better organisation behind me than the one I joined 4 and half years earlier.

Have you received permission from the "client" to tell us their story?

Yes.

APPENDIX

This appendix contains the modified interview guide used for the interviews conducted throughout the organization by the core group, the positive themes that emerged from the interviews, the summit program, actions and volunteers, and some additional photo's from the summit.

MODIFIED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction to Interview

Thanks for agreeing to do this interview. You are now contributing to a collaborative strengths-based approach to ERC's development as an organisation. The purpose of the process is simply to elevate and enhance the ERC's performance in every respect. We do this by discovering what motivates people about the work they do for the ERC and locating the strengths of the staff and of the Centre as a whole.

The Core Group for this process consisting of Andrew Hibberd, Ajay, Karen, Thapelo, Britta, Stephen and Holle (with input from Richard D and Catherine early on) have now met on a couple of occasions over the past 2 months and after much consultation, agreed that the strategic focus for us is to work towards a "unified and progressive ERC." We have also adapted a generic interview guide that will be used in this process. Stephen has convened the meetings and informed the process as he is currently being trained as a facilitator in these types of approaches.

We are conducting the interviews with all ERC staff members. These interviews are in preparation for a mini summit in September that Stephen will be convening. The summit will be used to present the core values and brainstorm ideas about how to take the process further with specific actions. The purpose of the interviews is to identify main themes that ERC staff members appreciate about ERC as a working institution. The contents of the interview will be presented anonymously in aggregated form; the details remain confidential between you and me. I will not quote anything you say without your permission. The interview will take about 30 to 45 minutes. I have nine questions to ask you. Do you have any questions before we start?

Interview Guide

- 1) What do you like about working at the ERC?
- 2) Why did you come to the ERC?
- 3) What do you most value or appreciate about the ERC as an organization?
- 4) What do you most value or appreciate about the contribution you make to the organisation? There is no need to be humble or modest!
- 5) Has the ERC changed your life?
- 6) What is the best thing that ever happened to you at the ERC? [note to interviewer: try to encourage the interviewee to tell a vivid story about the experience, and probe further if you notice them becoming more excited about their story]
- 7) What are the three things you most appreciate about the ERC [note to interviewer: encourage the interviewee to elaborate on one or more of these things]?
- 8) To conclude, what are the three wishes you have that would make the ERC a more healthy and vital organization?
- 9) Is there anything you would like to add?

Thank you very much for your time and collaboration. It is highly appreciated!

KEY POSITIVE THEMES THAT EMERGED FROM THE INTERVIEWS

- Communication
 - Internal collaboration and interaction between groups
 - Networking and collaboration within university and internationally
- Visibility
 - Publications and seminars
 - Public relations
 - Outside stakeholders understand what we do
- Personal contribution
 - Academic and intellectual
 - Practical: making a difference in the world
 - Teaching and development of students
 - Operations and smooth running of the Centre
- Leadership
 - Strategic vision for the group as a whole
 - Freedom to pursue individual areas of interest
 - Trust
- Opportunities
 - Growth and personal development
 - Travel
 - Training
 - Flexibility
- Environment
 - Friendly working atmosphere
 - Financial security
 - Sustainable funding
 - Walking the (energy) talk
 - Workspace
- People
 - Diversity of staff and skills
 - Enthusiastic and committed individuals
 - Professionalism and respect among staff
 - Social interaction

PROGRAM FOR THE ERC'S SUMMIT

A Unified and Progressive Energy Research Centre

Mini-summit program for 14 September 2011 (10:00 to 13:00)

Venue: **ERC Seminar Room**

10:00 Introduction (20 minutes)

Welcome, overview of the process, brief description of AI briefly and detail of the day's proceedings. Questions.

10:20 Developing themes (40 minutes)

1. Form 3 groups
2. Discuss the themes and wishes for the ERC using the existing ones as a starting point.
3. People (quickly) discuss and agree on the core themes and values
4. Add to (or modify) the existing themes on the chart paper
5. On the flipchart place a sticker (up to 3) on the themes that are most important to YOU

11:00 Coffee Break (20 minutes)

11:20 Creating a shared image and provocative proposition (20 minutes)

1. In the new groups (very quickly) create an image of a preferred future of the ERC (10 minutes)
2. Based on the image, create a provocative proposition (10 minutes)

11:40 Sharing the provocative proposition and image (20 minutes)

2 x 10 minute world café sessions to see what the other groups have created

12:00 Brainstorm ways of achieving the desired future (20 minutes)

Go to the table you feel most drawn to and discuss in the group ways of achieving this desired future (20 minutes)

12:20 Presentation of ideas and action points (20-40 minutes)

1. Presentation of action points to the wider group and people volunteer to take on specific actions
2. Wrap-up and closure

13:00 Closure and PIZZA lunch!!!

SUGGESTED ACTIONS AND VOLUNTEERS FOR CREATING A UNIFIED AND PROGRESSIVE ERC

IDEA	VOLUNTEER(S)
Arrange staff social gatherings	Seb, Hlogi
New coffee machine	Andrew M, Karen, Kevin
Organise 2-weekly stand-up meeting on individual and group research activities	Anya, Alfred and Harald, Holle, Jesse (volunteered in absentia),
Quarterly inter-group exchange of skills and proposal ideas	Mamahloko
Create a time for intellectual exchange	Marta, Holle
Review / reminder / revision of ERC's mission statement	Richard L
Regular review of teaching programmes and materials	Gisela, Hlogi
Create a common meeting space for staff	TASK OPEN TO VOLUNTEER(S)
Start a working paper series	TASK OPEN TO VOLUNTEER(S)
Identify areas to expand our activities	Bruno, Brett, Gisela, Seb
Periodic assessment of resource requirements	Karen
Re-design and improve our entrance area	Karen, Thapelo, Kim (volunteered in absentia)
Acquiring software and database resources	Ajay
Initiating the "Sustainable Menzies" initiative	Britta, Thapelo
Linking of performance review to peer reviewed publications for academic staff	Karen, Brett
Initiate the succession planning process for a ERC's future director	Karen, Kevin
PLEASE FEEL FREE TO ADD TO THIS LIST	PLEASE FEEL FREE TO VOLUNTEER FOR ABOVE / OTHER ACTIVITIES
PLEASE FEEL FREE TO ADD TO THIS LIST	PLEASE FEEL FREE TO VOLUNTEER FOR ABOVE / OTHER ACTIVITIES

ERC SUMMIT PHOTOGRAPHS

The following additional photo's were taken at the main summit for this report, and will also be used to illustrate a poster and presentation that will capture the work of the entire process







