

# **From Cutbacks and Low Morale to Long Term Cultural Change: Multiple Summits for the Human Resources Community in the Canadian Department of National Defence**

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Many people wonder if Appreciative Inquiry can be used successfully in times of economic and organizational constraints. Those of us who have been working with AI for some time have come to understand that such moments represent times when Appreciative Inquiry, as a philosophy and a process really shines. Consider the following story.

In the fall of 1999 Monique Boudrias, Assistant Deputy Minister/HR-Civilian became determined to do something of substance, to create a positive and sustainable change in her organization – but she found herself in a box – a box of circumstance and organizational tradition. During the early and mid 1990's, the size of the Human Resources community at the Department of National Defence (DND) was cut back by 45% to about 500 employees. Workload stayed essentially the same. Turnover shot up and morale plummeted. Civilian and Military clients that were receiving HR services from civilian employees increasingly complained about a lack of congruency in advice received and a lack of collaboration across the specialty areas in service delivery. Civilian HR advisors reported to a civilian leader, military personnel reported through their own

chain of command. Structural integration was not seen as possible.

But there was also good news. Robert Legris, (Monique's seasoned director of Organization Development) saw in this difficult situation an opportunity to initiate a large scale cultural change and he knew enough about Appreciative Inquiry to imagine the possibilities. Within weeks he had arranged a visit between two of his most senior OD consultants and Bernard Mohr. That two day mid-October visit outlined a strategy that began with bringing together a representative 15 person planning group – which, over three days identified topics for an inquiry, created a customized interview guide, identified key stakeholders and developed the outline for a 300 person three day Summit – a meeting which was to radically shift the organization's experience of change while creating significant progress towards the goal that the planning group had identified "Service Without Boundaries: An invitation to excellence

Within 90 days Madame Boudrias welcomed some 300 participants – including civilian HR Advisors , their clients, union leaders and other key stakeholders – to DND's first large scale planning and redesign event. During the

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next three days everyone in attendance engaged in paired interviews, story telling and identification of the community’s positive core – its strengths, hopes and opportunities. From that energizing “data base” they created skits songs and provocative propositions which expressed their dreams for what they could become if their strengths were expanded to address the opportunities which had been identified and if their hopes became realities. Before the summit ended, attention was turned to all the ways that their work practices, systems and structures might be modified to bring their dream to life.

During the following year hundreds of small and large changes were implemented – as with all change processes, some worked better than planned, some fizzled out. A formal evaluation of the change was deemed to be desirable as a prelude to determining how to move forward. The initial experience with the AI Summit method had been so positive that the decision was made to do the evaluation from an appreciative perspective and to use another Summit as the method.

Instead of being paralyzed by the small number of change projects from the first summit that had fizzled, a decision was made to learn from the best successes of the past year. Another group of employees (10% overlap with the first) were invited to the evaluation summit – which used the same primary topic as a year earlier “*Service Without Boundaries*” but added the provocative subtitle “*Leading the Journey*” . This summit, one year after the first late (again three days) focused on the immediate past year of the change process, asking “what have we achieved? Why? and how can we build on that?” .

The participants for this second summit arrived having each conducted five

interviews among colleagues and clients – to ascertain what was working in their change process. The meeting began with the posting of 300 success stories! Two days later, an updated vision had been created and a revised action strategy, informed by the learning from the past year was developed and embraced by all.

In closing this second Monique Boudrias shared her reflection that the organization had achieved not just short term gains of significance, but more importantly it had changed relationships and peoples ways of thinking about change. This more than anything continues to be at the core of DND’s journey into the future. DND now uses the Appreciative Inquiry philosophy as the orientation for all of their OD work, for executive teambuilding, for leadership development and for operational improvement. Some of these AI applications are described below:

1. In 2003, an inquiry was held into service quality and standards as well as methods to improve service quality. For this inquiry, all 800 of the HR staff were involved.
2. Appreciative Inquiry has been used to restructure entire branches as well as the creation of a completely new corporate branch that will manage the technical infrastructure of the department as a whole.
3. In order to solve recruitment and retention of staff problems, Appreciative Inquiry is used to design innovative and successful programs and to actually conduct the selection (i.e. interview) process.
4. The internal OD group is using Appreciative Inquiry in their work with military clients around large-scale culture change initiatives.

5. All the DND OD consultants are AI trained as well as all are the DND course developers (so AI concepts are being used throughout our network of learning centers across Canada)
6. When DND hires outside consultants to help out in OD interventions, they insist that the external consultants be trained in AI.

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