

Naming Elephants: The Positive Frame of Conflict

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What role does conflict play in Appreciative Inquiry? In this article, a long-time AI Practitioner reports on her increased focus on how conflicting opinions are handled in conversations in organizations. Enabling people to speak up, making choices about which topics to pursue and which ones to leave for another time as well as listening to controversial views can all be part of reframing conflict from negative to positive. Sue Hammond highlights not only the value of naming the elephants but dancing with them as well: in other words, recognizing that undiscussables exist, finding a way to talk about them and framing the conversation as a celebration.

Great Brainstorming

Have you ever been a part of a great brainstorming session? What were the characteristics that made it great? How did you achieve creative breakthroughs in that session? Take a few minutes and share your experiences with another person.

Inquiring into the best of a brainstorming session is sure to surface some best practices around creating vast quantities of ideas and following some sort of process that limits the final group of ideas that are taken to an action step. Sound familiar?

Most AI practitioners will recognize this as a process somewhat parallel to an Appreciative Inquiry. The purpose of any creative process is to co-create new knowledge or ways of seeing. The elements necessary are: diverse points of view and experience, a willingness to disclose different points of view and in a respectful way to ultimately choose some ideas rather than all ideas. In other words, choices will be made from a large group of ideas. Some participants will advocate ideas that won't make it to the final group but if people feel all ideas are important to share and have been heard, they won't hold back their thoughts for fear of being dismissed or marginalized.

Speaking up

My interest in that last sentence grew in the last couple of years when I began to notice the plethora of books on how conversations worked and the interest of one of my clients in helping everyone in the company learn to have 'robust dialogue.' Ultimately it led to a book co-authored with Andrea B. Mayfield called *The Thin Book of Naming Elephants: How to Surface Undiscussables for Greater Organizational Success*. As we researched the subject, we found that there was a common theme across the literature and in our clients' request. People asked us two questions, "How do I have the courage to speak up?" and "How do I say it?" Needing courage implies a climate of fear and retribution (or that the person is lacking in self confidence for some reason). We found ample evidence that people were being humiliated in

the course of conversations at work. Wondering how to say it implied a competency of how to voice an opinion or a wish that seemed contrary to the momentum or direction of the organization and to do so in a respectful way. It became clear to us that conversation is the work; especially conducting a conversation based on inquiry, not persuasion. Most people have a default that conversation is a zero-sum game of winning through persuasion versus learning something new through inquiry.

The Dynamics of Dream and Design

I have also observed these dynamics in the Dream and Design phase of an AI. While dot-voting may limit the choices of what to work on, the process doesn't allow for full dialogue about what does and doesn't get chosen. The "word-smithing" part of Design can also revert to conversation as persuasion. People don't always agree on the final language and can become disengaged because they don't want to push back. Yet, the best chance of achieving broad buy-in and implementation of the Design is a spirited, inclusive, robust dialogue.

Because an organization has limited resources, there will always be different and competing ideas about how to allocate those resources. In every Appreciative Inquiry, there are also more ideas of a preferred future than can be implemented in a given period of time. So there are conflicting and competing interests in how to choose and refine what the future will be and how it will be implemented.

A Good Fight

Therefore, in my experience, conflict is inherent in every organization and in every Appreciative Inquiry. However, conflict is too often seen as a destructive force. Clearly the way the organization manages and frames that conflict is key to it being a constructive rather than a destructive force. Much like Appreciative Inquiry searching for the best of the past, constructive conflict searches for the best ideas from different points of view. I don't know any way you can find innovative ideas unless you have a wide-ranging discussion and therefore conflicting opinions about what could be.

The problem is the deficit language. The root of the word discussion is concussion, symbolizing noise. Conflict is defined in the dictionary as a collision, a battle, a fight, a struggle, controversy, opposition and/or antagonism. Yet, the collision of two atoms creates the largest force of energy we know. A battle, fight or struggle can be invigorating if it leads to break-through ideas. Controversy can be the beginning of seeing something in a new way. Opposition can be invaluable if it causes a group to break out of group-think. Antagonism in a physiological sense can be beneficial as one muscle works against another to create a whole range of motion.

So while we categorize conflict as negative, it can easily be re-framed as a positive. For that reason Andrea and I call it constructive conflict or a 'good fight.' Reframing starts with personal intention. The intention must include a goal in common with others and authentic curiosity about how others see the world. Too often, the underlying intention results in a zero-sum game of winning and losing sides. If I convince you to my point, my choice of words, my priorities, I win. If not, I lose.

Defensive Routines and Company Politics

My original interest in conflict began with a client request for help in changing their culture so they could have robust dialogue. A large retail organization, they were trying to turn around their failing business through a new chairman. For many years they had been successful with a rigid and formal hierarchy. People did not disagree with someone who was a superior. They were also a classic example of an organization that developed what Chris Argyris calls defensive routines to make certain topics 'undiscussable.' The biggest undiscussable in their history was the need to change the buying (of products to sell) from very decentralized to completely centralized in order to get their expenses under control. Over their long history they even had two task forces study the topic without ever naming the topic! This combination of undiscussables and limited dialogue was almost terminal for the company.

The other challenge they had was implementation. Decisions were made and then people who didn't agree with the decisions worked around the edges to un-do the decisions. Large amounts of time were spent in what my colleague calls the meeting before the meeting, the meeting, and the meeting after the meeting, all in an attempt to manage the politics.

The intersection of a rigid hierarchy, undiscussables, rare innovation, and limited buy-in to decisions is the result of seeing conflict as a negative force to be avoided. Throw in some group-think for good measure and you had an organization about to go bankrupt, along with a lot of frustrated, disengaged employees. As an organizational behavior consultant, my first concern was where do we begin to change this deficit focused pattern?

Where to Begin?

Much to the dismay of my fellow AI practitioners, I began to talk about not starting with an Appreciative Inquiry. I found that to go to an Appreciative Inquiry directly in an organization such as the one described above was almost always going to be viewed as manipulative because an AI depends on all the participants feeling comfortable speaking up. Instead, I found that I had to begin to talk about how people talked in organizations, what they talked about and what they didn't talk about. The process certainly followed the underlying theory of AI, social construction, because the point of talking about how we talk is to uncover both the patterns that encourage open inquiry and dialogue and surfaces the fear that limits the openness needed to have the very conversations AI depends upon.

Once again, I found my way back to the early theories that the professors Argyris, Schein, Weick, et al taught us in Organizational Behavior 101. Surface the assumptions that people are relying on, find the defensive routines that keep certain topics being discussed, learn the difference between explicit and implicit communication and then find the best practices on open, inclusive dialogue.

Dancing with Elephants

In the midst of some AI listserv dialogue on this, Mac Odell shared his innovative integration of the concepts I was struggling with. Mac Odell, a long-time AI practitioner, has pioneered AI work in developing countries for over 20 years. When I sent him a copy of the Naming Elephants book, he immediately saw the connection and reported what he did some months

later. The secret, he said, was to name the elephants and then get the elephant to dance. In other words, recognize that undiscussables exist, find a way to talk about them and frame the conversation as a celebration.

I think Mac has it right. He demonstrated the both/and view and helped me see it in a new way. This is the pay-off for someone listening to another person's view; it almost always leads to an "ah-hah" moment.

Constructive Conflict

Positive conflict is possible through the way we approach it. AI shows us the way through the three human universals proposed by David Cooperrider: a need to have a voice and be heard; be seen as essential to the group; and be viewed as unique and exceptional. If we truly believe and practice these human universals, we hear a large number of voices with unique viewpoints. With some help people will find their words, their way and the courage to set out their viewpoint. If that process is managed constructively, we should be rewarded with innovation, creativity and enthusiastic participation. How is that not a positive result?

Competencies for Naming Elephants

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The "Naming Elephants" process is aimed at helping teams work better together and build a shared understanding of their commitment to transparency and mutual risk-taking. At the same time leaders have a tremendous impact on the abilities of the teams they lead to name elephants. They can open a discussion or they can close it down. Assessing the dialogue and judgement skills of the leader and the team members can complement an appreciative process. In the author's experience, leaders as well as teams must develop a set of competencies around Naming Elephants. She lists sample competencies and behaviours below.

To build a competency model, you first need to identify the main categories of competence, such as discernment, leadership, and risk-taking, and then refine the categories with examples of representative behaviour for each. You can turn them into a 360-degree feedback survey. The following are sample competencies and behaviours for naming elephants:

Discernment and Judgement

- Understands that multiple versions of reality exist, based on different experiences and backgrounds
- Identifies and questions assumptions of the team

- Pays attention to their gut as an important clue that something may be wrong

Leadership

- Challenges the status quo and welcomes the challenge from others
- Recognizes that a leader has the power to direct others beyond their intention and wields it wisely
- Creates a climate of trust and dialogue where people are open to new information and results

Risk Taker

- Acts decisively, while understanding the possibility that they could be wrong
- Limits advocacy until the decision has been made

Teamwork

- Is relentlessly ambitious for the organization and its welfare
- Solicits and values input and assistance from others
- Recognizes the importance of team learning and growth of skill, pursuing it on their own behalf and for others

Integrity

- Is committed to high moral standards and business ethics
- Continually strives to be honest, recognizing that that it is an ongoing exercise, not a stable state
- Is open to opposing points of view, indeed, encourages the playing of devil's advocate

Inner Strength

- Shows genuine appreciation for honest feedback
- Does not require a great deal of caution and tact when you communicate with them
- Is patient with people who don't immediately understand; their confusion may hold clues to the team's learning

Additionally, I recommend that open-ended, appreciative questions are used such as:

1. What behaviour are you most proud of in yourself in terms of naming elephants?
2. What do you most appreciate about this colleague in how they work in a team?
3. What useful contribution do they make to increasing the team's knowledge and ability to face difficult truths?
4. What do you most wish that this person would learn to do to support the team's goals?

Some words about 360-degree feedback: It is most often used to focus on individual results. If individual result are aggregated they can create a picture of the team's effectiveness assuming 360 results include quantitative ratings.

Increasingly, I find that some of my client organizations are using only open-ended questions and dropping numerical ratings altogether. While they lose the quantitative data, the richness and depth of the qualitative results more than makes up for it in payoff to the recipient and therefore to the organization as a whole.