

Team Development, The Appreciative Inquiry Way

by MICHAEL NORDBYE AND THERESE YAEGER

Team building is here to stay. For more than a half-century, researchers have reminded us that teamwork is more productive than individual decision-making efforts (Mayo, 1945; Tuckman, 1965; Berne, 1963; Varney, 1989; Bushe, 1998). Year after year newer, better team development concepts have entered the training arena, with the latest twists involving champion team building, outdoor team building, team workouts, and team synergy.

But staying abreast of team-building research can be daunting. A recent search at www.Amazon.com culled a hearty 5,984 glossy titles on teams and team topics. Clearly there is more information on teams that one can absorb.

Yet, as trainers and developers who need to assess and strengthen team development in limited time, where do we begin? Is there a more powerful and positive way that can be more generative and promising for teams than the traditional models?

In this article, we present traditional models of team development, a successful case of a non-traditional team development, and finally, a newer, more appreciative team development model currently under study. In advance, our thanks to Dr. Gervase Bushe in Canada for his early findings on the more generative team-development approach.

Traditional Team Development

While teams typically evolve through various stages, it is common to find teams developing through a “down state” a “low phase,” or a “withdrawal” state. Three examples of this low, often negative, phase are included in theories by Tuckman and Jensen, Kelly and Conner, and William Dyer.

Tuckman (1965), and Tuckman and Jensen (1977) reported some of the earliest

work on team development by reviewing about fifty studies on group development in a variety of settings. They found that teams typically evolve through four stages: forming, storming, norming and performing.

In the “storming” stage, conflicts emerge over work behaviors and relative priorities, and members often rebel against accomplishing the task (1965). Often in storming, social behaviors are a mixture of hostility and strong feelings, and competition for the leadership role may dominate. Members may withdraw as a result of the ensuing emotional tension.

In Kelly and Conner’s “Emotional Cycle of Change,” the term “valley of despair” describes where a team can head within the “Informed Pessimism” stage of team development (1972). In this phase, more and more problems emerge. These include unanticipated events and resistance. Morale drops; people ask themselves why they ever got involved or why they thought they could accomplish this task in the first place. During this phase, it is natural and even desirable for negative feelings to occur.

William Dyer’s *Team Building: Current Issues and New Alternatives* presents a Team-Building Checklist encompassing fourteen points. These fourteen negative assessment questions measure loss of production, grievances, hostility, confusion, lack of goals, apathy, lack of innovation, ineffective meetings, problems with boss, poor communications, lack of trust, disagreement with decisions, no rewards, and lack of effort for better teamwork (Dyer, 1995).

These theories indicate that all teams must develop through an unpleasant, often degenerating phase. But is this assumption true? Is it possible that a more generative team development process can eliminate the “down” or low stages and ignite the

team development process with more time and spirit?

Perhaps there may be a different approach, a more appreciative approach to team building that, instead of anticipating problems, would let teams focus on positive aspects of high-quality, high-value outcomes. Possibly a more promising approach to team building would focus on the values of human dignity and respect to create an esprit de corps, or group spirit. The following case provides one example of a group that experienced a more positive team development outcome when members desired these outcomes.

A Chicago Case: Team Development Workshop

A team development workshop was recently undertaken with a Chicago group. The 2-1/2 day workshop focused on key variables that influence individual, group, and organizational performance. Rather than using an introductory program describing the usual stages of new team development, this session used an experiential learning approach that helped 20 participants recognize the challenges that teams encounter after becoming established. The team facilitator, with traditional models in hand, provided team development models that assumed that teamwork is full of conflict and that high-performance teams are rare.

The group of 20 attendees was divided into four teams of mixed gender, ethnic backgrounds, and team-building knowledge. All groups were told that, similar to Kelly and Conner’s model, they would pass through the phases of Uninformed Optimism, Informed Pessimism, Informed Realism, and Informed Optimism, and that the associated emotional states would likely be certainty, doubt, despair, hope, confidence and satisfaction.

It was explained that the initial exercise of establishing operating guidelines was critical, and that some groups might even have to revisit this exercise on the third day if/when teams began falling apart. At the end of each project, the groups identified where they were in respect to these stages.

Chicago's Team Z Outcomes

Three of the four teams experienced the typical phases of forming, storming, norming and performing. In the same three groups, members anticipated entering into the storming stage, the valley of despair, and moments of withdrawal. These groups experienced the traditional phases of team building, acknowledging degenerative, often unpleasant moments. While assigned team projects were most often completed on time, the group spirit remained typical.

However, "Team Z," did not proceed through the typical stages of development. Throughout the workshop, Team Z successfully completed each project. There was the occasional pressure of time that forced this group to refocus, but they did so without conflict. They never encountered the iterative loop into the "valley of despair."

At each checkpoint, when asked to self-evaluate their team, Team Z considered placing themselves in the "polite" or Uniformed Optimism stage. Members thought that because they had not encountered conflict, they were not progressing through the established route to high performance. Team Z members would discuss the possibility of not moving forward, but the successful completion of each project provided evidence that they were accomplishing the work goals. Hesitantly, members of Team Z designated themselves in the third phase of Informed Realism while anticipating slipping into the second stage of the "valley of despair" at some point.

For Team Z, slipping into a low phase of storming never happened. When the workshop concluded, the facilitator agreed that this particular team reached Phase Four, Informed Optimism; they had accomplished the projects and met the characteristics of a high performing team. This was evidenced by Team Z being able to:

- Produce high-quality, high-value products and services,

- Consistently perform well against known external standards,
- Perform better than their assumed potential for performance,
- Use significantly fewer resources than one would expect,
- Generate a sense of enthusiasm and excitement, and
- Serve as a source of ideas and inspiration for others.

Surprisingly, Team Z successfully moved through numerous situations when conflict should have occurred. But by using human values, and particularly the qualities of human dignity and appreciation, they were able to avoid the traditional, often non-generative, stages that all groups expect to encounter.

Could the success of Team Z be in their values-based, generative operating guidelines which included respect, sensitivity to others, a desire to have fun, shared responsibility, active listening, open mindedness, risk taking efforts, results-oriented, flexibility, learning, spirituality, and trusting the process?

Perhaps a different model, designed around more humanistic elements can be proposed—one that focuses on possibilities, achievements, and on human values, igniting the team's energy, without storming or entering the valley of despair. Possibly this new model would have elements of 'appreciate' and 'inquire' for the good of the team members—a model that embraces appreciation over traditional problem-based team development.

A Different Approach for Team Development

Are human beings capable of forming groups and going through team-building workshops without experiencing the usual trial and tribulations? Could this Team Z have experienced the effects of appreciation while inquiring and learning? Although this team did not consciously decide to use an appreciative model for team development, the evidence suggests the possibility of a concept similar to Appreciative Inquiry. This team's "inquiry" was the exploration of team development; their "operating guidelines" mirrored the definition of appreciation and valuing.

The findings of this Chicago case mirror earlier research by Dr. Gervase Bushe, a professor at Simon Fraser University

in British Columbia, Canada, who has reported similar findings on Appreciative Inquiry with teams (1998). Appreciating and inquiring with team members early in the team development process have proved that a team can become more generative and more cohesive. This model would follow elements of an appreciative inquiry process, where organizational members are encouraged to value and explore the strengths and possibilities within a group.

Appreciative Inquiry for Team Development

Defining an appreciative inquiry model begins with dictionary definitions:

APPRECIATE

1. valuing; the act of recognizing the best in people or the world around us; affirming past and present strengths, successes, and potentials; to perceive those things that give life (health, vitality, excellence) to living systems.
2. to increase in value. Synonyms: valuing, prizing, esteeming and honoring.

INQUIRE

1. the act of exploration and discovery;
2. to ask questions; to be open to seeing new potentials and possibilities.
Synonyms: discovery, search, and systematic exploration study.

So what is Appreciative Inquiry?

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an approach that has grown from a method of organizational change practiced and developed by a small core of people in the 1980s to a widespread phenomenon by the beginning of the 21st century.

Appreciative Inquiry is a form of action research that attempts to help groups, organizations, and communities create new, generative images for themselves based on an affirmative understanding of their past. (Bushe, 1998).

The concept of Appreciative Inquiry suggests that the most important change an organization can make is to begin conversations about what the organization is doing *right*. Appreciative Inquiry helps organization members understand and describe their organization when it is working at its best. That knowledge is then applied to creating a powerful and

guiding image of what the organization could be (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).

These new appreciative images are expected to lead to developmental changes in the systems in which they are created. The four principles Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) lay down for appreciative inquiry are that action research should begin with appreciation, should be applicable, should be provocative, and should be collaborative. The basic process is to begin with a grounded observation of the "best of what is," then through vision and logic collaboratively articulate "what might be," ensuring the consent of those in the system to "what should be" and collectively experimenting with "what can be."

In its simplest form, according to Bushe, a "Best Team Inquiry" focuses on developing a shared, generative image of teamwork (1998). It lets team members tell others, in a somewhat indirect way, what is important to them in relating to their team members, what roles they prefer to occupy, what group characteristics they most value, and so on. This appreciative process can greatly accelerate the team

development process, and avoid a "stuck" or "degenerative" phase.

Bushe's work has been shown to affect groups positively and builds group cohesion; it creates a different set of understanding and opportunities to materialize for a group; and it creates more affirming generative images to support the team in the longer life.

Revisiting the Chicago case with Team Z, similar elements of successful team development were present. Team Z avoided a "stuck" process when other groups tended to become problem-based. Team Z focused more on generative team development than traditional team models. Also, Team Z viewed team members as something to appreciate and collaborate among, with no hostility or confusion. Similar to the Cooperrider and Srivastva model (1987), Team Z was appreciative, provocative and collaborative.

Conclusion

This preliminary work is only the beginning of knowledge for this appreciative approach to team development. More research is necessary. But to support this

Appreciative Inquiry Team Development model, perhaps the best advice came from Team Z: when given the opportunity to develop through one of the traditional team models, or a more appreciative team development model, the latter is clearly better.

In the future, organizations that succeed will be those that use teamwork to be unusually innovative, creative and bold (Francis and Young, 1992). One challenge for trainers and developers includes the need to keep organizations alive, adaptable, and flexible, yet not-threatening to employees. These findings indicate that one possible solution to make groups more flexible and alive is appreciative team development.

Dr. Therese Yaeger is Associate Director of the OD programs at Benedictine University, where she also teaches OD and OB courses. Her recent publications include *Global and International Organization Development* with Sorensen, Head and Cooperrider, and *Appreciative Inquiry: An Emerging Direction for OD*, with Cooperrider, Sorensen and Whitney.

Mike Nordbye is principal of Proven Strategies, a business and management development firm,

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and is currently enrolled in the accelerated MOB program at Benedictine University. He attributes the current success of his firm to the assistance from the Benedictine faculty and the direct application of this program to his work with clients.

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GROWING

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growth in others. Trainers who insist on growing personally and professionally don't just train for a living—they feel at one with their careers. They are people who have the courage to move on to new fields when their own growth requires it. The best role models for growth through learning are able to inspire learners to find value—meaning—in their subjects, because they value their subjects greatly. Beyond mastering the latest training techniques, your efficacy and job satisfaction will increase naturally when you pursue the art of growing in your own personal and professional life.

Karen Field Bolek is the Director of Karen Bolek Communication Services. She will serve CC•ASTD as editor of *Training Today* beginning January 2004.

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