A three days Appreciative Inquiry into leadership

Quote from the client:
"It was a very inspiring workshop, I'm proud to be a part of this team!"

Developing Appreciative Leadership Skills
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Fighting Turmoil
Last year I've successfully worked with a management team of a Human Resource Management (HRM) department of a large city. One day, the manager of the team sent me an email asking if I am willing to facilitate a new, 3-day event. I checked my agenda and after blocking the dates I make an appointment with her.

As with all local authorities, a variety of changing demands are going on. The HRM department plays an important role in handling all changes and reorganizations taking place. Professionals involved focus on getting the job done and solving problems. They're in an action-reaction mode. In the midst of all this turmoil, the management team feels an urge to support their workers to look towards the future on a more future oriented basis. The management team decided to develop their appreciative leadership skills.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) isn't new for this team. I've worked with them before in an appreciative way on teamwork. Also, AI is one of the pillars of organization development within this city. Characteristic for AI is to inquire into what will work best for a team or organization (Discover). Then, you imagine a preferred future (Dream), design the best possible conditions for making the dream come true (Design) and move into action (Deliver). Looking at the best an individual, team or organization has to offer is a deliberate choice, instead of focusing on deficits and problems. The result is always more confidence, openness and trust in relationships.

When we met she asks me: "*Can you help us improve our appreciative leadership skills? The outcomes I envisage are: a more collaborative climate, improvement of internal communications. We need a rise in trust and more positive energy between the team members.*" The manager of the department wants to participate fully in the inquiry process, implying she doesn't want to lead the meeting herself.
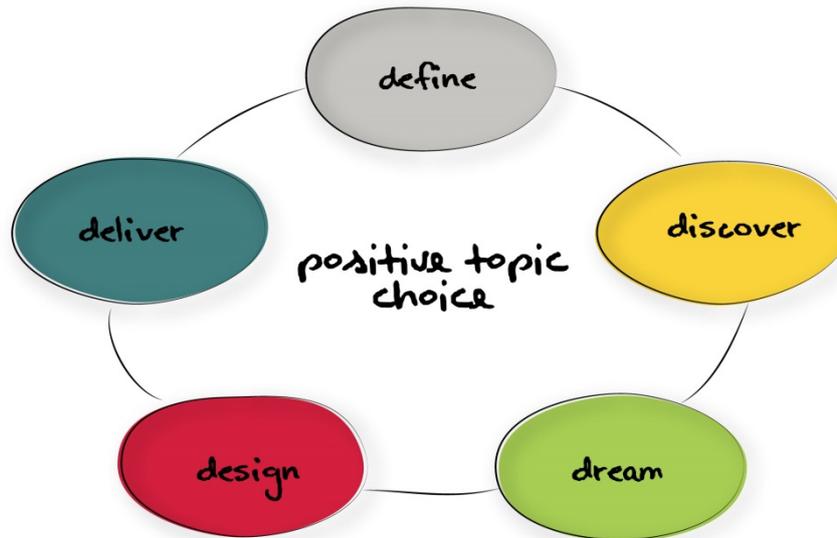
Taking time and space

Together with the manager and the internal AI-consultant I develop an inspiring three days program. This will take the team members on each successive day deeper into their leadership habits and skills. With enough time to share experiences and develop new insights based on the feedback they provide each other. We will work off-site in a very characteristic villa, that is exclusively at our use during these three days. Prior to the event, the team members, 13 in total, prepare for the workshop by doing some reading. They fill in a test about individual drives and thinking about their goals. Then they're ready for take-off!

On the first day we start with the inquiry process going through the first two steps of the AI-cycle: Discover and Dream. Firstly, they share stories about their experience with successful leadership. From these stories they extract the factors that have made leadership successful in the past. The main success factors that their stories reveal are giving and receiving trust, supporting talents of co-workers, being open and approachable for colleagues, and a shared focus and strong connections.

Secondly, they develop a shared vision on future leadership: who do they want to be in 2 years' time? I ask them to share their future images in small groups and then produce a shared drawing as a group. The groups produce vivid images which they present to their colleagues. They invoke laughter, fun and surprise. We end the day discussing commonalities and differences in the future images they've produced.

The next day is feedback time. They comment on their individual profiles to enhance understanding of their talents, commonalities and differences within the management team. This is an exciting exercise for them, because they don't know what feedback they will get from their colleagues. Every individual profile is put up on the wall to receive feedback from colleagues. Subsequently, team members collect

their feedback and discuss their profiles plus feedback in small groups. After the group discussions I present the team profile to the attendees, which shows the strengths of the team as well of its opportunities for growth. During the day the team members discuss how they'll put their strengths into practice and how to cope with deviancy from group behavior. I see the depth of their conversations increase when they start asking each other penetrating questions, and starting discussions about topics they've not mentioned before. During the second day I feel the atmosphere becoming more open, intimate, and respectful towards each other.

Giving and receiving feedback appreciatively
The third day differs greatly from the first two. The team members develop their skills on appreciative communication, to complement their task oriented conversations. In groups of 3-4 persons they role-play real live situations, practicing until they attain their goal in the communication. Asking questions, being appreciative in a consistent manner and explaining intentions behind their questions, expands their already available skills.

Giving appreciative feedback to each other. We write Post-It notes with Tops and Tips and then discuss all feedback given to each other. The participants become more open to each other and share thoughts that they normally don't share easily.

These skills are at the heart of appreciative leadership: to keep inquiring into the relationship in order to find shared meaning and to coordinate shared actions. We end the day with an evaluation of the three days. Examples of comments they wrote are: energy, warmth, atmosphere, learned a lot, provocative but fun, we're improving, positive approach to give each other personal feedback. At the end each team member formulates an action item to put into practice after he or she got back to work.

Staying appreciative
I stimulate their learning by creating an atmosphere of trust and being appreciative. Also, by being a role model, team members not only talk about appreciative leadership, they sense it in the language, questions and interactions of the facilitator. Trusting the process took the team members into a deeper learning process where they become aware of thinking patterns, communication habits and implicit group norms. In this lies the opportunity of changing their leadership skills which they had often taken for granted.