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Cases and Applications

Toward the Creation of a Positive Institution

St Peter's College, Adelaide, Australia

ABSTRACT

St Peter's College, Adelaide, Australia, held an AI summit to elicit feedback from all 151 staff on the school's draft strategic plan and mission to provide 'exceptional education that brings out the best in every boy.' The AI summit was evaluated by school staff and self-organised groups.

In the foundational paper introducing the field of positive psychology, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) called for the promotion of 'positive institutions' which they defined as 'institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship, responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance and work ethic.'

Today, it is critical for a well-functioning society that schools meet the ideal of a positive institution. As such, Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich and Linkins (2009), Yates (2007) and Waters (2011) have called for schools to give the same priority to character development and social-emotional learning as to the traditional academic agendas. We show first-hand how the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) summit methodology is a process that allows a school to gain a clearer idea of its positive core so that it is able to tap into its citizenship, responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance and work ethic.

Recent educational research suggests two important dimensions that must be incorporated into school-based change:

1. A more collaborative approach to change
2. A more positive approach to change (Fullan, 2002; Harris and Lambert, 2000)

Hoy and Tarter (2011) have called for the use of approaches that bring a 'more sophisticated understanding of the good things about schools.' Purkey and



St Peter's College, Adelaide, adopted AI to assist it provide 'An exceptional education that brings out the best in every boy.'



Novak (2008) urge school leaders to 'make school a more exciting, satisfying and enriching experience for everyone – all students, all staff and all visitors.' These two change dimensions are consistent with AI's constructionist principle and positive principle, suggesting that the AI summit would be a beneficial change methodology to use in schools.

St Peter's College, Adelaide, adopted AI to assist it to meet the school's mission and provide 'An exceptional education that brings out the best in every boy.' After briefly describing our first ever whole-staff Appreciative Inquiry summit, conducted in October, 2011, we outline the evaluation results of our process.

Our case study: St Peter's College, Adelaide, Australia

St Peter's College was established in 1847. The school covers early learning (from the age of 3 years) through to 12th grade (students aged 18) and has 1,239 students. The culture of this non-selective school is aligned to its Episcopalian values of unlocking individual strengths and virtues, fostering wellbeing, building lifelong engagement and commitment to service and social justice. The school has a tradition of excellence with three Nobel Laureates, 42 Rhodes Scholars and leaders found at all levels of government and in every profession. Following Mr. Simon Murray's appointment as the new headmaster in 2010, St Peter's College entered a new phase of cultural change.

In 2010, the senior leadership team (SLT), in consultation with the council of governors, created a draft strategic plan to establish St Peter's College's new direction. Six strategic goals were set in the following areas: academic performance, well-being, co-curricular activities, culture, infrastructure and financial sustainability. The SLT was committed to a change approach that was positive and collaborative and, hence, wanted to include ideas and feedback from all staff in finding ways to enable the school to achieve these goals. Thus the AI summit methodology seemed like an ideal fit for our goals.

The sense of unification, goodwill and pride at the end of the day was palpable.

We hosted a one-day AI summit to elicit feedback on the draft strategic plan. All 151 school employees participated. This was the first occasion in the school's history where employees across all job classifications met to provide their ideas and opinions on the school's future. As Appreciative Inquiry is a new approach at St Peter's College, many staff were a little nervous and uncertain of the day that lay ahead. Some staff, having a belief that decision making was the role of senior leaders, felt unsure of their capacity to contribute to this decision making approach. However, there was also a feeling of interest and excitement as staff joined their AI teams at their tables and began to earnestly collaborate and generate new ideas.

Unification, good-will and pride

As the day progressed, the AI facilitators (the leadership team of the school had been trained as AI facilitators by an external consultant) also observed that there was a lot of laughter within each AI staff team and friendly inter-team rivalry about the ideas that were being generated. Many staff actively commented to the AI facilitators during the day about how beneficial and enjoyable the process was. The sense of unification, goodwill and pride at the end of the day was palpable.

The summit design followed the 4-D cycle and presented six overarching dialogue questions that were designed to tap into the simultaneity, the poetic and the positive principles.

- What are we most proud of at St Peter's College? (Discovery)
- What are our greatest strengths? (Discovery)
- What do we deeply care about at St Peter's College? (Discovery/ Dream)
- What are our most exciting opportunities at St Peter's College? (Dream)
- What would success look like for boys, staff and parents? (Design)
- How would we know that we are succeeding? (Delivery)

The constructionist, poetic and anticipatory principles were built into the design of the day, whereby staff were assigned into teams and asked to respond to the six questions above which provided positive images of the school's past, present and future. Teams were balanced for gender, sub-school and staff classification. The responses of each team were typed up by administrative staff following the summit. Over 20,000 words were recorded about the strengths of the school and the new plan. Results were synthesised by the three authors together with the school's HR manager. The results were fed back by the Headmaster and Lea Waters at a 90-minute all-staff meeting. On the days following the feedback session, many favourable and endorsing comments were offered by staff to the senior leadership team members as they walked around the college campus.

Evaluating the impact of AI at St Peter's College

After learning about AI, the SLT felt that it was well-aligned with the new strategic plan to ensure that every boy flourishes and to enable St Peter's College to be an evidence-based, positive institution. The leadership team felt that AI, if successful in this first summit application, might be used as an ongoing

approach at St Peter's College. In order to determine the validity of using AI as an ongoing technique with the staff, the SLT decided to evaluate the effectiveness of the AI summit on two levels: 1) staff reactions to AI as a change technique and 2) whether tangible change occurred within the school as a result of the AI day. In order to capture data on the first criteria, staff members were given a brief survey at the conclusion of the summit that asked them to provide their opinion about the use of AI as a change technique. The qualitative data was analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss, Corbin, Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

Evaluation 1 - Is the AI summit a change management tool that is suited to St Peter's College?

Qualitative analysis revealed that staff felt the AI summit was a useful approach and, by tapping into the positive core of the school and their colleagues, staff felt uplifted and optimistic about the school's new strategic agenda. Analysis identified six key themes:

- Valuing the collaboration process
- Learning from colleagues
- Appreciating one's colleagues
- Connecting with staff around shared values
- Feeling energised and passionate
- Having a clearer vision of the school's future direction

Table 1: Example comments for each of the six themes, aligned with the five AI principles

Theme	Example comments
One: Valuing the collaboration process <i>AI principle: constructionist principle</i>	'How staff participated in the all the discussions – took it seriously, felt valued' 'Excellent opportunity for discussions with staff from other faculties and areas of school' 'Hearing the voice of staff and being given the opportunity to share' 'That the whole school was included in this PD Day'
Two: Learning from colleagues <i>AI principle: constructionist principle</i>	'Enjoyed hearing others thoughts and opinions' 'Talking with colleagues and hearing their impressions of Saints' 'Sharing ideas of others and listening to others' 'Being able to talk to colleagues I wouldn't necessarily do otherwise'
Three: Appreciating the people you work with <i>AI principle: positive principle</i>	'To discover how many members of staff have such extensive experience at Saints' 'The creativity and talent of our staff' 'How warm our staff are' 'Confirmation that people do generally care – its not just a job'
Four: connecting with staff around shared values. <i>AI principle: poetic principle</i>	'So many common threads. There seems to be a real sense of purpose which is shared' 'Everyone has the same passion and objectives' 'That other staff members have the same thoughts and ideals about the wellbeing of boys and staff. We are united' 'I was pleasantly surprised by the commonality of ideas'

Tangible evidence of change has been present at St Peter's College as a result of our AI process.

Theme	Example comments
Five: Feeling energised and passionate. <i>AI principle: positive and simultaneity principles</i>	'The enthusiasm with which all the tasks set for groups was tackled. That staff are more united in their vision for the school than expected' 'Keen interest of staff in making this school better. How much passion and pride was extracted from staff over the course of the day' 'The high levels of engagement of so many' 'The energy and engagement of staff'
Six: Having a clearer vision of the school's future direction. <i>AI principle: anticipatory principle</i>	'The investment being made in helping us understand and be a part of the direction of the school both now and in the future' 'That all staff are now aware and involved in the school's vision – we all know what we are aiming for' 'Hearing strategic goals allowed me to understand our focus for the next three years' 'Sense of purpose and clarification of goals'

Evaluation 2: Did the AI summit create change at St Peter's College?

In the months since the summit, tangible evidence of change has been present at St Peter's College as a result of our AI process. Specifically, we have seen the simultaneity principle in action across the school as a number of self-organised groups and outcomes quickly emerged including:

- A voluntary positive psychology interest group of 70 members with representation from teaching, support and grounds staff.
- Requests for further professional development from middle managers in the 4-D process.
- The 4-D model being adopted to operationalize the new strategic plan.
- The formation of a middle management consultation group.
- The inclusion of positive psychology and character strengths into the English curriculum in the eighth and twelfth grades.
- Three peer-reviewed papers written by staff and submitted to positive psychology conferences from the English department, Religious Education department and positive sports coaching.
- Increased staff commitment to the strategic plan.
- Staff referring to the new strategic plan when framing management requests.

Conclusions and Reflections

Responding to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) call for positive institutions, St Peter's College has a mission to provide an exceptional education that brings out the best in every boy.

Following the positive evaluation of the AI summit methodology at St Peter's College, we will be using this approach more frequently in engaging all staff in the operationalization of the strategic plan, thus creating an increasing sense of macro-management and embracing the constructionist principle more fully

at the school. More specifically, the AI method will be used throughout the organisation to co-create key performance indicators against the six strategic goals. In addition, there are plans to introduce the 4-D model as a method to complement the performance appraisal processes, for strategic planning in meetings, in designing curriculum and in working directly with students.

We have found the AI summit to be an effective and engaging way to create change in our school. Careful planning went into the design of our use of AI at a macro-level and we believe that the success of this whole-school AI summit was contributed to by the design of the teams so that staff mixed with people across different areas of the school (e.g., a team might include staff from grounds and maintenance together with IT staff, catering staff, teachers and middle managers). Another success factor was the AI training provided to the senior leadership team prior to the summit so that the school leaders could assist AI staff teams by asking appreciative questions and allowing time for the staff to generate ideas.

Finally, the AI summit was run at a date in the school calendar where staff would be receptive and not overwhelmed with academic pressures and end of year reports.

As other school leaders consider the use of AI in shaping their own school's future, we encourage you to be well prepared and have trust that this process will unlock a positive core and showcase the rich reserve of human resources available in your organization.

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