

A Case of New World Wine - In Old World Bottles?

Adrian McLean & Marsha George
McLean & George Ltd

In the middle of a dinner party the host invited his guests to sample a new wine. In turn they inspected its colour, swirled the dark liquid and inhaled its “nose” before tasting it, allowing it to linger on their taste buds. “Well, what’s the verdict?” Inquired the host. “Where is it from?” asked one of the guests, a self styled wine buff. “It’s from the new vineyard in the village, just across the lake.” Offered the host. “Hmm!” said the guest. “Doesn’t travel well does it.”

As a European based consulting company with strong North American links we find ourselves intrigued by debates concerning the culture-bound nature of AI. Is the evident popularity of AI as an approach to organisation change and growth in North America attributable to its North American origins? From a European standpoint it is easy to caricature AI as an expression of unbounded American optimism that, in its single minded pursuit of the life giving or “positive” aspects of organisational life, denies the shadow or dark side. Presumably from the other side of the Atlantic it must be equally easy to think of the Brits certainly, and other Northern European countries, as emotionally buttoned up and burdened by a skeptical and heavily intellectual world view.

The Social Constructionist epistemology underlying AI, with its radical assertions that reality is a co-constructed and thereby social phenomenon, offers the tantalising implication that organisation members are free to construct different realities. This organisational manifestation of the Post Modern paradigm might also be considered as located in, and characteristic of, a different setting. And this setting is not defined geographically but philosophically. Appreciative Inquiry offers a perspective on organisations that sees them as living, self creating, phenomena. As such it is differentiated from approaches to organisations that emphasise structure and form, and which invites managers, leaders and consultants to see change as a question of restructuring, downsizing, relocating. In short, Appreciative Inquiry operates out of a different underlying set of assumptions than other, more traditional approaches to organisational change.

This case describes the introduction and use of Appreciative Inquiry into a UK organisation. In particular it describes the challenges and dilemmas associated with introducing the New World Wine of Appreciative Inquiry into an organisational setting that might be considered to embody the Old World setting of the British Magistrate’s Courts Service. We will begin by describing something of the background to the case before identifying what we considered to be some of the key dilemmas and challenges facing us as consultants. The third section will outline the choices taken and how they unfolded in the context of the broader intervention. We will conclude with reflections on our learnings and hazard some thoughts on the broader implications of our experience.

Background to the case - “What is the ‘previous’¹ ?”

¹ “Previous” refers to previous convictions, a defendant’s criminal background.

The nature of the organisation and the circumstances that precipitated the introduction of the intervention might be considered as an inauspicious venue for the introduction of Appreciative Inquiry. The organisation is The Inner London Magistrate's Court Service. It is an organisation comprised predominantly of lawyers and as such places a premium on rationality, logic and precedent. Reason and truth are held as defining qualities and virtues. The spirit of Descartes, Bacon and Newton were enshrined not only in the intellectual traditions and disciplines of the service but also in the very fabric of the older court buildings and settings. Some of the oldest and most famous of London's courthouses, Bow Street, Marylebone, Horseferry Road carry the legacy of a grand tradition of the administration of justice over centuries.

The introduction of fixed price penalties for minor traffic offences together with the reconfiguration of other administrative responsibilities had resulted in a significant reduction in workload for the magistrate's courts across the country. The consequent closures and amalgamations of courts had, inevitably, resulted in a programme of redundancies for staff. Many remaining staff were obliged to relocate to new courts and, in some cases, accept jobs at lower grades. Departing staff were offered attractive terms and those staff who remained felt that they were regarded by senior management as unambitious and foolish for not taking such a handsome package. Or as one member of the service expressed it: "We were seen as mugs for not jumping at the chance." A compounding inequity was felt to be the fact that the best staff were not offered the chance of redundancy. Hence a popular construction placed on the whole episode was that those who performed the worst were rewarded the most. A restructuring of grades and positions served to prolong the uncertainty and anxiety for those who had survived the cutbacks.

Other pressures for change were also impacting the service: The introduction of service level agreements, performance targets and the drastic pruning of budgets by central government ensured that the service would no longer be able to operate on a continuous improvement basis. More of the same, even with continuous improvement programmes, would not deliver the order of change that was required. This was a real challenge for a service that was a close knit and closed culture. Close knit in the sense that most staff saw the service as a career and strong ties of loyalty and identification developed in regard to one's court and fellow workers. The term "family" was frequently invoked as a way of describing the comradeship between staff in the courts. New staff joined the service at the bottom of a hierarchy of grades and gradually worked their way up the ladder. Few people were able to enter this hierarchy other than at the bottom level. Once established within the service it was felt that there were few transferable skills to other industries. The consequences of this were that there was a relatively stable work force with high average levels of service and little experience of other organisations and cultures.

All in all, a tough new climate, typical of the revolution that had been occurring throughout the public service sector in the UK, had finally reached the Courts Service and was obliging it to transform itself. It was not difficult to believe reports that staff morale was on the floor. For a service that had experienced little major change to its operations for as long as most staff could recall, the effect of these changes was nothing less than traumatic.

In an effort to mitigate the damaging effects of these changes the Head of Training within the service together with the Director of HR decided to instigate an initiative termed the New Ways programme for middle and senior staff. The term New Ways perfectly summed up the challenge facing these staff. How could they create, discover or design new ways of managing and running the service that would enable it to operate within stringent budget restrictions and to demanding new service standards? The sub text of this initiative was to do this in a way that would re-energise staff and enhance their morale. The contract was awarded by open tender. The brief specified that a programme be delivered in three, two-day, segments.

Essentials of design - “All rise”

We will offer a skeletal outline of the design by way of setting out our rudimentary frame for the work. We will then identify some key dilemmas and choices with regard to the design which we believe speak to some of the dilemmas at the heart of AI interventions. We would emphasise that, like all designs, this represents our intent. How the intent worked out in practice of course is the real stuff of consulting work.

Given the predetermined structure set out in the tender, we decided to design the programme as a series of cooperative inquiries (Reason 1988). We saw the challenge as creating the circumstances for cultural change. We have achieved this in the past by supporting organisational members in gaining a heightened awareness of their culture, and by fostering a systemic dialogue together with the development of a host of emergent but essentially practical steps. Marshall and McLean, (1985) McLean and George, (1993), McLean and Marshall, (1989) Given the predominantly closed nature of the culture, we wanted to encourage people literally to step outside the boundaries of their thinking by visiting other organisations and inquiring into how they approached similar organisational and operational challenges. Figure 1 is a reproduction of the “Map” of the programme.

Challenges and Dilemmas: “Raise your right hand and repeat after me...”

Within this broad framework we faced some key choices:

What would be the underlying epistemology of our strategy? What approach to change and development would be most appropriate in this circumstance?

How would the spirit of appreciative inquiry sit within a demoralised and cynical system?

Would a heavily rational and hierarchical service engage with our participative and expressive design?

It was clear that there was a great deal of “baggage”² associated with the recent changes some of which were still in process as the programme was launched. For instance, the introduction of a new grading system for staff and the appointment of new senior administrative posts meant that many managers were unsure of their grade or position. Many were in the process of being interviewed for new jobs or in the unenviable position of having to apply for their own jobs. So we wondered how this “baggage” would affect attitudes towards, and participation in, the New Ways programme.

The request was for a programme aimed at middle and upper levels of administrative managers and legal clerks. It was clear that this did not include the most senior level of Managers comprising the JCE’s (Justices Chief Clerks) the directors of Human Resources and Finance and the Justice’s Chief Executive (JCE). Clearly, these were key players and participants in the culture. Without their support for and active participation in the process, what chance was there for real and lasting changes? How could we work with the whole system under these circumstances and apparent constraints?

We were aware that the way in which the programme was designed, promoted and delivered would carry important messages to staff. From a semiotic perspective we realised that meaning would be constructed both by course participants and their colleagues based on who attended, the level of participation by senior managers, and, of course, levels of support for the ideas that were to emerge. A continuous challenge was how to ensure a congruence between the spirit and intent of the programme - New Ways, empowered staff, and the experience of participation in the programme. How, in short, to ensure that the medium was the message?

As a staff group we debated these questions at length. And we made some decisions that, in retrospect, turned out to be fateful.

Our theory of change

A key discussion concerned our approach to change. In previous interventions we had supported organisation members in understanding their culture and achieve a heightened awareness of the taken for granted assumptions that framed their thinking and behaviour. Once awareness and ownership of cultural patterns by organisation members was heightened we would support dialogue and exploration of the principles for reshaping cultural patterns from the fresh vantage point of this awareness. Key to our methodology was a series of questions designed to elicit cultural knowledge (see McLean and Marshall,1989) through the exploration of storytelling. For example, we invited people to describe their experiences of first joining an organisation, what struck them as novel, unusual or strange? Similarly we invited them to reflect on the stories they heard or were told about the heroes within a culture and to consider what cultural messages these stories carried. Through the use of these forms of reflection, gradually, insights would emerge concerning the norms, values and dominant constructions for interpreting events and phenomena. In the same way as the underlying contours of a Brass Rubbing are gradually revealed with each stroke of charcoal so the underlying cultural assumptions and cognitive frameworks of a culture would also be uncovered through the patient accumulation of information from such stories. (See McLean & George, 1993) In many

² Baggage here refers to unresolved feelings of resentment and inequity associated with the recent redundancies, court closures, amalgamations and restructuring exercises. These feelings were particularly directed at senior management who were seen as responsible for the disruptions and disturbances. In particular the recently appointed “outsiders” (non lawyers] in the senior positions, namely the HR director and the Head of Finance.

ways our use of storytelling and collaborative inquiry methods closely paralleled those of Appreciative Inquiry.

There were two significant points of difference, however, between our methods and those of AI as well as different theories of change. Whereas we sought to create the circumstances for cultural change through insight and through revealing the hidden forces and assumptions guiding behaviour, Appreciative Inquiry emphasises the fateful nature of how an inquiry is framed: "Human systems move in the direction of that which they inquire into". Whereas surfacing cultural understandings requires an attitude of impartial and non-attached curiosity, eschewing judgment of cultural phenomenon, Appreciative Inquiry's relentless quest for the life giving phenomena, for examples of systems and organisations "at their best" and for the discovery of those things that inspire and excite, not only places the affective centre stage but strongly advocates a stance of commitment and passion. This is significantly different from the predominantly cerebral, reflective and cognitive emphasis characteristic of cultural analysis.

In this heavily rational culture we wondered how well organisation members would respond to the interpretive and qualitative perspective of cultural analysis. Moreover we had discovered that the primary discourse within the service was heavily deficit based. Criticism was rife. Much of it personal and scathing. We were told repeatedly about the blame culture within the service and regaled with many stories of incompetence and organisational shortcomings. The most scathing criticism was reserved for outsiders, non lawyers, especially recent, senior appointments. They were seen as the root source of the ills afflicting the service and their status as non lawyers amplified their estrangement. The lawyers within the service were particularly adept in the use of the English language and we were both shocked and impressed at how skilfully they invoked this talent in their denunciations. And at times it felt like a performance, the skilful crafting of an account that constructed an individual or an episode in the most damning and scathing light. It was as if years of training in the courtroom had become deeply embedded in their habits of discourse. In a setting that is primarily concerned with determining the guilt or innocence of individuals, the establishment of blame and culpability, the dynamics of prosecution and defence, it should not have surprised us that these constructions carried over into the transactions of everyday organisational life.

We encountered an intriguing paradox. In spite of the deficit based discourse that characterised the informal, or shadow, exchanges within the service we were also hearing the service described as a friendly place to work. The metaphor of family was regularly used to describe the comradeship and warmth that existed between staff. This was used most often in reference to the close ties and feelings of intimacy that had developed between staff over many years of working together in the same court house.

How do you plead?

So, which approach to adopt? Both AI and our cultural approach would represent a challenge to this culture. In many ways we could see how the capacity to develop an intellectual understanding and articulation of the culture using the methods of our cultural approach to change would match their cognitive mind set. We were concerned that Appreciative Inquiry would represent too much of a mismatch with their skeptical and critical world view and would be derided as naive.

Our debate turned on two observations. We recalled an oft quoted comment from AI workshops: “When you ask a neutral question in an organisation setting the answers you get back tend to be critical”. Appreciative questions represent a deliberate attempt to counter-balance this propensity towards the critical. This certainly rang true in our experience. When using our cultural story telling methodology we always emphasised the importance of getting people to ask themselves the question: “What is this saying about the culture of this organisation?” We would have to work hard to help people find descriptive, non-judgmental terminology. This was precisely as a result of the tendency we had observed for people to more readily adopt a critical stance towards the cultural information revealed through their stories. In the context of the culture of the Magistrate’s Courts’ Service this sounded an alarm bell. We were concerned that the use of neutral cultural questions could amplify what we saw as a destructive and demoralising pattern of discourse. This swung our thinking in favour of using AI as our approach.

The second observation confirmed our decision to adopt AI. It arose from our consideration of the frequent use of the metaphor of family that we had encountered. In spite of the harsh and critical discourse within the service we suspected that the feelings of loyalty, community and cohesion implied by the term family offered a possibility of generative potential within the culture. An AI approach could, we reasoned, amplify these affiliations and offer the basis for a differently configured set of relations within the service.

AI in a demoralised system?

Our decision made we now were faced with a different dilemma. How to introduce Appreciative Inquiry into a demoralised system in which controversial changes were continuing to be processed, causing uncertainty and anxiety for the very people targeted to participate in the programme? We were mindful of the often asserted belief within the AI community that

the first steps of an intervention are fateful. Yet how could we invite people to inquire into the life giving, generative experiences of their careers within the service when what was clearly figural for virtually everyone was unprecedented levels of uncertainty, insecurity and anxiety?

Coupled with these feelings was the more banal fact that the cut-backs and redundancies had significantly increased workloads for staff, so people were feeling stressed and stretched into the bargain. We concluded that it was necessary to attend to how we might create a climate in which people in such circumstances would be prepared to engage with an Appreciative Inquiry process. In plain language it just didn’t feel right to launch straight into the 4-D model of Discovery Dream Design and Destiny without first acknowledging and validating the nature of their current construction of “reality” within the service. Our views here have been influenced by the work of Milton Erikson who placed considerable emphasis on the development of a relationship of rapport as an essential prerequisite for change. Erikson’s work was conducted mainly in a therapeutic context, however we believe that its relevance translates across into organisational settings. Jeffrey Zeig (1982) describes Erikson’s approach as based on the principle of “accept and utilise the clients reality” and the second principle of “Pace and lead the subject’s behaviour.” Zeig outlines the basic processes by which these principles operate:

“Pacing communications essentially feed back the subject’s experience; they add nothing new. Their major intent is to enhance the rapport between therapist and

subject....Once rapport has been developed, the therapist can lead by introducing behaviours that are different from, but consistent with, the subject's present state and slightly closer to the desired state." Zeig, 1982.

Once we had accepted the need for some preparatory work with the client system ahead of the main AI intervention we were faced with the design challenge of how to achieve this. We will describe our approach to this challenge in the next section but before embarking on this description of our practice we will set out a second challenge that felt critical to the success of this intervention.

Getting the whole system in the room. "Call the witnesses!"

The New Ways initiative was conceived as a programme aimed at middle and upper middle managers and legal staff within the service. In many ways this was an inspired and timely initiative. There was no doubt that the service was under the strongest pressure to change. Innovations would need to be delivered largely by those for whom the programme was intended. From a systems perspective however we were concerned that a number of important stake holders did not fall within the boundary of the target population as originally defined. Most obviously this included the senior management team (CMT) of the service comprised of the Justices' Chief Clerks, the directors of HR and Finance and the Justice's Chief Executive (JCE). Less obviously, but of real significance as we discovered, was the Magistrates Courts Committee (MCC). This body was responsible for the ratification of policy decisions and were the overall guardians of the management of the service. It was a lay committee made up of current or retired lay magistrates and some stipendiary magistrates. Even less obviously were other agencies such as the police and the probation offices with whom the service needed to liaise closely.

How to involve these parties in the process of renewal and change? Their active support of both the process and the outcomes were essential not just in terms of any specific innovations at an operational level but more importantly we felt because they were key parties to the construction of the reality that represented the Magistrates Courts Service. We strongly believed that any changes that would help in the transformation of the service were bound to include changes in the belief system, the epistemology of the service. If there was to be a shift in how people conceived of themselves, each other and the service as a whole then these parties would need, somehow, to participate in the process.

In the remainder of this chapter we will concentrate on discussing how we addressed these challenges and the lessons we take from the experience. For a brief summary of the overall design see figure 1.

First Steps - "Would you tell the court, in your own words, what happened."

The first steps in this work felt particularly fateful. To re-iterate the challenge: how could we create a climate in which demoralised people, in the midst of radical and disruptive changes, and with predominantly deficit discourses, would be prepared to engage with an Appreciative Inquiry process.

We saw the purpose of the first two day event as needing to build the sense of a group or community of inquirers who saw themselves as active participants in the changes necessary within the service. Secondly, we wanted to introduce them to Appreciative inquiry, sufficient for them to be able to undertake interviews in the period between workshops 1 and 2. But first we needed to achieve rapport with them as individuals and as a group.

We decided on a four stage process: Describing your own reality, pacing and leading, issuing the invitation and the social re-definition of relationships.

Step one: Describe your reality

Once we had introduced ourselves to each other and said something of the purpose of the programme we invited them to list out all of the changes within the service that they were aware of. We asked them to simply list, on a sheet of flip chart paper, the changes they had experienced or were aware of. We asked them to divide the page in half and to list the changes on the left hand side and the consequences of these changes, as they saw them, down the right hand side. They did this in groups of three and four, capturing headlines on flip charts. Typically each group would use at least two charts.

We then asked them, using a different colour marker, to find words that described their feelings about these changes. Invariably they chose red markers for this part of the exercise.

This accomplished, we then invited them to lay their charts on the floor forming the collective whole into a circle. People were then invited to review all of the flip charts, to ask questions for clarification, to comment on what they noticed, similarities, themes, surprises and so on. We gently encouraged the process, largely giving permission and encouragement for people to speak their truths. We were mindful to ensure that their views and especially their feelings were heard and received as legitimate. We refrained from comment ourselves other than to seek clarification or to test for themes and connections between comments. We noticed an early tentativeness on the part of participants which we later discovered was an uncertainty as to how far it was acceptable to speak their truths. Could they trust us and each other?

As a light finale to this exercise we invited them, as small syndicates, to imagine themselves as journalists writing a feature on change in the service. What would be the headline, the storyline with sub headers and what photo or illustration would they include? This offered a playful device for further encouraging the expression of their feelings.

Comment: From an Appreciative Inquiry perspective this exercise validated the observation regarding the use of neutral questions invoking negative, critical responses. The vast majority of comments and expressions revealed strong feelings of anger, powerlessness, uncertainty and unfulfilled promises. The Newspaper headlines typically revealed their fears for the future of the service and themselves and portrayed senior

management in an unflattering light. In fairness all was not unremittingly critical. There was also acknowledgment of some changes that had been favourably received.

We noticed a buzz of conversation during the coffee break that followed this work. At some level the exercise had energised the group and we felt confident to proceed to the next stage of the process.

Step 2 Pacing and Leading

We were curious as to how participants in the programme saw their own involvement in these changes. Rather than think of change as a series of events we invited them to reflect on their part in the change process. We had created a simple exercise that was intended to help them describe this. The exercise was based around a continuum of Involvement in Change, (see diagram 2).

The continuum sets out five forms and levels of involvement in change episodes:

Victims, Consumers, Interpreters, Participants / Shapers, Co-creators

Each of these has accompanying text to describe the experience of involvement in changes from the viewpoint of organisational members.

After inviting them to read the descriptions of each position we asked them to decide which of them most closely resembled their experience and to indicate this on their copy of the continuum. We then placed five sheets of paper on the floor to represent the continuum in the room. Each sheet was marked with one of the positions. People were asked to physically stand in the position along this continuum that they had recorded on their own sheet. In this way the whole of the information was immediately and visibly available to everyone in the room. There was much interest in how the continuum was populated. The majority of people placed themselves either as victims or consumers, one or two, (out of a group of fourteen), considered themselves as interpreters and one participant, from head office, saw himself as lying somewhere between Participant / Shaper and Co-creator.

We asked people to say why they had placed themselves in their chosen positions. What did it feel like to occupy that position? Others spontaneously joined in this questioning and a natural dialogue developed. We then invited observations regarding the overall pattern. What was this saying about the service and recent changes in particular? Broadly, the conversation revealed feelings of powerlessness, exclusion and of things being imposed without consultation. A distinction emerged between how they felt about changes that occurred to the service as a whole and their feelings of involvement in change at a local level. The consensus was that they felt more involved locally.

The positioning of the participant from head office, a senior member of the finance department,

attracted both interest and wry comment and prompted a discussion of levels of consultation between head office and the courts.

Up until this point all of the activities might be considered as pacing activities. Patiently encouraging participants to describe and express their reality using a variety of methods both descriptive and expressive. We had gradually shifted the focus from discussing changes in the service in a generalised, distanced way and in the direction of encouraging them to see themselves as personally subject to and involved in changes. It increasingly felt as if rapport was developing both between ourselves and the group and within the group. At this point we moved from pacing to leading. We asked them to think about where they would most like to be on the continuum and, when ready, to move to that place, paying attention to the experience of moving positions. With the exception of the representative from Head Office, they all moved and generally clustered between interpreters and Participants/shapers. No-one moved to the co-creator position and a small number hovered between consumers and interpreters.

Once again we heard from them, why they had chosen their new position and what did it feel like to have moved? Again the level of energy and attention within the group was high. A discussion developed regarding the extent to which they were in part responsible for times when they felt powerless. They speculated about how their seniors would position themselves on the continuum³ and were at first shocked to discover that they had distributed themselves in similar fashion. This caused them to think about how the service as a whole was subject to a number of externally driven changes. The exercise at the very least caused them to entertain the possibility that things could be different. We closed the session by inviting them to process their thoughts from the exercise with another member of the group and to reflect on what they might do that would help them move closer to their desired position.

The morning was all but over.

Step 3 Issuing the Invitation

We had invited three senior managers to join the group for an informal working lunch. The intent was to give participants a chance to make direct contact with those that they considered were among the organisation's leadership (the CMT or Corporate Management Team). We suggested that the broad topic for conversation was the future of the service, how did people see the challenges to the service and what were their aspirations? Participants had been briefed about this at the beginning of the day and we gave them time to prepare for the conversations, clarifying what they might want to say to, and ask of, the visitors.

Lunch was an informal buffet and three separate tables settings were arranged. Over a period of an hour and a half participants were encouraged to spend time at each table so as to hear different perspectives. The lunch was attended by the head of HR, the Finance Director and one of the Justice's Clerks - the legal and administrative head of one of the

³ We had met with their seniors the previous afternoon to brief them on the programme and had used the same exercise with them. This is discussed more fully later in the case.

courts. Our intention was to create an opportunity for natural conversation and dialogue, and for participants to hear directly from their seniors. In this way we hoped for a co-construction of the requirement for change within the service.

Conversations were lively and engaged. From the vantage point of observers, it was clear that this was a challenging experience for the “visitors.” It was apparent that the early conversations did not address the broader question of the future of the service. Participants had specific issues they wanted to air and in some cases grievances regarding the ongoing re-grading exercise. This alarmed us. We felt that the conversations would become mired in such operational, yet seemingly trivial matters. During an interval we reminded everyone of the intent for the conversations and gradually noticed that they did indeed drift into a discussion of the broader issues. Once started, these conversations seemed to gain in energy and momentum such that we had difficulty in getting people to honour the agreed closing time.

Step 4 The Social Re-definition of Relationships

In the post lunch debrief we were excited to hear what participants had heard and what they made of it. How did they interpret the views of the visitors? As an exercise in the social construction of meaning we were in for a shock. Participants were critical of the “visitors”. The two new comers came in for particular criticism. They were seen as centralist bureaucrats who were more interested in numbers than the organisation. They didn’t seem to know how things would work out in the future and after all wasn’t that what they were being paid for. Appreciation was expressed for the Justice’s Clerk who, it was felt, seemed to be doing his best in difficult circumstances. Once again alarm bells sounded. Far from apparently engaging in dialogue with the visitors it seemed that participants were engaging in a form of collective scapegoating exercise. The deficit discourse we had observed informally was being demonstrated in full blown living Technicolour. We allowed the discussion to develop. Someone pointed out that participants were placing the visitors in a double bind. On the one hand they were being criticised for being too directive and autocratic while on the other they were admonished for weak leadership after admitting that they did not know exactly how things would unfold in respect of a range of externally driven changes.

One of the major messages participants had heard was that the visitors were looking to them to generate ideas and possibilities as to how the service might cope with diminishing resources and increased expectations. While this was greeted with indignation by many, a noticeable number began to express the opinion that perhaps this was senior management asking for help. How can they ask for help if they already know the answers? People began to use the terminology from the mornings’ exercise looking at forms of involvement in change. One of the more junior administrative staff suggested that by blaming senior managers for not coming up with satisfactory solutions to the difficulties the service was facing they were keeping themselves as victims. She argued forcibly that both by committing to the New Ways programme and participating so candidly in the lunchtime conversation that the senior managers were in effect inviting the members of the New Ways Programme, and by implication all staff, to become more active participants in the change process. Hadn’t they all agreed that in the morning’s exercise that this is what they preferred? This proved to be a turning point. Some grudgingly, and others more enthusiastically, acknowledged that she had a point. We called a tea break.

Reflecting on this dialogue we realise now how critical it was to the success of the process. In effect we would suggest that in the course of the dialogue a new meaning was being constructed by course participants. Prompted by the exercises in the morning they were not only able to articulate their feelings about current and past changes but also had an image and vocabulary to describe a preferred alternative. And the way in which senior managers had been defined thus far as autocratic villains of the piece was also being questioned. Yes, they were expected to give a lead but there was also acknowledgement of the double bind portrayed so powerfully by the administrative assistant. Naming this double bind allowed for the possibility of defining a different pattern of relations between staff and senior managers. The dialogue over lunch and the post-lunch de-brief felt as though they addressed an issue that lay right at the heart of the dynamics within the service. In Transaction Analysis terms it seemed as if there was a chance to shift from a parent - child pattern towards an adult - adult based transaction. The luncheon became constructed as an invitation from senior management to course participants to more fully participate in the changes required of the service. Were they prepared to accept this invitation we inquired? The response was a provisional yes. While many were now openly enthusiastic at the prospect it was clear that a significant minority were prepared to go along with it for the time being. They were prepared to test out the new possibility to see whether indeed behaviour matched with the rhetoric. But the real test would be whether senior managers were seen to sustain the newly re-defined pattern of relationships in their behaviour. Would the enactment match the re-definition?

Once we had reached this point we felt that the time was right to introduce them to the philosophy and methods of Appreciative Inquiry. We sensed feelings of relief among the group as we talked about attending to those times when the service was at its best. In our view we had achieved our first goal. The group was ready to engage with both the AI philosophy and its practical implications.

During a review at the end of the programme we were struck by some of the comments by participants about this first day typified by this observation:

“The first day was hard but vital. It helped to get rid of all the baggage.”

Certainly we were delighted at how enthusiastically participants embraced the philosophy of Appreciative Inquiry throughout the remainder of the programme.

We will never know of course whether it would have unfolded equally as well had the programme launched directly into an Appreciative Inquiry at the very beginning. For our part, we are mindful of an observation made by a colleague quoting an unreferenced sage: “The second step is always the first step forward.”

Getting the whole system in the room.

We saw this as the second major challenge to the success of the initiative. Essentially it is a systemic challenge. If the programme did indeed succeed in discovering new ways there would need to be broad based system-wide support for any changes that were to impact on the wider organisation. How to achieve this when the most senior of the services' managers together with other key stakeholders were not formally involved in the programme and did not see themselves as its “consumers” in the first instance. In some ways the way in which the initiative was conceived might be regarded as a further

indication of the parent- child pattern of relations that became evident during the first day of the programme.

Since the most senior managers were not officially part of the programme, we needed to find ways of naturally involving them in the course of the three events. They became involved in six different ways; three of them as an intentional part of our design and three emerged spontaneously as the programme gained momentum.

By design:

Pre-briefing:

Prior to the launch of the first (pilot) programme we invited members of the senior management team (CMT) to a briefing to set out the objectives for the programme, to review the overall design and to explain what their staff would be asked to do. We wanted to set their expectations and to introduce them to the philosophy underpinning an AI approach to change. While this was mostly intended as a courtesy, they expressed interest in the design and wanted to participate in the Involvement in Change exercise. The results were illuminating. They clustered mostly around the positions of Interpreters and Consumers. The ensuing discussion revealed their feelings of being on the receiving end of many government initiated changes, and of finding it hard to cope with the succession of these changes while conducting business as usual in their courts.

Luncheon dialogue - issuing the invitation

We have already described this part of the first day. The intention was to close the gap that often occurs between senior management teams and organisation members who work in the “body” of an organisation. In our experience this gap invites all kinds of projections and speculations on the part of both parties. We wanted to create a forum that encouraged dialogue and which required all present to hear each others’ views. The choice of using a buffet lunch for this was intended to foster an informal atmosphere. We prepared all parties ahead of the encounter emphasising the need to set personal agendas to one side and to concentrate on the broader challenges facing the service as a whole. As indicated earlier, we were only partially successful in this although ultimately we believe that the encounter played a crucial part in both parties’ re-definition of the relationship.

Guests at Workshop three

In the course of the programme (see map of the programme) participants followed the 4 - D process. Inviting key stakeholders to participate on the afternoon of the third workshop was the third element of our design where we sought to involve senior stakeholders in the process. We will describe how this worked in as part of an outline of how the 4-D process informed our overall design.

The Discovery phase, participants inquired into their own experiences, and the experiences of others in the group. A number of themes emerged from these interviews that formed the basis for the second cycle of inquiry: the identification of affirmative topics.

During the second cycle, participants, in pairs, interviewed colleagues from other courthouses within the service. (There were a total of 12 courthouses that served inner London)

In addition they arranged visits to other organisations with reputations for innovative practice and high standards. Each pair conducted a number of interviews in these organisations. The interviews were based around the topic choices arising out of the first inquiry cycle. Among the organisations visited were: Hewlett Packard, British Telecom, The Body Shop, Virgin Airlines, Imperial College London, House of Frasier, British Rail, DHL, Metropolitan Police at Scotland Yard and several other Magistrate's Courts with reputations for innovation and high standards. At first we assumed that we would need to arrange these visits but we realised that this would be consistent with a parent - child pattern of relations. Instead, we invited suggestions from participants for appropriate places to visit and were overwhelmed by their ideas. This demonstration of resourcefulness on behalf of the participants was an important and enlightening message both to the participants themselves and to members of the CMT.

Debriefing the learnings from the visits during the inquiry phase was invariably a high point for participants. They took time to prepare carefully before sharing their learnings with each other. We invited them to be creative in how they did this. The session took the form of a market place with a number of stall holders displaying their "wares". Participants took it in turns to "mind the stall" while their colleagues visited the other stalls. Thus there were a number of simultaneous conversations occurring as participants explored and debated each others' discoveries and their potential value to the service. The buzz of conversation and energy during these sessions represented a high point for participants and was indicative of how inspirational they had found the visits. For many of them it was the first time that they had been exposed to the operations and culture of another organisation. Quite literally, they had stepped outside the boundaries of their thinking. A typical response to the discovery of new practices is summed up by the comment of one participant: "Well if they can do it so can we!" At the same time they had also discovered things about their own service that surprised and impressed them. In one court, for example, participants were impressed by a communications forum held on a weekly basis involving all staff. Visitors to another court were struck by the care with which the physical environment had been designed and arranged so as to create a supportive and sympathetic setting for family cases. Visitors to the Finance department were impressed by the streamlined and devolved organisation of work.

Dreaming

The discovery phase was indeed generative for the service. Not only in terms of practical ideas and possibilities for new ways of organising and managing but also at a more fundamental level of assumptions and values. Old values of family and community had been reaffirmed during the visit but aspirations to new values such as transparency and teamwork had emerged as a result of the visits. New linkages across the courts were beginning to emerge and relationships across hierarchical levels were being experienced as helpful.

The Discovery phase created a truly generative platform for the Dream phase. We invited participants to review all of the ideas and possibilities that they had directly and indirectly been exposed to during the discovery period. How would they imagine the service in three years time if the seeds of innovation generated by these visits had germinated and flourished? They undertook this work in pairs, translating the ideas into a form appropriate

to the service, and then we asked each pair to join another pair and to find a way of summarising their images of the future service using a medium other than words. We had provided a collection of assorted materials to help them but also encouraged them to experiment with other media such as drama, drawings and sculptures. Their creativity with these media was remarkable and they surprised and delighted themselves.

Dream and Design

In the interim period between workshops two and three we asked participants to find ways of sharing their discoveries and dreams with colleagues from their sections. To take the thinking into the organisation both as a way of informing their work colleagues but also by way of inviting their contribution and comment. What did they make of the ideas, how might they be developed or amplified in some way? What would be necessary to make them succeed at a practical level? In this way the ideas were both embellished and endorsed while others, it became clear, were either impractical or dropped through lack of support.

Coming in to the last of the three workshops participants had a robust sense of what innovations they would like to see and which had the support of their colleagues. This was the third place where we had designed in the participation of other, key stake-holders within the system. Members of the senior management team (CMT) together with members of the overall governing body, (MCC) were invited to join the group to hear about their discoveries and suggestions. Once again the design was intended to foster a climate of discussion and dialogue. Participants were encouraged to display their ideas in creative, compelling and memorable ways and in a way that invited engagement by those visiting. A “market place” format was used at the request of participants because of its capacity for generating good dialogue and because it made the encounter with their seniors less daunting.

By this time the participants had become adept at the creative representation of their ideas and patently enjoyed the opportunity to be both innovative and playful. Ideas were represented in the form of an interactive quiz, others adapted the format of the Monopoly game while a third group took the visitors on a fantasy tour of the future service and presented the guests with small gifts to serve as symbolic embodiments of their messages: a clear balloon to symbolise transparency, a miniature chocolate bar to embody a culture of recognition and a miniature plastic car to indicate working from home.

The response of the visitors to these events was encouraging at many levels. They welcomed not just the ideas themselves but also the spirit of possibility and innovation that they represented. They especially enjoyed the opportunity to debate possibilities and to have their views invited. They commented on the creativity and enthusiasm of participants and especially welcomed the fact that participants were not looking to them to take responsibility for the implementation of the ideas.

One of the visitors, a member of the MCC commented:

“It is so refreshing to come to come an event like this where we are not having more problems dumped on us.”

This encounter between policy makers and those subject to their thinking also proved highly enlightening in other ways:

“The scales fell from my eyes”

This comment was in reference to the discovery on the part of these visitors that the long held belief on behalf of policy makers that staff should be protected as far as possible from the adverse effects of changes. The practice had been to shield staff from information regarding such developments until such time as the changes were unavoidable. Visitors discussed this with participants, particularly in respect of the value of transparency, and were surprised to hear that participants emphatically preferred to be informed of unpleasant news as early as possible.

“We don’t need to be protected from bad news. But if you keep us informed early on we might be able to do something about it.”

This encounter represented something of a climax to the programme for the participants and for the visitors it represented an important discovery forum.

Design and Delivery

The last day was spent planning the implementation of innovations both within individual courthouses and on initiatives that spanned the service. It amplified the Design aspect of the process and bridged into the final D - Delivery or Destiny as it is variously represented. Each service -wide initiative had a champion or sponsor at CMT level. This idea emerged from the conversation during the exchanges of the previous day.

In these ways senior members of the service were enfolded into the programme. Their interest gradually grew and their attitude towards the programme became more positive and enthusiastic.

Senior members of the service had also been enfolded into the process in more natural spontaneous ways. Participants decided that they wanted to include them as interviewees during the first Inquiry phase, and subsequent participants indicated that their Justice Clerks had begun to express interest in what was happening in the course of everyday business.

The final endorsement of the programme and the AI approach occurred when the CMT invited us to facilitate their annual management conference around the theme of managing change. How might they cope with some challenging changes that they were facing; the introduction of leading edge IT, the devolution of budgets and the most radical of all, the amalgamation of the service with the Outer London Magistrate’s Service.

But that is another story.

The Verdict

There were many change initiatives that came about as a result of the New Ways Programme. Perhaps most important was a change in the mind set which pervaded this traditional service organisation. They had opened their boundaries to discovering difference, had started to acknowledge the tremendous amount of innovative practice already happening within the courts, began to move away from the “blame and protective parent” culture to a more inclusive, adult-adult culture, and were growing positive relationships up and across the organisation. Senior managers described a sense of

renewed energy within the service and commented on significant changes in the attitudes of staff previously regarded as hardened cynics.

The launch of the new IT system represented not only a dramatic manifestation of a key element in all of the course participants' dreams for the Service but the manner of its introduction, using a process of high staff involvement, was considered to be a significant shift in style attributed, in large measure, to the New Ways Programme. Of equal significance to us was the attitude towards the dramatic news, half way through the series of programmes, that the service was to be amalgamated with the Outer London Service. The clear message from New Ways participants to the CMT and the MCC was: "How can we position ourselves at the heart of the change process and influence it rather than opposing it and marginalising ourselves?" This alone was illustration of a major shift of mindset within the Service.

Among the many practical initiatives directly and indirectly coming out of New Ways were:

- * An employee recognition scheme set up around individual court houses
- * A totally new IT system linking court houses by e mail
- * A new ideas forum
- * The re-introduction of a performance appraisal system
- * The re-consideration of a long- term service award
- * Team development initiatives
- * The introduction of Magnet, a cross service staff newsletter

In all there were five iterations of the New Ways Programme. Interest and support for the programme continued to develop and the representatives of the programmes held regular meetings to keep each other informed of progress and developments.

On reflection:

A major conclusion for us arising from this case was the realisation that systemic involvement of major individual groups and individuals in the process can occur in a natural or organic fashion. It is not necessary to contract in the participation of all stake holders at the front end of the process. The natural energy and enthusiasm generated by appreciative processes seems to have a contagious quality that is welcomed by senior managers, and that draws them into the process.

We believe that this case offers a resoundingly affirmative response to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter. The old world bottles of the London Magistrate's Service proved to be surprisingly receptive vessels to the New World Wine of Appreciative Inquiry. It is our view however that the time spent at the beginning of the programme was essential to creating the climate of readiness to engage with such a process. Once their feelings of suspicion and cynicism had been expressed and acknowledged, and the invitation to participate accepted, the staff of the Inner London Magistrate's Service demonstrated an unlimited capacity for innovation and change. The cork was well and truly out of the bottle.

References:

Reason, P. **Human Inquiry in Action**, Sage Publications, 1988.

Marshall, J., and McLean, A., *Reflection in Action: Exploring Organisational Culture as a Route to Organisational Change*, in Hammond, V., (Ed.) **Current Research in Management**. Francis Pinter, 1985.

McLean, A., and George, M., "*Organisational Brass Rubbing: Applications of the Cultural Metaphor.*" Paper presented to the Association of Social Anthropology Decennial Conference, Oxford University, July 1993.

McLean, A., and Marshall, J., **Cultures at Work: How to Identify and Understand Them**. Local Government Training Board, 1989.

Zeig., J., **Ericksonian Approaches to Hypnosis and Psychotherapy**. Brunner / Mazel, 1982.

Appendix 1 - Map of the New Ways Programme

Workshop 1

Essentially the first two day workshop would attend to group formation, the intent of the programme and inviting the members to participate in the process of organisational renewal and transformation. It would also be used to prepare for the visits or inquiries both within the service and in outside organisations. Senior managers were invited to participate in issuing the invitation to staff. This was achieved conversationally over lunch on the first day. Three or four of the senior managers (the HR director, Head of Finance, the Chief executive [JCE] and one of the Chief Justices Clerks [effectively the professional and administrative head of a court house) joined the group for lunch around a number of small tables. The spirit was that of a conversational exchange. Both participants and the “visitors” were encouraged to prepare for the conversation which was around the topic: What are the challenges facing the service and what aspirations do people hold for the service in the future?

Inquiring

There was an interval of approximately three weeks between workshops one and two. During this period participants, in pairs, were to conduct their inquiries. We wanted them to visit another court within the service and to find out how managers in other organisations had responded to similar challenges.

Workshop 2

Workshop two, also a two day event, was dedicated to debriefing participants from their visits. They were invariably very rich in learning and full of surprises for participants. Part of the two days was also used to help them assess these new ideas and possibilities and to develop a sense of how they might be introduced into the service. This led them to debate and develop an image of the service in the future. Time was also dedicated to considering the merits of different ways of achieving change in organisations. Finally they were encouraged to think about how they might involve other staff from within their court in what they had discovered and how some of these ideas might be implemented locally.

Involving

The second activity which we termed involving, required participants to involve their immediate colleagues and other interested parties within their courts. The

idea was for participants to share their discoveries and learning from their visits with their colleagues and to invite comment and discussion. In addition the intent was to create opportunities for their colleagues to enrich and inform the thinking, to actively participate in the thinking and the development of possibilities.

Integrating and Launching

The final two day event required participants to fashion the ideas and possibilities into tangible form and to broaden the dialogue to include senior managers and members of the MCC (Magistrates Courts Committee). This is the lay governing body that oversees the development of policy and overall management of the service. The emphasis of the presentations was on informality and creativity. Participants were encouraged to share their thinking in a way that was memorable and engaging and which promoted dialogue. The spirit of the event was to inform, excite and to engage the “visitors” in discussions regarding how suggestions might be implemented. The final day was devoted to participants working through the details of implementation and sustaining the momentum that had developed during the course of the programme.

In order to support participants in the activities between events and as a home base for preparing for and processing learnings, participants were formed into Change Support Groups. These were essentially a form of Action Learning Group. Part of the rationale behind their creation was also to encourage and strengthen relationships between staff in different courts and to create a vehicle for sustaining momentum following participation in the formal programme.

A final device to provide continuity, offer focus and to encourage learning was the use of personal journals.