

Appreciative Inquiry at Nutrimental – How did it happened?

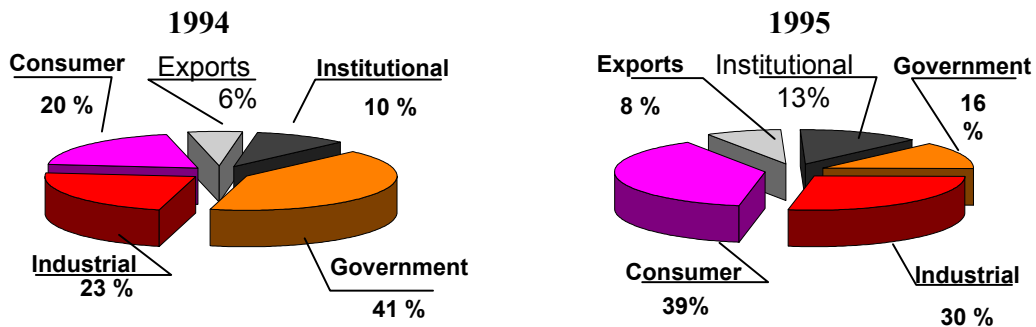
Nutrimental is a food company founded in Curitiba in 1968. Its business consists of dehydrating food. For many years Nutrimental worked only with the government that bought dehydrated food for federal institutions (schools, the army, hospitals and universities) and distributed it in the whole country. The government was Nutrimental's main partner until 1992, then the new government decided to decentralize the purchase of food for all these institutions.

As a consequence Nutrimental had to rearrange its business and try to find new markets for its products. It was difficult because the 24 year-old firm had no experience in dealing with consumer market. Nutrimental's dehydrated products had to gain a new image and appeal, to reach the consumers at the supermarkets. Having concurrence was also a new thing to Nutrimental. How to beat the competitors? How to survive in this tough environment? Suddenly everything had to be changed.

Nutrimental managed to adapt its products to the consumer market, but very soon it became clear that the range of products it offered wasn't big enough to support the huge size that the company had acquired during the gold years. Therefore, Nutrimental had to develop new products to survive.

The firm's new goal was to grow in the consumer market. The figure below shows the development of Nutrimental's business: from one year to the other the consumer market expanded while the government share decreased.

Revenues Contribution per Market Segment



Percentage of the revenues gained in each market segment of Nutrimental.

Source: Courtesy of Nutrimental

Nowadays Nutrimental operates with approximately 650 employees (in the past it operated with 2000 employees). Nutrimental decided to fight and face up to the new challenges. It wants to remain in the food business and to go on expanding and developing the range of its consumer products.

Mr. Rodrigo Loures, the chief executive office of Nutrimental realized that it would be crucial to create a new synergy between people at Nutrimental. How should he bring people to work together and to have common goals? How should he make these 650 employees that had remained in the company feel confident in the new environment created by the downsizing? How should every one know their new rules after the reengineering process?

Those were very tough and vital questions to answer. Mr. Loures knew he had to come out with a human resource development method that would allow the remaining pieces of the company to become a whole company once more. Integrity was needed. But what was really the face of Nutrimental after all these changes?

It was clear that at this point Nutrimental had more questions than answers. And it would be great if everybody could find the answers together. People needed to know that they were not alone, that their colleagues were also passing through a questioning period.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) came to the scenario. It was just the perfect organizational development method Nutrimental needed. Through AI people would have the chance to participate in the reconstruction of Nutrimental. Anyway, everyone's idea was important at that time, and everyone actually should contribute to recreate the firm.

In 1997 David Copperrider was invited to apply the method in the company. He suggested a pilot workshop to be applied by one of his students, Ilma Barros. She came down to Brazil on July and what she found was a company full of fear and hopeless. The board did not really believed on the '*positive based process*' to start with, but at least it was fun to talk about high points and to share with others good moments of the past... The present situation was anyway too sad and stressful to talk about, and they had been discussing the same things since the business' route collapsed in 1992, without any results. The Appreciative Inquiry pilot workshop was approved.

In the second day of the AI pilot workshop, as if it was magic, the atmosphere changed. People were glad they were there. It was suddenly not 'that boring' to be there during the weekend!... It was fun and it was giving them hope. Hope was everything they could count on at that moment, anyway.

The following days went brighter and brighter, and in the end no one in the board could doubt anymore the power and the focus that the method was able to generate. The same board that was unbelieving the pilot AI workshop, decided to apply AI in the whole company. The idea to have the '*whole in a room*' to discover, dream, design and find the destiny of the company was simply magnificent!

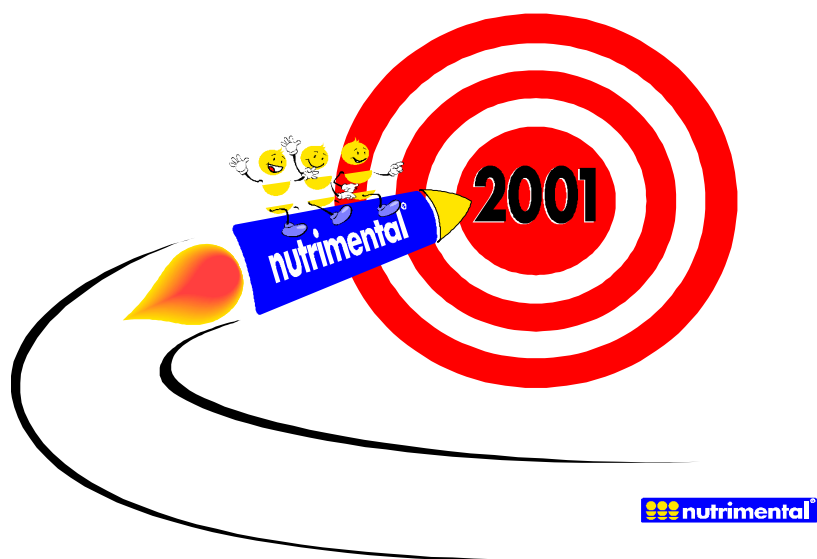
David Copperider and Ilma Barros came to Brazil in September 97 to apply the method in the whole company. Meanwhile the people that had attended that pilot workshop had developed an AI questionnaire that had been applied in as many people as possible during the last two months. People really enjoyed being asked and having the chance to speak out their good memories and thoughts. It would be wonderful to give everyone the chance to be listened to during the full process that was going to be applied with the whole company in the room!

At that time I had just graduated and as I had written my dissertation working with Nutrimental, I was invited to work as trainee in the marketing department of the company. My goal when writing the dissertation was to look for breakthrough products *to save* the company. After exhaustively studying this theme, I realized that what the company need to develop was a breakthrough organization rather than look for breakthrough products, as they are something unexpected and found by chance, while a breakthrough organization is something to be built together and something that no competitor is able to copy. My task when invited to work there was to try to start applying my thesis, helping developing a strategic plan to build a breakthrough organization. But suddenly someone was needed to organize a workshop that would invited all employees (750 people) and stakeholders to participate on. As this

workshop had to do with organization development, I was chosen to be responsible for organizing the event.

'Appreciative Inquiry' was a vocabulary that did not exist in anyone's dictionary at all. How should I make people familiar with something they had no idea at all? How should I make them not be afraid of this organizational change? And even more challenging, how should I prepare illiterate people to participate in the method without having fear of not being able to participate?

Appreciative Inquiry itself has already all these answers, but at that time I did not know it! And therefore, I developed visual communication to attract people to come and check how all of them were important to the success of the whole company. For my visual communication to be effective, I had to find something everybody was familiar with, and associate this 'thing' with the 'new thing' that was coming in their way. I could not find anything better to use than the own logo of the company. I created a character from the company's logo. From the old I created something new, and that was the goal of the workshop: to visualize from the past and present our future.



I guess the visual communication was effective. Around 750 people came and fulfilled the huge warehouse that had been empty and rearranged to host the whole company in a (big!) room. Seven hundred people, between employees and stakeholders came to create the future of the company.

Now, it is difficult to describe what happened there. The energy in the room was enormous. No problem that people could not read. No problem that David was talking the whole time in English and that they had to wait until the translation came. No problem that the accent of Ilma Barros was from the north of Brazil, and the simple people who were attending the workshop had difficulty in 'understanding' it. No problem at all! Synergy was in the room. People simply enjoyed telling their high point stories and sharing with others their feelings and expectations.

Since AI Nutrimental gained a new face and found its identity. The little character that was used to help people participate in the AI process has been adopted and given a name: The Appreciative. He appears in an internal journal that now is responsible for divulging the news around the company's businesses.



People now know how important it is to work together and to communicate with others. A voluntary committee was created in the last day of the workshop, and those

people were responsible for keeping everybody informed about what was happening in the company and in each extent they have were being able to reach their goals.

Everybody appreciate participating. The culture of sharing ideas, thoughts and stories has become something alive at Nutrimental. Everybody together dreamed about the future of the company, and they all are committed to making their dreams become true. Being pessimist is synonym of 'not being appreciative' and that is the worth thing anyone can now do in Nutrimental! "Appreciative Inquiry" is now in everybody's dictionary and actions and the company has only profited from it.

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Freiburg, September 1998.