

Do We Really Mean It?

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“The group hug has been fine. I enjoyed it and think it did a lot for the team. Now I want to know if we really mean it? Because if we do not, I have better ways to spend my time.”

Brian’s challenge was met with silence. The team had spent a day and a half working through an appreciative inquiry. They were editing their provocative propositions when Brian rose to speak. What now?

Background

Telesystems is an international leader in the development and manufacture of telecommunications hardware components. Telesystems had a long history with teaming and a deep cultural respect for participation.

The wni (wireless network interface) Design Team was working on a new generation interface destined to provide the connection between current long distance transmission systems and emerging PCS wireless technologies. The wni Design Team consisted of 16 engineers. All the members had experience working on teams and worked well together in the beginning, but approximately 9 months into the 20-month project schedule, problems started appearing in the design coordination process and deadlines started slipping. Because the wni design was highly visible, management reacted to the first sign of problems. A series of management interviews with team members followed, and the result was a belief that the team had “people problems.” Based on this assessment, the manager of the interface-engineering group brought in a human resources generalist to work with the wni Design Team.

Problem Solving¹

The approach used with the wni Team was standard practice: get the team with the “problem” together, share management’s concerns with the team, and ask the team to come up with a solution. This approach is based on sound organizational

¹ The events in this section are reconstructed based on interviews with the interface-engineering manager, the human resources representative, members of the team, and the project leads. I have made every effort to be unbiased in my assessments. And there is really no reason to be judgmental; no one failed here, the problem-solving approach just could not work. Everyone involved acted professionally, responsibly, and worked very hard to solve the problems as he or she perceived them.

behavior principles. It does not emphasize blame, it gives the team an opportunity to understand the problem and the management issues involved, and it allows the team to come up with its own solution, greatly increasing the probability that the solution will actually be implemented. The company had great success with this approach, and used it frequently to solve a wide range of problems, although the problems involved tended to be technical. A human resources generalist facilitated the solution generation process in this case because the team had “people problems.”

The wni Design Team met with the interface group-engineering manager and the human resources representative on a Friday afternoon for a problem solving session. The manager, Fred Williams, presented information on the number of change orders generated by the team and the schedule slippage to date, along with his assessment of what this meant for meeting the team’s delivery deadline. Because the team was among the first to use a new approach to design qualification that integrated testing with the design process in an attempt to shorten the overall product delivery schedule, much of the initial discussion focused on the coordination processes involved, especially for software. The team generally was very favorable toward the new integrated process and did not have any specific recommendations for improving or changing it.

After spending two hours reviewing processes, the team was no closer to solving its problem than when it began. Fred reiterated the major symptom: the team was behind schedule. The team then began brainstorming to develop solutions that would get the team back on schedule. After brainstorming a list of options, the team began discussing each and trying to evaluate whether it would help them accelerate the development process. There was a high level of participation in the discussion, but the outcome was inconclusive. The team seemed to actually be doing most of the things that were suggested, and those they were not doing did not offer much hope for schedule acceleration.

At 5:00, everyone was tired, including Fred. It had been a long week. Most of the team members had worked at least 60 hours that week, and they just wanted to go home. There was a lot of activity at 5:00, including individuals packing briefcases, putting on coats, and looking at watches. **Basically, the team did everything but bolt for the door.** This made Fred mad, and he chewed everyone out and expressed his disappointment in the team’s “unwillingness to do anything about the scheduling problem.” The wni Team members shared furtive glances with one another as Fred continued lecturing them, but no one responded. In exasperation, Fred sent them home and told them to come back Monday morning with solutions.

Jerry and the Software Qualification Process

Jerry Rogers was responsible for software testing. He was a key team member because his tests provided feedback on the interface’s performance in conjunction with a wide variety of equipment supplied by other manufacturers. In addition, as part of the

qualification subteam, the testing he did was required for the design to be released to manufacturing.

In the past, the testing and qualification process had come after an initial design was completed. But because testing invariably identified problems, designs would have to go back to a design team that had subsequently been assigned to other projects, plus problems were often identified in the software that required hardware solutions, creating further problems in getting the design finalized. It was not unusual for the redesign process that came after testing to take as long as the original design process and then the design would still have to clear testing and qualification before it was released to manufacturing.

Based on successes at other companies, Telesystems had adopted a new approach to testing and qualification that placed testing engineers on the design team. The test engineers began test development in conjunction with the specification of design objectives, which allowed them to better understand the design and communicate qualification problems at the very beginning of the design process. In addition, the test engineers could begin subcomponent testing and preliminary testing as various parts of the design emerged, thereby providing early feedback if they identified any problems. This early feedback was very valuable to the design team in making hardware versus software tradeoffs in the design. This approach had been shown to reduce the time for design to manufacturing by 50%, which is why Telesystems was so enthusiastic about it.

It was not unusual for testers to work all night and have results back to the design team the next morning, and because they worked odd hours and were called on to perform heroic acts, the testers were given a lot of latitude in their work hours. They also generally worked unsupervised and were accountable only to their team. Again, this was a practice that had worked well for the company and was understood by the design teams.

The wni Team's Tester, Jerry, had been with the company for three years. Jerry's disposition was somewhat aloof, and he did not socialize with the other members of the team, most of who were about 10 years younger. But Jerry was well liked, in part because he brought fresh baked muffins to work for the team every Monday morning without fail. It was Jerry's way of showing he cared while not over committing himself on a personal level.

About 6 months into the project, Jerry's mother moved into his home. She was dying of cancer, had no health insurance, and at 60 was not eligible for Medicare. Much of the burden of caring for her fell on Jerry's wife, but Jerry also felt an obligation to spend time with his mother and help his wife. The team knew about his situation and was very sympathetic.

As his mother's health worsened, Jerry became more and more distracted and the testing process became more sporadic. It was not that Jerry wasn't doing his job, but

tests that had been done in two days were now taking two weeks, in part because Jerry was not working nights anymore. And because the design process kept moving, feedback that took two weeks often identified problems that required design changes that might not otherwise have been required and caused work to be redone that might otherwise have not been done in the first place. In addition, Jerry was not as aware of the design activities, and so sometimes problems identified by the tests were not design flaws, they were test flaws.

The team did not doubt that it was missing schedule milestones, but who was to blame? Everyone was doing their jobs to the best of their ability, everyone was working long hours, and the design work was actually generating some exciting results. There was a lot of communication about Jerry's personal situation, and members of the team helped him as they could, but ultimately the delays and confusion around testing were having an impact on the schedule. The team did not blame Jerry, however. Instead, they tended to blame management for trying to stick to a schedule that was overly ambitious and did not allow for slippage due to the personal difficulties of key team members.

When the schedule problem got management's attention, the members of the team were reluctant to talk about Jerry's problem, plus there was a sense the schedule was unrealistic. So during the interviews, they tended to talk about unresolved "people problems," although even the members of the team were not sure what this meant. Nor could anyone on the team very clearly articulate how Jerry's personal problems were impacting the schedule. As far as the team was concerned, everyone was doing his or her job and the team was falling behind schedule. It was no one's fault.

Monday Morning

Fred rounded up everyone at 9:00 to resume the problem-solving session. The human resources representative, Debbie, was not around and Fred did not want to wait for her. Everyone crowded into the conference room, Jerry's muffins in hand, and Fred launched into another lecture. Fred had taken everyone's desire to go home on Friday as a personal affront, and he had been stewing about it all weekend. He had decided to let them know that he thought they were not committed to the project. Rough them up a little and get them motivated to prove him wrong, he thought. So he waded in and let them know in no uncertain terms that he thought they were overly complacent, unmotivated, and did not care about their work. Furthermore, he pointed out that they obviously did not realize that their jobs could be on the line if the wni design did not meet its delivery deadline. His parting words were "Now get back to work and I want to see some solutions."

Many team members were angry, and the rest of the morning was spent talking about what Fred had said. Most of the team had been putting in very long hours, and they had been working even harder since it became apparent that the schedule slippage was giving management major heartburn. Based on what had just happened, they perceived

that Fred clearly had not appreciated their contributions, and most of the team agreed that they would be going home at 5:00 every day from now on.

The problem-solving approach had clearly not worked as planned. A team with some relatively minor schedule slippage — they were about 3 weeks behind schedule — was now angry at their manager, plotting revolt, and no closer to dealing with their team issues than before. What had been a minor problem had become a major problem, and the process had created problems that had not existed before. And the conflict with management would have an effect on the team over the next two months as team members began to blame one another as work hours were reduced and Fred reacted with anger as more milestones were missed.

Appreciative Inquiry

By the eleventh month of the project, the schedule had gone from 3 weeks to 6 weeks behind. It was at this point that Fred decided he had lost control of the project and needed the help of an outside consultant. Debbie had been attending local Organization Development Network meetings and had participated in an appreciative inquiry exercise. She thought the appreciative inquiry philosophy looked interesting and suggested to Fred that a fresh approach might get the wni Team back on track. Fred was desperate and agreed to meet with a consultant to talk about the situation. After meeting with the consultant, Fred decided to go forward, not because he was convinced it would work, but more because he realized the team was disintegrating and needed some kind of intervention to bring it back together. At this point, Fred still thought he needed to eventually get the team back together for another problem-solving session.

The appreciative inquiry was scheduled for Thursday and Friday of the following week. The session began with an individual appreciation exercise in which the participants taped a 5x8 card on their backs and everyone anonymously wrote one thing they appreciated about the individual on every card. Fred participated with the team at the consultant's urging, and based on the consultant's coaching, he made sure he wrote something on every card. Only about a third of the team wrote something on Fred's card, but he was also coached not to take this personally. Individuals were asked to share items on their cards during the debrief and comment on their own positive experiences with the team. The debrief set a very positive tone. The individual members of the team clearly had a great appreciation for the efforts of others, and a lot of information was surfaced about heroic acts and hard work. Fred used his opportunity to speak to acknowledge the team's hard work and to comment that, based on the exercise, he had a new appreciation for the dedication that had been exhibited by the team. This was not something Fred had been coached to do. **The structure of the exercise exposed him to information that he had no other way of knowing, and it changed his perception of the team.**

After the opening exercise, the participants were broken into pairs and began the appreciative interview. As is typical with this part of the process, things began somewhat quietly. But as the morning progressed, the volume of the conversations increased, laughter could be heard with some regularity, and the energy and engagement noticeably increased.

The group reassembled after lunch to share interview information and to begin to organize a description of the team at its best. One of the events that surfaced during this discussion was something that had happened in the previous month. Jerry's wife was having trouble getting his mother in and out of the house, so he was planning to build a ramp on the front of his house so his wife could use a wheel chair. He mentioned this to one of the members of the team, and the team then surprised him by organizing to help him with the job that Saturday morning. With lots of help and too many engineers, the job was done quickly. Jerry's wife picked up barbecue and beer for lunch, and they sat around in Jerry's backyard all afternoon sipping beers and talking. They talked a lot about work, the team, the project, life, their hopes, and even a little football. It had meant a lot to the entire team, and they had experienced it as a kind of best that they had never had in the workplace. **The team spent most of the afternoon debriefing that Saturday at Jerry's house, what it meant, and identifying parallel times when they were both effective and satisfied with results at work.**

In addition to the teamwork description that surfaced and appreciation for task ownership, this discussion was pivotal because it was the first knowledge anyone outside the team had of Jerry's personal problems. Debbie immediately got to work on finding some help for Jerry, and by the next week had identified some non-profit agencies that could help Jerry fund home nursing assistance and would help him with some of the medical access issues he faced. Fred was also able to approve an equipment purchase to set up an office in Jerry's home so he could telecommute in the evening and at times when he was needed at home, providing him with greater flexibility in working with the team. This also contributed to mending Fred's relationship with the team.

While the appreciative inquiry process brought some relief for Jerry, problem-solving Jerry's personal issues was not going to get the team to peak performance. Instead, the issue was how the team was dealing with the performance challenges of Jerry's personal problems. The team had experience meeting challenges, dealing with schedule delays and process issue, and coming up with creative technical solutions to seemingly impossible situations. But they had not applied what they knew how to do to their team because they were focused on problems that they did not know how to deal with instead of challenges they were well equipped to meet. **The appreciative inquiry process was significant because it got the team focused on what they knew.**

On Friday morning, the team began working on its provocative propositions, taking the descriptive material from the day before and turning it into statements that

captured what the team was when performing at its best. The team devoted a great deal of time to this task, continuing the discussion through lunch with sub-teams trying to find exactly the right wording for each proposition.

The working propositions were posted on flip chart sheets after lunch and the team began discussing the final wording. This is when Brian issued his challenge. “The group hug has been fine. I enjoyed it and think it did a lot for the team. Now I want to know if we really mean it? Because if we do not, I have better ways to spend my time.”

Commitment to Living the Propositions

It is not unusual for discussions of appreciative inquiry to stop at the provocative propositions. And with good reason. There is a sense of accomplishment in defining the team at its best, in the realization that, though the propositions may be challenging, they describe a level of performance that has been achieved and can be replicated again. And people who have participated in the appreciative inquiry often would also like to stop at this point as well. To paraphrase Brian, they enjoy the group hug, so it seems like a good place to stop.

But the real challenge of appreciative inquiry is to make the groups propositions a reality. And this is very hard work that requires an individual and group commitment to trying to work at peak levels all the time. Furthermore, it may require a commitment on the part of individuals and groups to make changes in the status quo. Achieving at a group’s peak level of performance often requires a continuous learning process and engagement with change that is simply more work than sticking with the way things have always been done. So how do you make the group’s propositions a reality?

Wni Design Team

Brian had asked the question that needed to be asked, even if he had not waited until the propositions were edited. The team sat silently and the facilitator did not intervene.

The silence was maintained for a good four minutes as everyone thought about what Brian had asked. Then Ted asked, “What do you mean?”

Brian responded that he thought everyone meant well and had shown enthusiasm for the process of creating the propositions, but he seriously doubted that anything would be different on Monday. In fact, he added, he did not think anything would be different that afternoon when they went back to their offices to try to clear things up before going home for the weekend.

Various team members now stepped forward to challenge Brian, arguing they thought the process had been good and that they realized some things about working as a team

that they had not realized before. But Brian was not backing down. “Yeah, you know some things you did not know yesterday. But what are you going to do? What is going to change and how are you going to make it change?”

Some members of the team were becoming upset with Brian, who had a reputation on the team for disagreeing and “causing trouble.” A couple of participants tried to humor him into going along by joking that “Brian can find the dark lining inside every silver cloud.” Then Henry appealed to the facilitator to “get the group back on track,” but the facilitator declined to intervene.

This is when Brian again stumped the team. Pointing at the posted flip chart sheets, he said, “Look at what we have up there. Item number 9. We challenge the process. But when I challenge the process, the first thing you do is try to shut me down. That is what I mean. We do not intend to live these propositions. We are assuming that writing these propositions will change who we are, but I do not think we are going to do any of this.”

That the team was already violating its own values probably had the greatest impact on everyone present. Again, there was a long period of silence. There were no glances from person to person. Instead, everyone was concentrating and trying to come to terms with the challenge before them.

Robert, normally quiet and reserved, was the first to speak. “You know, it makes me sad to think that we may not be able to live up to what we would like to be. But I think Brian’s questions are fair. Do we want to live our values? I want to. And I would like to know how we can do this as a team.”

Henry, who had tried to get the facilitator to quiet Brian, was next to speak. “Brian is right. We were not living our values. But I would like us to respond by acknowledging Brian is right to challenge the process and by accepting his challenge. We need to live our values starting right now.”

The discussion that followed went on for two hours. Every member of the team spoke, they listened to one another, and they discussed in great detail what it would mean to live the values reflected in the propositions. This discussion was not facilitated. Once Henry had accepted Brian’s challenge, the whole group took ownership for everything that happened next. Members of the team asked about boundaries of obligation, they shared expectations and negotiated roles, and they talked about the next Monday as if it were the most important day of the rest of their work career.

After two hours, the team quickly completed the initial word-smithing of the propositions and gave them to Brian, Henry, and Robert to do the final edit. Then they went around the table and had every person make an individual commitment to the team to try to live the propositions. The facilitator had not played any role in the entire

afternoon session and the team left that afternoon with complete ownership of the propositions, including all the capture and distribution.

Socially Constructing Reality and Individual Commitment

One of the things we know about group processes is that if there is a dispersion of perceived volition, the result can be weak individual commitment to action. There are also some widely used solutions. The most frequently one used is the action item commitment. In some environments this becomes a formal document that must be filed in triplicate to department secretaries. The purpose of the action item is to have each individual define a next step in order to get implementation started. It also takes advantage of the public forum of the decision group to increase accountability and volition, two variables that are shown to greatly increase the level of commitment on the part of individuals.

While holding individuals accountable to a group may work fine for well defined individual deliverables like a project plan or meeting a deadline, it is less clear that it is sufficient in a situation where a commitment to shared values is expected. This describes the kind of situations where appreciative inquiry is frequently used. The problem with using the commitment lever alone is that the participants may not have a shared interpretation of what commitments are being made. **It is one thing to agree with one's own interpretation of the provocative propositions that come out of an appreciative inquiry; it is quite another thing to commit to a shared understanding of what the provocative propositions mean in practice.**

The process that Brian drove for the wni Design Team was a social construction process. The team not only agreed on the provocative propositions, they agreed on what they would mean for actual day-to-day behavior on the job. This is no small thing, and the commitments that occurred as a result of this social construction were not taken lightly. Indeed, much of what happened in the final commitment process had strong similarity with the role agreement process (rap), which emphasizes shared, negotiated understandings of role expectations. But the social construction that occurred within the wni Team went far beyond work roles, including how people were treated as individuals and the team's concept of success and failure.

While some social construction occurs in the process of writing the propositions, it is probably not enough. There are two reasons for this. First, the process of proposition writing tends to summarize related and similar, but not identical, statements. While the facilitator can make every effort to retain meaning, invariably different participants are going to see different slants on the propositions based on which of the draft propositions they personally wrote or most closely identify with. So from a straight perception standpoint, there is an important social construction process that needs to take place around the final propositions. And the second reason for the social construction process is that it adds meaning to the propositions and turns them

into defined behaviors that all participants understand. A group's propositions may not have a great deal of meaning to those outside the process, and this is because the meaning is created through the process of constructing the statements. In other words, there is no meaning in the propositions per se. Rather the meaning is in the shared understanding that the group develops through the social construction process (also known as the co-construction of reality). Because this social construction creates the reality of living the words, it is important that appreciative inquiry not stop with the wordsmithing.

Facilitating

What Brian did for the wni Team is something every facilitator needs to ensure happens for every team or group that participates in an appreciative inquiry. The facilitation goals are:

1. Team must have time allocated for the social construction process, and this time must be significant. How much time is needed depends on the size of the group involved in the appreciative inquiry, but the units are hours, not minutes.
2. The team or group must grapple with the "Do you mean it?" question. The appreciative inquiry process, because it is positive, makes it easy for participants to go along. The problem is they can enjoy the process without committing to the results.
3. The group must live their values throughout the social construction process. And if they are not living their values during the social construction process, they must be challenged to do so. It is in the struggle to immediately put their provocative propositions into effect that groups construct the behavioral meanings that become work behavior.
4. The social construction process is difficult, and teams may want to avoid it. The process of constructing the propositions tends to be affirming and generates a lot of enthusiasm. Dealing with meaning and accepting the challenge of living the propositions is serious and at times emotional. Difficult issues need to be resolved, understandings articulated, and personal commitments made. The tone of this process tends to be serious. It is still affirming, but making a face-to-face personal commitment to the team is a sobering experience.
5. The propositions must leave the room with the group. If they are to become a day-to-day reality, the group needs to take control of them and all that happens with them. If the facilitator is doing the final processing, then the propositions are the facilitator's, not the groups.

Again, note that the closing process is not just about commitment, it is about social construction and commitment. Commitment has a role, but the commitment that

should come out of an appreciative inquiry is a commitment to the shared meaning of the propositions, not the idiosyncratic meanings of the individual participants.

Wni Team Practice

One of the profound things about the wni Team's appreciative inquiry was that most things did not change. Jerry still brings fresh muffins to the wni Team on Monday mornings, team members still work longer hours than is probably healthy, and Brian is still challenging the process. But important things did change, and they have made a difference in how effective the team is. Now the team listens to Brian, Jerry asks for help when he needs it, and Fred gives constructive suggestions instead of criticizing. In addition, team members know a lot more about each other and they have an occasional barbecue on a Saturday afternoon to let off steam and talk about work issues. Instead of seeing the project as a collection of individual deadlines, the team accepts responsibility for team deadlines, which was Fred's initial objective when he launched his problem-solving process. But Fred's problem-solving approach created problems because that was its focus, whereas appreciative inquiry challenged the team to be at its best because that was its focus.

The social construction process did not stop with the development of the provocative propositions (see Appendix 1). The wni Team had cards made up, and they continue to review these cards at team meetings. After several months, the values are well understood and committed to memory, but the team seems to enjoy reviewing what they have achieved. Because the provocative propositions are the Team's, they take pride in living up to their own expectations.

At the time of the appreciative inquiry, the team was 11 months into a 20-month project and six weeks behind schedule.

The wni Design Team:

- Completed its work in a total of 19 months
- Delivered a product that performed significantly above specifications for less than the expected cost.
- Developed improvements to the concurrent design and testing process that are expected to produce reductions of time to delivery of about 10% on all future design projects.

Telesystems is now using appreciative inquiry as its primary team development tool for all product design teams, Fred still has an occasional problem solving session, and Jerry and his wife are adjusting to life following the death of his mother. All the members of the wni Team attended the funeral.

Appendix A
Wni Design Team's Provocative Propositions

SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

- We achieve together.
- We ask for help and give help when asked.
- We give credit to others in a timely manner.

OPEN COMMUNICATION

- We listen first.
- We give constructive feedback.
- We value each other's opinions, even when we agree to disagree.

CHALLENGE

- We accept challenges as a team, not as individuals.
- We own the process, and we challenge the process.
- We challenge each other to learn and tackle new tasks.

TEAMWORK

- We meet our commitments to the team.
- We take the time to know each other.
- We have fun and look for the humor in every situation.

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