

Working together with Elaine, Leora and Natalie, we served Aprender y Crecer for our Appreciative Inquiry intervention in Costa Rica. It unfolded in unexpected, complex and pleasantly surprising ways where I experienced authentic, collaborative leadership that supported our client to engage with Appreciative Inquiry.

I entered the project with a desire to “lead” our team in a traditional sense where I was “in control” and instead was pleasantly surprised that I checked myself and moved towards authentic collaboration where we co-created an environment where we shared leadership with our client. During our second call prior to Costa Rica, Elaine and I expressed a desire for us to both “let go of our normal need to control things”. The others had to leave the call and we wound up talking for another hour reflecting on our relationship to control. We decided to continue our conversation together at a later time. Only after speaking with Jeb did he help me realize that Elaine and I were moving towards excluding the group from our conversation. I decided to approach Elaine and suggest to her we invite the other two to be a part of our conversation since we were still in the group formation stage. She said she had been thinking about the same thing and agreed. We reached out to the others, updated them on our conversation and invited them to join us. The four of us met for dinner and agreed to experiment with sharing leadership and I feel like it went very well. We each took the lead at different times and also provided a space for the client to lead.

What was unexpected for me was the client’s interest in facilitating the AI session with their grantee, the school. We supported them with their desire to facilitate and supported them with the planning, helped prepare them for their presentation, made

process suggestions during the AI session and occasionally stepped in to facilitate. The AI session proved to be very successful and eye-opening for me. What I enjoyed most was the opportunity to fluidly move from participant to facilitator to observer to observing the observers. By stepping back from my traditional way of leading (through facilitation), I was able to experience the AI session from multiple vantage points, which ultimately gave me a deeper appreciation of the process. Experiencing the AI intervention from multiple vantage points reinforced some of the learnings around complexity. Specifically, the following quote from Griffin, Shaw & Stacey (1999) stands out for me:

“Each person in the group responds to others in his/her own manner and, in so doing, evokes responses from others: this complex web of responding is clearly nonlinear. It is through this process of continual responding that new patterns of relationship emerge.” (p. 304-5)

Each of us brought this quote to life. We each responded to each other in a non hierarchical, collaborative way. As it was happening, I was able to step back at times and observe it all, appreciating its positive flow. When we debriefed as a group, we appreciated the positive aspects of our work flow. One of our group members did voice that at times, she questioned whether or not her contributions were helpful and at other times wondered if she was making the right decisions. We realized we could have contracted better prior to the delivery of AI at the school by generating ideas for how we might communicate with each other during the session. Instead, it emerged in a more organic way. We heard very positive feedback from our primary client, Aprender y Crecer. We also heard the same from all of the participants from the school.

Regarding my “point of view” on the nature of planned change, I observed an ever increasing energy as the AI session progressed, with positive energy building upon itself. The process created a level playing field that created a safe space for everyone to

participate. By starting in an intimate space of a paired conversation and building up from there, the process built trust and created a space for a new possibility.

Since Costa Rica, I have facilitated two AI sessions for clients (a two-day retreat for Long Beach Gay and Lesbian Pride and a one day retreat for Long Beach Alliance for Children with Asthma). In addition to the Discovery and Dream phase, at both retreats I found the most transformation happened during the Design phase as we created a space for members to share offers, requests and commitments (due in large part to the foundation built during the Discovery and Dream phases). I plan to also do a “Valuation” process using AI principals with the clients I served this year.

Beyond AI, my “point of view” around community shifted during Costa Rica. Specifically, I gained numerous insights that will help me as a practitioner weave a stronger sense of community for my clients and also better connect me to the multiple communities I’m a part of. Specifically:

- *Vulnerability creates a space for genuine community.* If a leader has the courage to be vulnerable, that creates a space for community to flourish.
- *Invitations are powerful.* Invitations begin the conversation to name possibilities and create change.
- *Intentions are essential and need my attention.* Understanding my own intention will help me more authentically connect with people, rather than pushing them away by mindlessly trying to teach them something.
- *Community: It’s complicated.* There’s more than meets the eye. What we see is shaped by the ladder of inference. Real data helps us understand reality.

Altogether, Costa Rica proved to be a phenomenal learning experience!