

Voices From The Field

My lessons learned as AI-facilitator

Heike Aiello, May 20th, 2016

The theory of Appreciative Inquiry has been made very accessible in the past years, there are countless books, case studies, films and websites. The challenge lies in the translation of the ideas into practice. AI comes to life in conversation and interaction. A central figure in these relational processes is the AI facilitator, who is an omnipotent figure, really: radiating hope and trust, shining like a beacon, while non-judgemental and unobtrusive like a fly on the wall. Warm, welcoming, result-oriented and 'AI-authentic' to the core. When conflicts arise, all eyes are on the AI-facilitator - how will she exhibit appreciation, when under pressure? Far from being a perfect AI facilitator myself, I would like to share five lessons I have embraced through the years:

1. Practice what you preach

An AI facilitator is only credible when she lives and acts out appreciation not only to others, but also to herself. People will not remember what you said, they will remember your energy, how you are, your choices under pressure. An appreciative mindset goes further than just using the AI-tools, it should have become a core-value that is reflected in personal habits and choices. Let AI sink into your personality. What do you appreciate about yourself as a facilitator? For what do you receive compliments?

Lesson 1: Keep developing an appreciative mindset in your professional and private life.

2. Affirmative topics need time

What is the question behind the question? I have learned to never underestimate this stage and always make sure to give it enough time. If the first stones of the foundation are not set properly, the entire building will not stand strong. What is the question the group *really* needs to answer? What is the essence of what they *really* desire? Often, such a clarification process is not straightforward. Discussions arise, frustration sets in. It is tempting to rush and cut this important phase short, as participants might 'want to get going', or find it 'good enough'. However, the satisfaction of a group that succeeds in crafting a truly relevant core-question is a great reward. In addition, the facilitator has led the group through their first mini-AI-process, which will pay off in the process that follows.

Lesson 2: Take enough time for the wording of the 'question behind the question'.

3. Balancing result and process

Regularly I hear from participants that 'time flew by'. Elements of appreciative inquiry, like generative questions and analysing successes, release energy. It is an art to create a feeling of space, a secure setting that allows emotions, a supportive atmosphere to foster creativity, on the one hand, while keeping an eye on the results and structure on the other hand. You want to facilitate a balanced process of inclusion, where the voice of each one is heard *and* where a concrete output is realised.

Lesson 3: Invest time to design and shape a balanced program that lets the AI principles come to life.

4. A space that reflects the nature of AI

A pleasant environment contributes to good conversations. This is also a sign of appreciation for the participants. Choose a space that helps them relax, with enough water, healthy snacks, air and light. Music can play a fine role in contributing to an atmosphere of comfort and inspiration. You want to create a day that stands out and feeds positive emotions.

Lesson 5: Pay attention to the facilities and space. This supports the well-being of the group.

5. Focus on contact before content

Before the actual AI process begins, it is important to enable the participants to get to know each other, the programme and the environment. Participants who feel at ease are more likely to engage in open conversations. I have created a repertoire of active, fun, interactive exercises to open a meeting.

Lesson 5: Pay close attention to introduction and contact before engaging in content.

These are a few of my personal lessons. There are many more, maybe this article triggers you to reflect on what AI has taught you?