

**Robbert Masselink**

Robbert is a management consultant, facilitator and trainer. He helps teams and individuals to collaborate effectively on organizational development issues. He (co-)authored three Dutch books on Appreciative Inquiry. Contact: [robbert@keynoteconsultancy.nl](mailto:robbert@keynoteconsultancy.nl)



# Reflecting on a Summit as a High-Relational Practice

*In the autumn of 2015, a large-scale AI conference was held in a mental health institution in the Netherlands. Its aim was to inquire into the topic of addiction recovery. One hundred and fifty people gathered consisting of (ex-) patients, addiction recovery experts, psychiatrists, therapists, managers, staff personnel and people from other institutions. It turned out to be a beautiful conference, and afterwards, in the evening, all the participants joined the party where they, and many of their colleagues, celebrated the 25th birthday of their organization.*

## How the conference developed

The participants arrived at the residential site just before noon, in time for lunch. Afterwards, the CEO opened the conference with a personal and heart-felt welcome. The participants interviewed each other on the central topic. At first people had to find their place at the tables, but when they began the dialogue with each other you could feel the energy changing. It was a thrill to see how everybody started asking questions, telling stories about how they had dealt with difficult situations in their personal lives, emerging stronger than before. What happened as a result of this kind of questioning was that functional boundaries fell away as people started talking to each other as human beings, instead of as functionaries. For some of the participants this was tough; they had not considered that these questions would be answered from a personal point of view, only from a functional one. But when they did, it changed the quality of the conversation and of the relationship they had with the colleague or a patient. During the Discovery phase the relationships as well as the contents of the conversations were altered and this had a definite impact on the emergence of new possibilities.

In the second phase of the conference the participants introduced each other by exchanging stories about situations when they had shown resilience and courage in difficult situations. Mostly, these stories showed great admiration for the sometimes very difficult situations in which participants had found themselves, and nevertheless had recovered successfully from. People recognized their common humanity in each other's stories and this changed their mutual relationships as well as their view of the identities they had held of each other.

*They created vivid images of the future in which they positioned themselves as a part of their preferred future.*



During the final phase of the conference the participants dreamed of a future in which all of the elements that contributed successfully to addiction recovery were commonplace. They created vivid images of the future in which they positioned themselves as a part of their preferred future. The participants were supported by professional illustrators, who made their sketches come alive, as you can see in the illustrations which accompany this article. The groups from each table presented their future images to the whole group in a creative way and added their stories about what they saw happening in the near future. When all was said and done, the CEO thanked all the participants for their contributions, concluding by saying that within a couple of months the inquiry process would be continued with next steps.

### Appreciative questions asked

1. With our policy on recovery addiction we offer our clients the support to rebuild a meaningful life. Do you recognize that after a difficult period, when you did not feel well and when you were feeling vulnerable, you were able to find new meaning in your life? Can you tell me a story about that?
2. I'm curious if there was a moment in your life when you did something that you were afraid to do, but you did it anyway? A moment where you showed the guts to do something and that made you stronger? Can you tell me about that moment?

### Offering a window for reflection

As the main facilitator, I wonder what it was that made the conference go so well. I remember that before we started we – the facilitators and organizers – felt nervous; it was a critical group of people. Improving addiction recovery within this institution had begun three years earlier, and after some major changes and initiatives, the development process had slowed down in the

*A relational practice perspective on AI turns our attention from the cognitive content towards the relational aspects*

eyes of management. This conference – and the ones that were to follow – was regarded as a revitalizing event. What we had heard was that groups of participants saw the conference as an offense because they were still working very hard on improving addiction recovery. The CEO and his fellow managers were uneasy about the attitudes with which the participants would enter the conference. But the conference succeeded above expectations. So, what were the main factors that contributed to its success?

Rene Bouwen and others have written extensively on what constitutes a “relational practice”. This can help us gain understanding about some of the elements that make AI work. A relational practice perspective on AI turns our attention from the cognitive content towards the relational aspects of the conference: i.e., how people are doing “things” together and with each other, who is included or excluded, and how this is done. The quality of the interaction gives an indication of “what really works” in ongoing interactions for change. Bouwen regards a relational practice as any communicative or task-oriented interaction that is characterized by a certain quality of interacting between at least two actors. Examples would be: an event to start a project, a management team meeting, a group training session, a large group summit, a joint field visit, an occasional meeting between coworkers and/or supervisors or any moment of “joint acting”.

To characterize the quality of the conference as a relational practice, one can look for the following concrete and observable qualities:



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1. Reciprocity in relationship
2. Joint “authorship” and “co-ownership”
3. “Talking with” instead of “talking to”
4. Mutually open and illustrated communication, the possibility of mutual testing and contradicting
5. Mutually energizing conversations through joint appreciation, active engagement and the continuing possibility of being authentically present with others
6. Mutually appreciative inquiring
7. Joint reflection on the here-and-now group interaction and relationships that are developing
8. Dialoguing that offers the possibility of “frame-breaking”

### **Reflecting on the conference**

What I saw happening at the conference was a wide variety of people gathering in order to discuss a topic that mattered to them, an opportunity they wouldn't normally have. Their everyday discussions were always temporal, local and solutions-focused. By sharing their personal experiences, the topic gained subjectivity. It was no longer about a topic there-and-then but a topic that was alive in the here-and-now. It mattered personally, and how it did so was what was talked about. Because people spoke from their personal experiences, their stories could never be denied by anyone. They were real and as people expressed their individual realities through their stories they discovered what connected them. This created a “we” identity.

Participants also found out that every story counted. People were not judged by others on the validity of their stories but appreciated for their contribution to the conference. For many participants it seemed an opportunity to really be heard by others, an affirmation and an inclusion of their concerns, expectations and desires into the whole of the organization. If there were any



*Experiences and stories could contradict each other, and still be accepted as valid.*



feelings of anger, disappointment, shame or guilt, as we had expected, they were sometimes expressed but more often replaced by feelings and emotions such as pride, happiness, self-esteem and connectedness. They were creating shared meaning based on what they had in common instead of what separated them. They experienced ability during the conference to create a common story and a shared ambition. And the images they designed of their future evoked joy, enthusiasm and laughter amongst the participants.

Many of the factors that contribute to high relational practice were visible during the conference, including advancing reciprocity and equality amongst the participants, concrete conversations that were based on personal experiences, co-creating a common and shared reality by means of conversations that were energetic and alive. Participants were talking with instead of about each other. Experiences and stories could contradict each other, and still be accepted as valid. There was real inquiry going on as well as joint reflection on what was created during the exchange of stories and future expectations of each other. The conference strengthened some mutual relationships, renewed others and established new ones. From a relational point of view this shows what is actually going on in the communications and interactions that take place during an AI event, and can explain the effects we see so often when we put AI into practice.

### **An urge to embed high relational practice**

The AI case that I've just described is one of the many conferences that I have facilitated during the years. I always feel grateful for having the opportunity to be part of these special occasions. But it also makes me realize that, most of the time, these people do not have these kinds of experiences inside their organizations. What they experience is the opposite; it is the background

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which sets the AI event off as such a remarkably positive and memorable experience. In daily practice people often work in environments which display a lack of value and meaning, where they are silenced – or they silence themselves. Where they experience feelings of shame, guilt, frustration, separateness, boredom or powerlessness, probably based on the fear of being excluded or judged by others. Or where they do not feel themselves to be part of a larger and meaningful whole.

If this is the background by which participants appraise the AI meetings they attend, we have to consider the question of how we embed and sustain relational practices in the daily operations of organizations in a way that eliminates the discrepancy between off-site events and normal day-to-day operations. This would propagate a more “political” stance for AI practitioners, in which they not only facilitate AI events, but aim for a higher purpose: to show the intention and commitment to contribute to more sustainable organizations in which the human side of business – creating high relational practices – becomes primary instead of secondary. This mirrors an ethical responsibility to raise the bar considerably from the realization that sticking to straightforward AI facilitation might result in an unwanted contribution to continuation of a situation that is exactly opposite to what people desire in their normal day interactions with each other.

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