**Focus of the Appreciative Inquiry**

This case study describes how Appreciative Inquiry was used to address a need for gender equity in an international direct-sales organization.

**Client Objectives**

Avon Mexico at the time of this project had about 3,000 employees with a sales force of 250,000 independent distributors. Although Avon is generally known as one of the best places for women to work, the parent division, Avon International in New York City, wanted to increase the number of women in senior management and executive positions across the company.

Avon Mexico was to be our starting place, and was to serve as a pilot project for the rest of the company. At the Avon Mexico headquarters in Mexico City when we began, there were no women on the executive committee and few female executives in general.

**What was done?**

The 4-D model formed the framework for the project: Definition, Discovery, Dream, and Destination.

We built our foundation for success by creating a deeper understanding of Appreciative Inquiry with the clients, and then working with a planning team – an internal/external team made up of internal opinion leaders who would help co-define the topics to be studied and be the guides for the external consulting team. We gained a shared understanding of the readiness for change and the methods that would be most appropriate for the site’s culture.

Together we planned the next step: a series of two-day workshops to introduce AI theory, practices and philosophy to people selected to be part of the learning team – those who would conduct the Discovery interviews. This group of 20 formal and informal opinion leaders from across functions and organizational levels was known as “The Pioneers.”

The Discovery phase began with a 2-day workshop for the Pioneers where they learned about AI, developed the first set of questions to be used in the interviews, practiced interviewing, and planned all the logistics for collecting the data (stories and examples).

We had several challenges in translating Appreciative Inquiry to the appropriate terminology in Spanish. There was concern about the word “inquiry” and some of the multiple meanings it suggested. There was, however, absolute clarity on what we were doing. The Pioneers group soon called AI the “philosophia” – they understood that AI is not merely a method or technique but a way of living and doing business. Provocative propositions were renamed possibility statements by the client since the translation of “provocative” has multiple meanings in Spanish as well.

One of the defining moments in our first workshop session was when the head of Human resources, Mr. Pedro Cervantes, stood up on the last day. He was wearing a red sweater. This dignified lawyer started moving around the room with his arms extended. “I am an airplane,” he said with appropriate noises. “One wing of the plane is problem solving and that wing is very strong. The other wing of my plane is Appreciative Inquiry. We have not built that wing to be strong. That is what we need to do at Avon Mexico.”

The final interview protocol focused on identifying instances of men and women working together effectively. Over the course of about 2000 interviews, these questions helped uncover many best practices and compelling stories that illuminated what it looks like and what it takes for men and women
to work well together at Avon Mexico. Out of the most illustrative stories, the planning team was able to construct models of excellence so that the ideal could come alive in people’s imagination.

Sometimes change was instantaneous. At a planning committee meeting the possibility statement that men and women should be represented at all levels of decision making was brought into question since no women were sitting on the executive committee. The President of the company, Fernando Le Zama said, on the spot, that women would be invited to attend all future executive committee meetings. The two most senior women began attending those meetings and within six months one of the women, Lucia Larado was named director of Sales and had a permanent seat on the Avon Mexico Executive Committee. Ms. Larado has since been named President of Avon Ecuador.

The Dream phase found us writing a report that summarized the key learnings, reinforced them with stories, and presented a range of possibilities for achieving gender equity as an effective way of working. The report showed that the ideal was already happening and how it might be possible to foster more of those extraordinary examples. It was used as input to the Future Conference or summit that occurred next.

Over 100 of the learning team members were invited to the summit to validate and flesh out a collective vision of a possible future and strategies to get there. The planning team also invited a group of Mexican university students to participate in conversations about the changing role of women in Mexico.

The group arrived at a joyous conclusion about what was possible: Men and women working together in teams. Clear and compelling steps forward came out of the summit such as insuring male and female co-chairmen for project teams. These conclusions were put into a second report for the Destination phase.

At this point an **internal advisory committee** was formed to move the recommendations into action. The committee continued (for four years at last check), and through their work the entire division has realized that appreciative inquiry is not a program. It is a process and a philosophy that creates real results. As the external team moved on, the people of Avon Mexico were able to use their new capacity in ways that eventually translated into real business performance.

**Outcomes**

Within six months the first female executive was appointed to the Executive Committee. Profit increased dramatically. The division and this project won The Catalyst award given each year to a company that has policies and practices that significantly benefit women in the company. AI fueled the Positive Core of Avon Mexico and that has continued and is sustained.

**What We Learned**

- You don’t have to use the words “Appreciative Inquiry.” The process itself is what matters. The appropriate way of talking about it emerges from the local lingo as understanding is reinforced with practice and results.
- Working in a second language can be surprisingly effective. The clarity and power of the communication was improved because we had to first educate the translators sufficiently about Appreciative Inquiry and in the sessions slow down our communication to allow for translation and. We used examples to illustrate key points, which also magnified the learning. Slowing down allowed us to go deeper, and we believe this was key to how the approach became so well embedded in the organization over a long period of time.
- Another key factor to sustainability was the involvement of the chief executive officer at Avon Mexico. His authentic sponsorship of the project assured longevity in spite of the short-term pressures that all corporations experience as a fact of life.
- As to the spread of AI into the rest of Avon International, we faced some insurmountable language barriers at the time. Our sponsor/client at Avon International, who has since left the company, later reflected that if she could have done one thing over it would have been to launch three projects in
three different parts of the world, to give the magic that happened at Avon Mexico a chance to catch fire in several locations simultaneously.

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