Walking the Path Together Tools: Appreciative Inquiry

REPORT ABOUT THE USE OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

ACWS
Alberta Council of
Women's Shelters

Author
Roxanna Stumbur

The Walking the Path Together (WTPT) project was a partnership of the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (ACWS), the Centre for Children & Families in the Justice System, five Alberta on-reserve First Nations shelters—Bigstone Cree Nation Women's Emergency Shelter (Wabasca), Eagle's Nest Stoney Family Shelter (Morley), Ermineskin Women's Shelter Society (Hobbema), Paspew House (Fort Chipewyan) and Sucker Creek Women's Emergency Shelter (Enilda)— and Dr. Jacquelyn Campbell, School of Nursing, Johns Hopkins University. The origin of what was to become WTPT was an ACWS committee comprised of the five on-reserve Shelter Directors who began meeting in 2004. The lack of culturally relevant program resources for child residents of on-reserve shelters was identified as a priority area for collaborative efforts and discussion began on project scope and potential funders.

In 2008, the Shelter Directors used an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework to visualize a shared goal of helping families live in peace and harmony, free from violence and abuse.

Specifically, the Directors wanted Aboriginal women and children to interrupt the cycle of violence and live thriving lives. It was also important that on-reserve shelters contribute to building up healthy communities, in part by creating stable and adequate funding for shelters through joint action. A key assumption was that families, children and communities can live in happiness if:

- Everyone has an adequate livelihood (physical);
- Everyone is guided by "love they neighbour" (spiritual);
- There is equality for everyone (social/emotional); and
- World leadership is caring and works for people (social/mental).

Based on the success of working together in this way, ACWS built an Appreciative Inquiry approach into our application for Government of Alberta's Safe Communities Innovation Fund.

Appreciative Inquiry is an organizational development method that focuses on an organization's strengths rather than its weaknesses or challenges. Through an inquiry that emphasizes the positive and engages all levels of the organization (and its stakeholders), a process is initiated to renew, develop and build upon accomplishments. The AI methodology is applicable to organizations, units, projects and systems facing rapid change or growth.

What is Appreciative Inquiry?

Originally developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva at Case Western Reserve University in 1980, AI has been used by numerous, diverse organizations throughout the world to guide change initiatives. These include Klahoose First Nation & Silva Forest Foundation, Kwantlen First Nation, Skownan First Nation, McDonalds, NASA and the United Nations. AI searches for "what works" through the sharing of success stories. It refocuses attention away from critical, more pessimistic perceptions to supportive, optimistic behaviours that create new perspectives and enable conversations of what is possible. Confidence and commitment result as plans for the future are grounded on familiar successes of the past.[1]

Appreciative Inquiry in Walking the Path Together

For Walking the Path Together (WTPT), the following methodologies were employed to accomplish desired outcomes:

---

[1]   Cooperrider, D. & Whitney, D. (2005). *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

- Appreciative Inquiry Assembly— The goal of the Assembly was a journey through the four components of an inquiry, the focus of which was the creation of a foundation for the Walking the Path Together Tools: Business Plan.[2]
- Interview/Survey Questions— An attempt was made to frame interview and survey questions from a position of strengths/successes while at the same time recognizing the need to gather both qualitative and quantitative data that aligned with funder requirements.
- Evaluation Matrix[3] — This document, created to guide the project evaluation, was built around questions that would be addressed at various milestones. Once again, an attempt was made to utilize language that spoke of possibility and surfaced individual and collective images of what WTPT has been and can be at its very best.
- Project Guidance Circle Meetings, Workshops, and Retreats—Gatherings began with project successes. Issues were framed as opportunities; problems and solutions were married to safeguard hope.
- Stories— The sharing of stories was fundamental to all activities and initiatives. Project partners understood the value of bringing forward the wisdom of the past (e.g. the circle, eagle feather, and medicine wheel, etc.) to guide, shape, and clarify the future.
- Collaboration of the Whole— At all times project partners recognized the strength of collaboration. Elders, Band Councils, community members, teachers, RCMP and others were included in the project. It was understood that inclusion creates understanding and buy-in. It also enables diversity of perspective and strengthens outcomes.

The vision, mission and focus of the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (ACWS) lend support to the use of AI as a change methodology. These speak to collaboration, strength in numbers, empowerment, networking and information sharing[4] As such, ideal conditions for the use of AI exist within this organization and thereby within WTPT. These conditions include:
- Support for full voice participation at all levels;
- Commitment to change as an ongoing process, not a one-time event;
- Leadership belief in the positive core and affirmative process as viable change drivers; and
- Structures/resources to encourage sharing of "good news stories" to support creative action.

From the beginning, the Project Guidance Circle (PGC) for WTPT recognized the alignment of AI with First Nations' cultures and understood the need to seek out the positive in situations that appeared, at times, overwhelmingly bleak. To focus solely on the issues, challenges, risks and threats, while a necessary component of the implementation of the project, would create additional barriers to meeting the needs of children living on-reserve who are exposed to domestic violence. Innovation in the development of intervention strategies; engagement of stakeholders; the need to seek out and build upon strengths and successes; sharing of knowledge and information through conversation and stories; discovery of ways to build better child-family relationships; and commitment to continuous adaptation and improvement were identified as requirements to sustain the project and ensure children may enjoy a safe and happy life journey.[5]

AI opens up dialogues with an organization's associates and stakeholders. These dialogues result in an expansion of the current capacity of the organization, as associates look for ways to build upon strengths and create shared directions that are of benefit to all.

---

2   Alberta Council of Women's Shelters. (2009). W*alking the Path Together Tools: Business Plan*. Edmonton, Alberta.

3   Alberta Council of Women's Shelters. (2009). *Walking the Path Together Tools: Evaluation Matrix*. Edmonton, Alberta.

4   Alberta Council of Women's Shelters. (2008). *About Us*. Retrieved from http://www.acws.ca.

5   Alberta Council of Women's Shelters. (2009). *Walking the Path Together Tools: Business Plan*. Edmonton, Alberta. p. 1.