

The author introduces us to her work with a community whose members must come together to craft a new identity. In doing so, they learn how to let go of the past, yet honor the unique relationship that is their strength, in order to build a foundation for the future. Some specific processes designed to assist groups undergoing transformational change are described, including an application of one approach to OD work, Appreciative Inquiry.

Crisis at Home: Fostering Agreement in an Intentional Community

Wednesday night, 7 p.m.

Twenty-one people sat in a circle in the Community's meeting room that night. Most were there merely to confirm their belief that someone like myself had little to offer to help them deal with their present dilemmas.

Thirteen families lived communally on the 50 acres up the road from where I had recently settled. I'd only gotten to know a few people from the group, however, being somewhat familiar with their story, I wasn't surprised at their fierceness – how whole families, kids in tow had set out 20 years before to start a values-driven community, packing up everything and coming, sight-unseen, to this wild island, and how they'd lived through three long winters in tents as they built homes, a counseling center, a church, their dream.

During that time they had followed their hearts and a charismatic minister. Now he was retired, and it was their turn to lead.

But meetings dragged on for hours with little or nothing getting resolved; battles ensued over the minor questions of community operations (trash pick-up was the subject of one passionate debate). No one seemed to trust anyone to do anything. Worst of all, community members who voted with their feet by not coming to weekly meetings, could show up after a decision had finally been hammered out and, if they didn't agree, demand that the process start all over again! As one

person said, "Some of us were uneasy about making changes too fast; some of us believed we were making no progress at all."

The agenda for the meeting to which they'd invited me stated simply: Can you help us develop a meeting structure to pose and answer emotionally charged questions? Yes, I answered, that's what people with my background (OD) do.

Coming Together. Something old and something new.

It seemed to me that the question the group wanted to answer was not about how to run a good meeting, but rather, what was it they wanted their community to become. Twenty years after its founding, it was time to rethink how they were organized, their relationships to one another, how to co-own the land, and how to support their church and community. The design of our work sessions together needed to reflect this larger purpose.

I proposed a series of meetings over a nine month period that would introduce new ideas about self-organizing systems and build new relationship and leadership capability, while bringing forward for review some options for how to reorganize. I hoped that these sessions would be a place for inquiry into how best to take joint action and how to create a basis for trusting members of the group to take action on behalf of the others, two factors I believed to be the minimum

requirements for their operating successfully as a community.

Drawing from their rich legacy of deep caring for one another and commitment to maintaining the beauty and peace of their land as an environment for nurturing their families, we stated the purpose of our process as:

To become *again* the conscious architects of our community and our lives, by reconstructing our common vision, based on the values and ideals of our community members today.

Getting Started. Creating a clearing to be present.

To honor the past, yet create an opening for new ideas to be heard, I asked the group to reflect on “What history do you bring with you that is important to acknowledge or is distracting you from being present?”. This allowed us to identify some of the background conversations that were the context within which the group was working, and, at the same time, helped focus participants on the task at hand. Questions such as “What experience do you want others to have of you today?” and “How will that enable you to produce the results you want?” established a direct link between obtaining desired results and present behavior – participants learned they had responsibility for how others experienced *them*.

Then they were given several questions to ponder about upsets or incomplete conversations that were still troubling to them, and asked to plan to address their issues outside of our sessions. Finally, they were asked to stand and state that they were complete with the past and ready to move forward.

Developing Groundrules. Learning about co-ownership.

Developing our groundrules presented an especially rich opportunity to renew community members’ experiences of agreeing with one another. First, in small groups, participants discussed and recorded on flipcharts statements describing their ideal meeting environment, drawing from the ‘high point’ experiences of their past. Each group was then asked to move to another group’s flipchart, and, beginning with the premise that they ‘owned’ the statements that were listed there (i.e., that the statements were 100% reflective of their own beliefs, as if they’d written them themselves), tell stories of how these statements reflected learnings from positive experiences in their own lives.

Only then were participants given the opportunity to respectfully suggest changes. Not surprising, little was changed. Instead of ‘we-them’, participants built on each other’s ideas, rather than discounting or critiquing them. The resulting statements described the behaviors they aspired to engage in, and became their groundrules. These were posted in the community room and referred to often during our work together.

What’s At Stake? Getting everyone to ‘show up.’

Next, in order to strengthen each person’s connection and commitment, we took time to clarify what each person had at stake in the community re-design process. We asked ‘What is at stake for you? for your family? and for your community?’ We even asked “What is at stake for the world?”, questions which allowed people to become more aware of the implications of the work we were doing together, and its impact on all that they valued and cared for.

From the time we completed this discussion until we were finished nearly 7 months later, every community

member insisted on being present for meetings. No one wanted to miss a thing!

An Appreciative Inquiry. Creating a context for the future.

Drawing from a model developed by David Cooperrider and his associates at Case Western Reserve University, I suggested that we conduct an “Appreciative Inquiry,” an inquiry designed to locate, highlight and analyze the distinctive strengths of a group. In Cooperrider’s view, the seeds for the future can be found within a group’s own history of creativity, excellence and accomplishment. Thus, the information generated from our inquiry could serve as the foundation for a new communal living design.

Members of the community agreed to interview one another and all their children, plus any others who were or had been involved with them. Their goal was to inquire into what gave meaning and life to their community, and from that sense of clarity, discover their shared core values. We would utilize this information as the basis for a new vision of the future, which would serve to guide their choices in designing the community of the present.

We used the interview data as a guide for developing a written list of statements describing ways of being in community. These statements (see BOX INSERT A for examples) were designed to be provocative, to bring forward discussion about differences/similarities in what individuals saw of the future. Subsequently, each person was asked to rate on a 5 point scale the extent to which a particular statement reflected his or her own viewpoint. Not surprising, much agreement was present – agreement which then became the basis for designing their new structure.

Social Architecture. Exploring scenarios of the future.

Five different options, ranging from 'don't change a thing' to 'divide up the property' were proposed. Members from the group, passionate about a particular option, volunteered to explore its feasibility and report back to the group. Each received the unconditional support of the others to do so.

**BOX INSERT A
PROVOCATIVE STATEMENTS**

REGARDING INDIVIDUALISM.

We are fully responsible for our own affairs.

We feel free to live where we want, and to come and go as we please.

**REGARDING SHARED
'COMMUNITY' EXPERIENCE**

We are secure knowing how important our well-being is to others.

We live our lives as part of a whole.

**REGARDING SHARED RELIGIOUS
PRACTICE**

We each have the choice of our own path to God.

**REGARDING PHYSICAL
ENVIRONMENT**

We maintain a beautiful, clean and healthy environment.

The work to maintain the environment is done by those who love doing it.

However, in order for participants to be fully able to review the options with an open mind, at the start of the next

session we discussed, and each person agreed on, these presuppositions:

1. The work I came to do here is done. (*The past is complete.*)
2. Each person is whole and complete, and competent to live his/her own life fully. (*The new Community will be based on what we have, not on what we lack.*)
3. The structure of the real estate has no impact on the potential of our relationships. (*Changing structure doesn't mean ending our relationships.*)
4. As a group, we no longer have shared (consistent) commitments. (*We are now ready to honor our diversity as we honored our similarity in the past.*)
5. Whatever control is needed to maintain the ambiance can be accomplished through legal structures, such as CC & R's. (*Control is not the issue.*)

Now descriptions of the options were posted around the room, and people were asked to stand by the option they most favored. Just as they were settling in to defend their preference, I asked them instead to work on option they didn't particularly favor, and acting *as if* this was their preferred option, to reflect on the advantages of this option *over all others*. Only then were participants allowed to return to their most preferred option.

In a last step, we rated each option on how well it would retain what each member of the group valued, using categories such as:

Retains 'best of what is'
Feasible: Financially
Allows for Flexibility / Diversity of Lifestyles
Allows access to a return on investment

After ranking each option, a lively discussion ensued. Finally, selecting two options for further investigation, the group set up a taskforce, a budget for additional professional consultations

and a timeframe within which to decide and act on restructuring their community. The long process of getting ready for the future was nearing an end.

A Timeline. Love, laughter and tears.

The time came at last to declare our process and work together complete. The Community's meetings were now effective, even civil, designed around well-thought-out processes to move forward important discussions (with only occasional reports of backsliding filtering to me down the hill!). Each person felt they'd had a voice in the decision, that they'd been heard and acknowledged, and that their differences were put to work for the good of the whole.

Given that they'd decided to radically change their structure, I felt that our last session needed to honor the past for how it had served as strong foundation for their future. Taking butcher paper, we covered one whole wall of our meeting room, and drew a line from one end of the paper to the other, to represent the Community's timeline. The starting point was the moment when each had dreamt of living and working together in service of their ideals, some months before their move to the island twenty years before; the end point would be today.

Slowly at first, but soon standing in line to pick up a marker when another had finished, each person indicated events that were of importance to them, recounting stories of births and deaths, of romances, and marriages, of graduations and growings, of first nights in their own homes, and even of the year's supply of tater tots that had to be eaten until they were sick of them. How we laughed and cried! When it was done, we sat quietly for a few moments. Time for their new community to be born.

Consulting Distinctions. Personal learnings from the process.

As designer and facilitator, I learned and re-learned from my work with this community what I believe are some of the fundamentals for change process success.

- For people to be connected to the process, they not only must have something they truly value at stake, they have to be acutely conscious of it as well.

I think of how often in the past I have failed to fully address this issue because I assumed that people had something important at stake and understood clearly what it was. Prior to our conversations about what was at stake, a number of people in the community complained about seeming lack of commitment to our process; after that conversation, people refused to allow us to schedule a session if they couldn't be there. I believe that this sense of 'in it together' moved them to work out their differences.

- It is important to have every member of the system in the room, at minimum for the first session.

My experience has shown that those absent will not only fail to feel a sense of ownership of what was accomplished, they often force the group to start over again because they miss out on the key conversations and shared experiences that bind a group together. As a result of being present at each session, members of the community feel confident that their decision process demonstrated respect for each person's point of view.

- Culture *is* the conversation. To change the culture, change the conversation.

Finally, I saw evidence once again that how we speak about ourselves to others *and to ourselves* is the fountain from which greater (or lesser) opportunities spring forth. With the community, the change we were working towards seemed already in operation when the conversations they were having about themselves shifted from negative to positive.

Sherene Zolno is a researcher, coach-educator and consultant whose expertise includes working with leadership teams to ready them for the future, and assisting organizations in identifying strategic intentions, improving operations and transforming culture. Her research-based New Century Leadership™ program and Timeline for Tomorrow process are the foundation for systems change in several major organizations.