

## APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY BUILDS CAPABILITY

MARCH 2009

*Findings from an evaluation of 25 projects that used the appreciative inquiry methodology, and were managed by Reframing the Future and funded through the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations in 2008*

DR JOHN MITCHELL SUZY MCKENNA CHERYL BALD



Developing Australia's VET workforce to  
implement the national training system



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**Australian Government**

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**Department of Education, Employment  
and Workplace Relations**

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Appreciative inquiry builds capability

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**Appreciative inquiry (AI)** is a methodology for influencing change that concentrates on the positives, not the deficits, within a group or organisation. It revolves around asking positive questions about existing strengths (discovery stage), possible futures (dream stage), improved designs (design stage) and preferred pathways going forward (destiny stage).

This summary report shows that AI can have a strong, positive impact on the capability of individual vocational education and training (VET) practitioner and the capacity of VET organisations in implementing the national training system. The report's title 'Appreciative Inquiry Builds Capability' draws attention to the way AI can assist practitioners to improve capabilities such as developing closer engagement with industry, improving relationships with separate enterprises, contributing to continuous improvement practices and refining workplace training and assessment strategies.

### Focus of evaluation

The report presents findings from 25 projects that were funded to use AI in the VET sector in Australia in 2008, as part of the Reframing the Future program.

### Reframing the Future

Reframing the Future is the national vocational education and training (VET) staff development and change management program. It is funded through the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), and is designed to support the implementation of a high quality, industry-led, demand-driven training system. Nearly 220 projects were funded in 2008.

Project teams are provided with extensive advice and mentoring support on issues such as how to develop their action plans, how to use their chosen methodology most effectively and how to evaluate their project's progress.

### Evaluation methods

The findings in this report are organised in five chapters following an overview chapter of the AI methodology and the 25 projects: main achievements of the projects (based on project convenors' responses to four questions in their final project reports tabled in late 2008 or early 2009); innovative uses of the AI methodology (two questions); effective facilitation strategies (four questions); outcomes for practice and change (three questions); and critical success factors for the AI methodology (two questions). Selected responses to these questions are presented briefly throughout chapters 2-6.

### Major findings

The major findings from this study are as follows:

- The projects achieved a great deal. Each project was required to nominate a priority area (from a choice of seven), and their achievements mapped well to the chosen priorities. These achievements included increased staff commitment to good practice and continuous improvement, stronger networks and alliances, cultural change, building sustainable development models, closer engagement with employers, and development and trialling of new tools and techniques. Additionally, projects achieved a range of practical outcomes. The AI methodology was frequently cited as instrumental in reaching these achievements and outcomes.
- The AI methodology is clearly well suited to dynamic environments, where professional practice must keep changing, personal and professional development are vital, and effective change management strategies are needed to maintain organisational viability.

- Even though the methodology was new and unfamiliar to most participants, the projects found innovative and imaginative ways to apply it. They were positive about its strengths and the advantages it offered over alternative methodologies, particularly those with a deficit focus.
- Different strategies were employed not just across the projects but also according to the project stage. Keeping processes and messages simple, working in small groups, and not being carried away by the open and inclusive nature of the methodology – of maintaining a focus on the practical – were all stressed by various project leaders.
- Several critical success factors for AI recurred through the project reports, including the need for careful planning and extended timeframes; the value of senior management input or participation; the need to keep language and processes user-friendly; and the importance of a skilled facilitator, preferably external to the lead organisation. The AI methodology was seen by most projects as contributing significantly to their success.

## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used throughout this report:

AI	Appreciative inquiry
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
AQTF	Australian Quality Training Framework
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
RPL	Recognition of prior learning
RTO	Registered training organisation
TAFE	Technical and further education
VET	Vocational education and training

This chapter briefly summarises appreciative inquiry (AI) as a methodology and the aims of the 2008 projects. It also provides summary details of the 25 AI projects.

### Key points

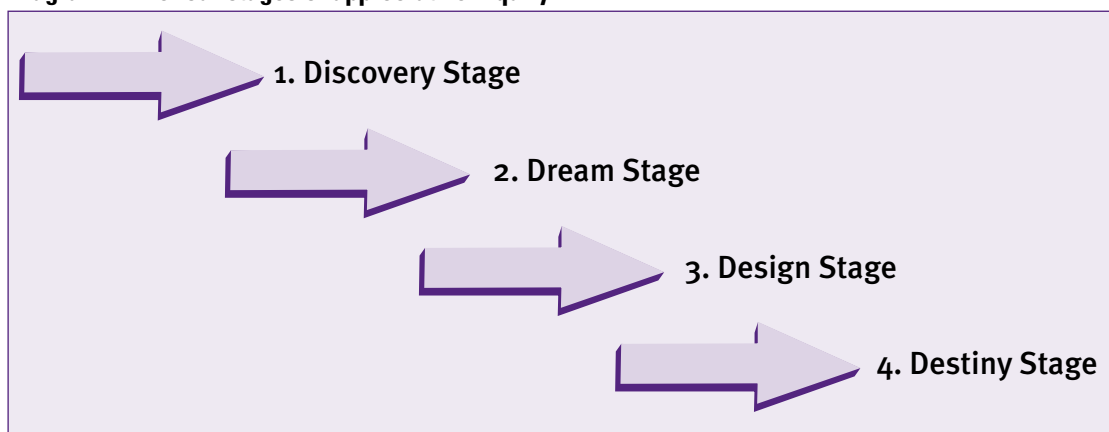
- AI is a methodology that is demonstrating its value in a range of contexts across the world. It focuses on strengths rather than deficits.
- Despite its comparative novelty, a substantial number of Reframing the Future applicants chose it as their preferred methodology in 2008. 25 AI projects were funded.
- The AI projects were distributed fairly evenly across State/Territory jurisdictions and the seven Reframing the Future priority areas.

### Definition of AI

Appreciative inquiry is a methodology for influencing change that concentrates on the positives, not the deficits, within a group or organisation. It revolves around asking positive questions about:

- existing strengths (discovery stage)
- possible futures (dream stage)
- improved designs (design stage)
- preferred pathways going forward (destiny stage).

**Diagram 1: The four stages of appreciative inquiry**



The appreciative inquiry methodology focuses on the causes and examples of success, as explained by Ludema, Whitney, Mohr and Griffin (2003):

Appreciative inquiry is an approach to organisation change that has been used successfully in small and large-change projects with hundreds of organisations worldwide. It is based on the simple idea that organisations move in the direction of what they ask questions about. For example, when groups study human problems and conflicts, they often find that both the number and severity of these problems grow. In the same way, when groups study high human ideals and achievements, such as peak experiences, best practices and noble accomplishments, these phenomena, too, tend to flourish ... Appreciative inquiry distinguishes itself from other change methodologies by deliberately asking positive questions to ignite constructive dialogue and inspired action within organisations (p.259).

Further explanation of this methodology is available in *Appreciative Inquiry in the vocational education and training sector: Core Ideas* (Mitchell & McKenna 2008). Available from [www.reframingthefuture.net](http://www.reframingthefuture.net)

This summary publication was provided to the 2008 teams before they commenced their projects. A range of AI project resources and project action plans can be found at <http://www.reframingthefuture.net/FundedProjects2.asp>

## Priority areas and goals of the 2008 projects

The 2008 Reframing the Future projects were organised around seven national priority areas and three program goals. AI was one of eight project methodologies that could be employed in order to focus on the chosen priority area.

Projects were required to focus on one of the following seven national **priority areas**:

- **Quality:** using effective approaches to implement the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF 2007) essential quality standards and indicators
- **Training Packages:** innovatively and flexibly implementing a new, recently revised or rationalised Training Package
- **Assessment:** developing the quality and consistency of competency based assessment practices
- **Employability skills:** strengthening provider capability in teaching, learning, assessing and reporting in relation to employability skills
- **Skill shortages:** increasing the responsiveness, quality and quantity of training in skill shortage areas, particularly for trades occupations
- **Partnerships:** developing partnerships or new ways of working between RTOs, industry, enterprises and/or communities to develop more responsive approaches to training
- **Diversity:** enhancing practitioners' capabilities to work with an increasingly diverse client base, in particular with Aboriginal, disability and other equity groups.

Projects were also required to achieve at least one of the following three 2008 program goals:

1. develop staff capabilities to continuously improve the quality of competency based training and assessment
2. be innovative in responding to the needs of students, and the emerging skill needs and workforce development requirements of industry and communities
3. increase the productivity of the VET workforce and contribute to the productivity of the Australian workforce.

Around 220 professional development and change management projects were funded, with funding ceilings ranging from \$10,000 to \$23,000 according to methodology. The ceiling for AI projects was \$15,000, and 25 projects were funded under this methodology.

Project Action Plans, giving more details about each project, can be found on the website <http://www.reframingthefuture.net/FundedProjects2.asp> A range of resources to support Appreciative Inquiry projects and project facilitators can be found at the same address.

These 25 projects were distributed between the states and territories as follows.

**Table 1.1: The 2008 AI projects**

<i>Project No.</i>	<i>State/territory</i>	<i>Host organisation</i>	<i>Goal</i>	<i>Priority area</i>
12	WA	Great Southern TAFE	2	Partnerships: Increasing training uptake of small businesses
27	NSW	Strathfield College	1	Quality: Best practice in RPL in a private RTO
28	VIC	Ambulance Victoria	1	Assessment: Assessment strengths of an enterprise RTO
35	TAS	TAFE Tasmania	2	Partnerships: Engaging regional small businesses
60	NT	Human Services Training Advisory Council	2	Training Packages: Sustainable training for enrolled nurses
72	VIC	Swinburne University	2	Training Packages: Governance framework
78	QLD	Queensland Police Service	1	Quality: Quality indicators for police force training
102	VIC	AMES	2	Employability skills: Students from diverse backgrounds
125	NT	CHARTTES Training Advisory Council	2	Diversity: Sharing strategies for Indigenous training delivery
150	QLD	Strive Training Australia Pty Ltd	2	Training Packages: Delivery of the CIV in T&A
179	NT	Northern Territory Police, Fire and Emergency Services	2	Assessment: Simulated assessment for public safety workers
182	NSW	Kiama Community College	1	Quality: Reporting and recording of quality
200	VIC	RMIT University	1	Assessment: Assessment methods in science and technology
211	NSW	ACIRL Pty Ltd, trading as MineSkill Australia	1	Assessment: Workplace assessment in the mining industry
266	SA	Training Prospects	2	Quality: Customer service in a private RTO
267	WA	Challenger TAFE	2	Partnerships: Increasing training uptake of small businesses
278	VIC	Hume Regional Council of Adult Community and Further Education	2	Partnerships: TAFE, other RTOs and community groups
280	NSW	TAFE NSW – New England Institute	1	Assessment: Industry involvement, consistency across sectors
302	VIC	Box Hill Institute	1	Quality: Discovering areas of good practice in the institute

<i>Project No.</i>	<i>State/territory</i>	<i>Host organisation</i>	<i>Goal</i>	<i>Priority area</i>
326	NSW	Staging Connections	2	Assessment: Integrating employability skills into assessment
398	VIC	Practical Outcomes	2	Skill shortages: Training delivery in children's services
447	VIC	Futurum Australia	1	Assessment: RPL tools and networks
458	QLD	Wide Bay Institute	1	Quality: Continuous improvement in assessment design
475	VIC	Institute of Counselling and Community Studies	2	Training Packages: Community Services TP delivery issues
489	NSW	TAFE NSW – South Western Sydney Institute	3	Quality: Change management for TAFE head teachers

## Conclusion

Given that 2008 was the first year that AI was supported by Reframing the Future, it is worth noting that the 25 projects granted funding applied the methodology to all three goal areas and seven priority areas. Within the parameters of those goals and priority areas they found a diverse range of uses of the methodology, from improving quality through focusing on customer service in a private RTO to developing partnerships by engaging small businesses in a region.

**This chapter explains the main achievements of the projects that used appreciative inquiry in 2008.**

### Key points

Key points raised in the chapter include the following:

- A wide and impressive range of achievements were highlighted by the projects.
- These achievements mapped quite closely to the nominated priority areas.
- Some outcomes were concrete and tangible; others were more abstract, though no less valued.

### Highlights

Project participants spoke of increased staff commitment to good practice and continuous improvement. Sample highlights were:

- increased commitment to and participation in continuous improvement initiatives (27)
- a continuous improvement framework for [a large enterprise RTO] (78)
- development of an informal network of assessors; growing engagement with and continuous improvement in assessment processes and systems (28)
- recognition of and support for good practice (125)
- understanding and ownership of continuous improvement among trade teachers (and others); a more collaborative approach to teaching and learning (200)
- participants' enhanced understanding of the AQF, AQTF and assessment principles (211)
- increased understanding among non-RTO providers of the compliance obligations of RTOs (278)
- better understanding and application of quality practices and processes within the AQTF standards; sharing of good practice across the RTO (302).

Participants developed stronger networks and alliances and closer engagement with employers, as follows:

- formation of a business alliance learning group (12)
- establishment of an industry reference group around enrolled nursing in the Northern Territory (60)
- better and better informed approaches to working with clients; better communication between team members (150)
- development of a model to support small regional businesses (267)
- successful partnerships between several RTOs, ACE providers and education centres.

Participants also spoke about cultural change within their organisations and building sustainable development models. Some of their highlights were:

- the cultural shift required in [the large public RTO] to become more enterprise and client-focused; impetus to establish employer forums (35)
- realisation of a sustainable model for enrolled nurse training in the Northern Territory; scoping of multi-option delivery models (60)
- development of a customer service model; much improved customer service culture (266)
- raising of awareness of teachers working with culturally and linguistically diverse learners studying for children service certificate III of how cultural values are embedded in everyday language – for example, in communicating with children (102)

Other highlights included the development and trialling of new tools, strategies and techniques, such as:

- new innovative techniques and tools to be used by workforce development consultants with external and internal clients; move from practitioner-led to client-led training needs assessment processes; close involvement of management and board members in the AI process (72)
- review of assessment strategies for two qualifications (280)
- an effective tool to develop staff capabilities; enhanced teamwork; more effective utilisation of IT (447)
- a commitment to producing enhanced, streamlined teaching resources (458)
- development of innovative delivery strategies; professional development of staff (475)
- development of a head teacher mentoring and professional development program (489).

The project delivered improved VET practice for provision of services to Indigenous Australians; involved Indigenous people in decision-making about VET provision to their communities; and provided information to people with influence within the Northern Territory government that will enable them to make better decisions about VET strategy and funding.

– Project 125

## Achievements

The seven projects that identified assessment as a priority area listed varied achievements including:

- an enhanced appreciation of and confidence in applying assessment; development of an assessor group within the private RTO (28)
- a promising relationship with a local mining company that seemed unachievable six months previously (211)
- enhanced networks between the RTO and industry; encouragement to innovate and trial new assessment strategies; increased work-based delivery and assessment (280)
- tools and processes to support assessment (326)
- clear, plain English guidelines and support for assessment candidates (447).

The project resulted in less over-complication and a refinement of the assessment process. We identified early on that we were over-assessing.

- Project 326

The seven that focused on quality listed achievements including:

- development of web page, proformas and other tools for assessment purposes (27)
- bringing together a diverse range of stakeholders; enhanced awareness of AQTF 2007 registration standards (78)
- a more detailed examination and understanding of the AQTF (182)
- enhanced awareness of the AQTF (458).

We have achieved a noticeable shift in organisational culture and an increased capacity for staff to communicate more positively and deliver higher standards of customer service.

- Project 266

The five that nominated partnerships, including one that also nominated partnerships, listed achievements that included:

- success in mobilising employers in a sector where it has proved very difficult in the past to get them together (35)
- development of a much broader framework for the delivery of the certificate IV in business (governance), which in turn led to enhanced provider capacity (72).

Non-RTOs have gained a greater understanding of the constraints placed on RTOs by AQTF 2007. Each group has come to recognise the strengths of the other.

- Project 278

The four projects that nominated Training Packages listed achievements including:

- addition of the diploma of nursing to the RTO's scope; greater awareness of the need for training among employers (60)
- building industry confidence of [the RTO's] capacity to deliver training and assessment (200)
- enhanced readiness to implement the forthcoming new Training Package (475).

We were able to design and develop new strategies and approaches for increasing our completion rates and upskilling our trainers.

- Project 150

The other three projects that each nominated a single priority area (employability skills, diversity and skill shortages) listed achievements including:

- recognition of and support for good VET practice in service provision to Indigenous communities; involvement of Indigenous people in decision-making; keeping people with influence in government better informed about VET strategy (125: diversity)

- identification of future professional development goals and opportunities for staff, both collectively and individually (398: skill shortages).

We developed a range of strategies to assist CALD childcare trainees to recognise cultural values embedded in the language forms of everyday childcare interactions.

- Project 102 (employability skills)

## Outcomes

Outcomes from the projects ranged widely. Concrete and tangible ones included:

- a new small business product; a new network (12)
- cross-college teams that bring together VET and non-VET teaching staff (27)
- a more robust assessment system (28)
- validation by employers of [large public RTO's] employer engagement strategy; development of an alternative employer engagement model (35)
- a good governance framework to be built into (non-accredited) governance training modules; capacity-building (72)
- improved VET practice in delivering to Indigenous communities; wide sharing of project findings; specialist advice provided to two large VET Indigenous delivery projects; better, more informed government decision-making (125)
- “a consistent and new approach to managing change and resistance to change”; strategies for improving completion rates; processes that foster greater accountability; greater confidence among team members in the capacity of other members; a more adaptable and flexible work environment; improved customer service (150)
- development of a resource kit for trainers of childcare workers (102)
- an assessment guide and framework; improved assessment methods; acceptance of the need for change (179)
- increased industry engagement with VET; increased student enrolments (266)
- improved work placement opportunities for students with local businesses (267)
- a framework for developing valid and reliable assessment tools; establishment of industry reference groups; enhanced teacher capability (280)
- a framework for building employability skills into workplace assessments (326)

Many of the tangible outcomes involved increases in staff capability, for example:

- development of confidence and capability among assessors in the region; greater consistency of assessment among the region's RTOs (182)
- more highly skilled trainers in skill shortage areas (398)
- establishing a network of quality auditors (302)
- enhanced staff capability; improved training materials (458)
- development of a head teacher resource kit (489).

More abstract and conceptual, though no less valued, outcomes included:

- enhanced reputation of [large public provider] (12)
- more effective, efficient and consistent assessment decisions (28)
- increased awareness of the new Training Package (60)
- a renewed commitment to quality outcomes and deeper understanding of continuous improvement; ability to replicate successful models and approaches (200)
- a closer relationship between the RTO and industry trainers and assessors; a better understanding of assessment processes by both industry and the RTO (211)
- greater understanding and awareness between public and private RTOs and non-RTO providers, including enhanced understanding of the AQTF (278)
- potential for greater uptake of recognition (447)

innovative ideas for learning and assessment; enhanced communication between staff at different levels; a larger pool of future potential managers (475).

Assessors in the region developed confidence and capability, which will lead to greater consistency across the region in designing and undertaking assessment.

– Project 182

Many project teams reported that the participants gained both tangible outcomes such as improved partnerships and less tangible outcomes such as increased commitment.

In the figure below, one such team's lists of achievements are set out.

### **Figure 1. Diverse achievements of a sample project (Project 27)**

The goal of the project was to develop staff capabilities to continuously improve the quality of competency based training and assessment. In relation to this goal, the main achievements of the project were:

- increased commitment, skills development to participate in processing of RPL applications including promoting, marketing, assessing, storage etc
- increase in College's network and collaborations which will lead to more advantages for the college, participants etc
- increased commitment and participation in continuous improvement projects
- increase knowledge of RPL especially as it relates to best practice
- increased knowledge of VETAB standards
- cross college team development.

The priority area chosen by this project team was Quality: Using effective approaches to implement the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF 2007) essential quality standards and indicators. In relation to this priority area, the main achievements were:

- development of web page RPL section, assessment and evaluation forms
- increased commitment and participation in continuous improvement projects
- increased knowledge of RPL especially as it relates to best practice
- increase in College's network and collaborations
- development of Performa for assessing RPL applicants and gaining assessor and RPL applicant feedback
- presentation and poster display at final National conference to assist other colleges use AI as a change management methodology.

## Conclusion

Almost all project reports point to substantial gains from the projects. These are both concrete and abstract:

- concrete: new business opportunities, development of networks among diverse players, valued new resources, expanded RTO scope of registration
- more abstract but also of value: enhanced trust and understanding, stronger commitment to quality and continuous improvement, greater industry engagement, closer attention to customer service.

**Several projects stated that the AI methodology was critical to achieving these strong outcomes.**

**This chapter examines how the individual projects funded by Reframing the Future in 2008 used the AI methodology in innovative ways. It also examines the advantages of the methodology.**

### Key points

Key points raised in the chapter include the following:

- Participants were imaginative in the ways they used and adapted the methodology.
- They were also very positive about the strengths of the methodology and the advantages it offered over alternative approaches.

### Innovative uses of the methodology

At the start-up national forum for all project convenors funded to use AI methodology, the convenors were encouraged to be innovative in their use of the methodology, as most uses of the methodology cited in the literature were about using it in, say, two-three day residential workshops. In contrast, the convenors in the Reframing the Future program were invited to develop innovative uses of the methodology to stretch across a six-month period. Although AI was a new approach for most project leaders and participants, it was used and adapted in interesting ways.

Innovative uses of methodology would normally involve modifying the steps or strategies advocated in the literature, adding new activities, inserting specially designed prompts and providing a range of ways that participants could communicate before, during and after any face-to-face sessions. All the types of uses were evident.

For instance, some facilitators introduced new activities before a session:

- posting of pre-forum questionnaire and reading materials to participants (60)
- separate briefing sessions to explain the AI methodology to participants (72)
- the addition of a “pre-step” forum before the first of the four prescribed steps, where the forum identified the boundaries of the investigation, such as appropriate participant behaviour and range of qualifications to be addressed (28 and 280 – also advocated in hindsight by another project - 475)
- collecting multiple “stories” before the event, then sifting them according to agreed categories (179 and 447)

Facilitators also used a range of strategies to enliven sessions:

- deferral of discussions that could not be fully accommodated within tight time restrictions for later discussion, based on materials produced during the one-day forum (35)
- use of motivational quotes and graphics to sustain enthusiasm (125)
- facilitator working with individuals when groupwork degenerated into negative attitudes; overlaying AI on a more familiar methodology (GROW = goal, reality, options, where to) (150)
- “yellow card” system for participants who were too negative (182)
- forums held in a neutral space; modification of the titles of the four stages to terms more comfortable for trade teachers (200 and 211)
- holding meetings in different settings for a diverse range of participating organisations; “meet and greet” session before proceedings began (278).

One project team drew comparisons between AI and continuous improvement:

- comparison drawn between cyclical AI process and cyclical nature of continuous improvement, requiring frequent revisiting of earlier stages and discussions (302).

The cyclical format of AI is similar to the cyclical approach to quality management at this RTO. It facilitates the identification of areas of good practice and areas where there is room for improvement.

- Project 302

Many project teams customised the AI methodology to suit their participants and the project's focus. In doing so, they often modelled considerable innovation as in the example below where the facilitator used unique approaches in each of the four stages of AI.

### **Figure 2. Innovative approaches of a sample project (Project 489)**

This project enabled some very worthwhile and useful outcomes to be produced, namely the Head Teacher Kit and the Head Teacher Mentoring Program. Highlights of the project included the development of a process for working with other Head Teachers to share ideas, and enable general networking opportunities.

“Appreciative Inquiry methodology was used as a methodology to facilitate sessions and was also modelled through a range of practical activities. An external facilitator provided two sessions to unpack and model the process. This promoted engagement with the AI approach and fostered the paradigm shift in participants’ thinking to a level where participants were able to embrace without hesitation this strengths-based approach.

The use of a series of interviews in a pair work context under the guidance of an experienced external facilitator was most influential for introducing the concept in a meaningful and relevant way. This then promoted dialogue on a wider level where participants were able to identify a range of aspects and found also that these were common to all units/ sections. This included aspects such as common values, professionalism and professional standards, team focus and cooperation, generosity of spirit, nurturing. The workshop sessions were further able to be explored in an online environment as well. This provided a level of continuity and reinforced progress made in the face-to-face sessions.

Groups or networks that had been established in previous workshops sessions were given an opportunity “to articulate their dream by use of graphic and symbolic means. In this way they were encouraged to explore their dream in holistic terms. What was particularly noteworthy was that participants of each group were totally engaged and motivated throughout. Following this process, discussion on directions and what we would like our organisation to achieve were very rich, and very positive. Two members of the initial workshop team facilitated this session based on and following their own experiences with Reframing Workshops conducted in Melbourne.

Animated discussion by the whole group was a feature of this aspect. The facilitator recorded aspects of the discussions, placed these into categories and then fed them back to the group for confirmation. Upon confirmation, these categories were placed onto the wiki site as post-it notes and participants were encouraged to post their input.

“We also had product development mentoring in relation to the Head Teacher Kit, a one-stop shop, and something that every member of the network could see would help us achieve our aims in an efficient and effective way.”

## Advantages of the methodology

Most projects clearly embraced AI, as it offered a range of advantages over other methodologies, particularly those with a “deficit” focus. Following are some of their comments:

- encourages a positive focus; avoids getting bogged down in political and organisational problems (179)
- a systematic approach (182)
- able to critique their and each other’s work “without fear and in a positive and constructive manner” (200)
- works well even with those who don’t fully understand the methodology (278)
- works best in face-to-face context, but also viable in online contexts such as a wikispace (326)
- counters the “deficit” mentality that surrounds the regulatory and compliance regimes within which RTOs operate (475).

Many convenors commented that the methodology was practical and not intimidating, allowing participants to break down complex challenges and work on them:

- its novelty generated a lot of interest from prospective participants (12)
- encouraged team participation; fitted well with STA continuous improvement principles (27)
- encourages input from people at all levels; relaxation of hierarchical controls while still maintaining an outcomes focus (28)
- fosters relationship building (35)
- encourages new ways of working; vests ownership in the participants (72)
- encourages a collaborative approach; validates individuals’ contributions (102)
- parallels other methodologies in use by RTO; easy to duplicate and share; very useful in preparing for audits (150)
- breaks complex problems into manageable chunks (211)
- a good tool for dealing with potentially negative subjects during times of organisational strain (266)
- allows status quo to be challenged without generating defensive responses (280)
- a non-intimidating process (458).

It was impossible to isolate one stage of the process as being more useful than the others as they all fed seamlessly into each other.

– Project 102

## Conclusion

It is clear from the reports that the projects took enthusiastically to the AI methodology and derived substantial benefit from it. Many of the advantages they listed are likely to be of lasting benefit to their organisations.

**This chapter examines the innovative facilitation strategies used by some projects funded by Reframing the Future. At the start-up workshop early in the process, convenors were informed about the international literature on the topic of facilitation strategies for AI, as it was focused particularly on one day or two-three day workshops. Hence, convenors were encouraged to design and use facilitation strategies that were relevant to their context.**

Key resources that project convenors were informed about, and which many explored in greater depth, can be found in the References and Further Reading section on page 32. These publications provide more in-depth information about the four stages involved in AI.

### Key points

Key points raised in the chapter include the following:

- In all stages, keeping messages simple and positive is seen as important.
- Working in smaller groups is recommended, either as standard or to break up proceedings.
- Although the methodology encourages open and free-flowing communication, project leader emphasised the importance of keeping proceedings focused and practical.

### Effective facilitation strategies

In the “discovery” stage of the AI projects, strategies that were effective included:

- groupwork (12)
- expert speaker (27 and 102)
- keeping discussion topics simple; attendance by senior management (35)
- ice-breaking paired interviews and reports back to whole group (60)
- external facilitation (102)
- smaller groups (150)
- icebreaker breakfast (179)
- maintain focus on good practice (200)
- pre and post-process questionnaires, with results compared at end of process (302)
- keep all messages and communications positive; use wikispace creatively (326).

In a number of cases, especially where project participants were separated by large distances, technology was used to aid communication between face-to-face sessions. Some of these strategies were as follows.

- focus questions emailed to group two weeks beforehand, for return and processing before forum (but hampered by limited response from participants) (28)
- online survey to gather information (182)
- teleconferences between sessions to sustain the process (280)

The scene was set by discussion of the findings and recommendations from several past small business reports and how they related to the goals of this project.

- Project 267

In the “dream” stage of the AI projects, strategies that were effective included:

- groupwork; keep the pace fast (12)
- move groups around (35)
- appropriate language for an educationally diverse group (60)
- use of one to one interviews when logistical problems in assembling a group were encountered (72)
- “strong visual questions and powerful images” (102)
- keep the group focused on what is possible (267)
- teleconferences between sessions to sustain the process (280)
- teams of two, one listening, one recording (302).

Skilled facilitation, stimulating questions and open lines of inquiry are critical for this stage.

- Project 12

In the “design” stage of the AI projects, strategies that were effective included:

- identify common themes, which keeps the concepts simple and manageable; avoid grandiose ideas (12)
- introduce something new (35)
- break the big picture down into smaller projects (150)
- validating ideas developed from the dream stage with management and other stakeholders (179)
- additional meetings outside the formal meeting to discuss ideas with key people (267)
- need to clearly understand organisational culture (278)
- top three ideas from previous stage taken forward to this stage (302).

Organisational cultures need to be more clearly understood if this stage is to succeed.

- Project 278

In the “destiny” stage of the AI projects, strategies that were effective included:

- groupwork and feedback to larger group (27)
- good food and venue (35)
- refining ideas developed in the previous stage through an agreed culling process; reconstituting participants in larger groups than for the previous stage 3 (78)
- working in pairs (102)
- space to meet outside the work environment; encouraging Indigenous people to take leadership roles (102)
- detailed agenda (267)

- participants asked to develop short and medium-term actions (280)
- participants voted on priority areas (302).

Refining participants' ideas through a culling process assisted in focusing on the essential elements. Consensus and engagement were promoted by slowly increasing the size of the groups.

- Project 78

Following is an example of just one of the projects, explaining why AI was used and how it was used in an innovative fashion.

### Figure 3. Effective facilitation strategies (Project 489)

This project focused on Goal 1: to develop staff capabilities to continuously improve the quality of competency based training and assessment.

"Our project goal was to develop staff capabilities to continuously improve the quality of competency based training and assessment, in particular RPL assessment in the mining industry. We have completed:

- Project goals, targets, strategies and KPI's
- Identification of the factors driving or opposing change in the industry
- Identification of a number of alternative assessment methods
- A group research exercise to identify further potential for innovative assessment methods."

Appreciative Inquiry was specifically chosen for this project because "there was a prior history of failure to achieve the objectives we had set. AI provided us with a tool and a process to move past those previous failures and address former positive results as a means to progress.

The project was divided into 4 distinct stages along the lines of the AI model – Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny. For the benefit of those who may have struggled to grasp the concept, the stages were translated in mining industry speak as *Exploration, Discovery, Survey* and *Mining*.

Each stage was also characterised as a part of the Margerison-McCann high performance team building process – specifically "*Who are we?*", "*Where are we now?*", "*Where do we want to be?*", "*How might we get there?*" and "*How can we be effective in implementing our plans?*" It did not seem incongruous to put that complexion on our endeavours so long as we remained grounded in the positive aspects of the appreciative inquiry methodology.

"From the above diagram of the Margerison-McCann process, we took the last four (4) questions and combined them into the single question "*How can we be effective in implementing our plans?*", to realign that process so that it more closely reflects the AI methodology."

## Conclusion

Not all project leaders directly answered the questions relating to what worked well at each stage of the process. Although they extolled the enthusiasm and focus of the participants at each stage, many of the reports did not specify the strategies that resulted in these strong outcomes. Nonetheless, a range of useful strategies were identified for each of the four stages.

The projects showed that the facilitator needs a thorough understanding of the methodology, including at each of the four stages, and what extra steps are required before the first and after the fourth stage, if it is to be implemented effectively.

**This chapter examines how the AI methodology impacted on professional practice and assisted practitioners to understand their need to change, diagnose the change required and manage the change.**

### **Key points**

Key points raised in the chapter include the following:

- AI clearly generated substantial improvements in practice and individual capabilities that are likely to endure.
- AI is also well suited to building change management skills and processes, such as diagnosis, selection of strategies and implementation of the strategies.

### **Improvements to practice**

Project reports identified the following factors or insights that led to improvements in practice from the projects:

- thinking big, then breaking down into manageable components (12)
- encouraged personal reflection (27)
- all participants able to see the merit of what was proposed (72)
- generated an expectation of success (72)
- an effective technique for instigating and controlling professional dialogue between RTOs (182)
- harnesses enthusiasm (266)
- leads to shared understanding (280)
- encourages a focus on people's strengths and how best to utilise them (398)
- deferral of discussions that could not be fully accommodated within tight time restrictions for later discussion, based on materials produced during the one-day forum (35).

For many participants, the methodology created a sense that they were safe and secure and able to think without being too pressured by external forces:

- participants felt in control of the uptake of new ideas and directions followed (102)
- encouraged people to stop and re-evaluate their own practices (179)
- helped people to step out of the difficult issues that dominate their working lives (125)
- time and space created (200)
- leaving behind the baggage of past failures (211)
- practitioners feel safe and supported as they move into uncharted territory; AI creates a level playing field (475).

AI allowed the group to think beyond what seemed like the impossible.

– Project 60

They also identified the following new capabilities that participants gained from the projects:

- awareness of drivers influencing key groups; understanding the value of partners; awareness of the need to adapt training to context (12)
- a renewed focus on relationship building (35 and 267)
- increased awareness of the new training package and qualifications; enhanced interaction skills; enhanced ability to think strategically (60)
- enhanced reflective skills (72)
- heightened awareness of the culture-specific nature of communication and teamwork (102)
- better understanding of the flexibility of the national training system (125)
- ability to ask the right questions, and to communicate change (150)
- information-gathering skills; critical thinking skills (179)
- well suited to the new outcomes-based approach in AQTF 2007 (200)
- enhanced teamwork; a greater appreciation of the skills and knowledge of team members from other disciplines and areas (211 and 278)
- a clearer understanding of industry's culture and operations (280)
- inspires and reinvigorates those disenchanted by earlier negative experiences (475)
- greater awareness of AQTF standards; enhanced skills in gathering and evaluating data (78 and 278).

Some of these capabilities followed on from the gaining of trust, confidence and commitment:

- increased commitment; increased knowledge of RPL; enhanced networks; increased knowledge of standards; team development (27)
- increased confidence in undertaking assessments and the assessment process; better problem-solving skills (28)
- developed trust and recognition of the value of other organisations (267)
- increased confidence in offering one's own skills to the team (398)

AI provided a strong structure for working through complex notions such as continuous improvement, leading to a deeper understanding.

– Project 200

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## Engagement with and management of change

The following aspects of the AI project were identified as enhancing participants' ability to engage in and manage change happening in their work:

- maintaining a focus on the positive enables sensitive issues to be overcome (12)
- AI is a simple and easy process (27)

- encouragement of an open dialogue (35)
- allowed participants to conceptualise models beyond what is currently available in the Northern Territory (60)
- allowed all participants to be involved and engaged in the process (78)
- enables people to fully recognise the things they do well (150)
- no time spent dwelling on the negatives (150)
- increased awareness of the importance of customer service (266)
- AI allows people to identify what is good and doesn't need change, and focus instead on what needs changing (280)
- encourages participants to "own" the changes that the process raises (302)
- participants become catalysts for change (326)
- a tool for revisiting issues that were previously regarded as too difficult (489).

Using an AI process assisted the group to concentrate on the strengths of the existing structures and design improvements based on these strengths.

- Project 72

Following is an example of one of the projects, describing the outcomes of the AI project for participants, particularly the impact on their practice and their capability for managing change.

#### **Figure 4. Immediate outcomes for participants (Project 150)**

This project focused on Goal 2: To be innovative in responding to the needs of students, and the emerging skill needs and workforce development requirements of industry and communities.

Immediate outcomes for participants and work teams were as follows:

- A consistent and new approach to managing change and resistance or negative attitudes in team members
- A greater understanding of what impacts our training outcomes
- Strategies for increasing completion rates and enhancing the participant's learning experience
- Processes that foster greater accountability in all stakeholders including industry clients/employers
- An improved and more innovative approach to developing materials and delivery strategies for the new training packages
- Greater confidence in the entire team of our ability and the quality of what we are delivering.

"The participants in this project have gained a range of new capabilities including (but not limited to):

- Framing and conducting more positive conversations with peers around matters of change

A better understanding of the appreciative enquiry methodology as an alternative

- A willingness to continue to build their skills and knowledge to use AI in future projects and changes we face
- Being able to speak with clients and students in such a way to draw out what worked – asking the right questions became an art as well as the ability to 'listen to earn the right to ask the next question'.
- A key learning was to fully appreciate that the greatest misconception about communication is that it has occurred. This new awareness has made us much more capable of having meaningful interactions that are engaged and acknowledged.
- It does mean as an organisation as a result of this project and the methodology we will move forward much more confident and empowered to implement the new training packages. Trainers skills and abilities have improved foremost in communication and managing change, but also in their understanding of employability skills and the importance of building stronger mentoring and coaching for students onsite."

## **Conclusion**

This chapter reveals that AI is not only a valuable tool for working through complex or highly charged issues; it also imparts a legacy of enhanced improvements to practice and individual capabilities, and better equips participants to engage in and/or manage change over the longer term.

This chapter examines the critical success factors for using AI methodology.

### Key points

Key points raised in the chapter include the following:

- Several factors recurred through the project reports, including the need for careful planning and extended timeframes; the value of senior management input or participation; the need to keep language and processes user-friendly; and the importance of a skilled facilitator, preferably external to the lead organisation.
- The choice of AI as the project methodology was nominated as critical to success by several projects.

### Factors assisting learning

The projects listed a range of factors or insights that assisted learning using this methodology:

- all participants gained a better understanding of each other's business and scope of operations (12)
- visits to best practice organisations; expert guests (27 and 326)
- a skilled and knowledgeable facilitator (28 and 60)
- organisational support; open and challenging questions (60 and 179)
- homogeneity of the group; linking of theory and practice (102)
- time and space; ownership; senior management input (200)
- careful constructing of the pre-process questionnaire (266)
- taking the time in the early stages to develop good working relationships with participating organisations; careful planning; an action statement at the end of each meeting (267)
- collaboration charts to map developing partnerships (278)
- participant diversity; time lags between stages (280 and 326)
- extensive support materials (302)
- keeping the subject matter user-friendly (447)
- a fun approach (458).

"I like the way the meeting kept moving back to the positive, and I can see now how much more creative we can be when we think about the good things and the possibilities" (comment from project participant).

The recognition for what was being done well and acknowledging the positive experiences, which tended to grow in number once we started to talk about them, again highlighting to us as a business that we don't focus on what we are doing well and right anywhere near enough.

– Project 150

## Factors assisting outcomes

Among the factors assisting outcomes were:

- having a group that was keen to work together; the opportunity to learn something new; a skilled facilitator; offsite meetings in a non-threatening environment (12 and 211)
- careful pre-planning (60)
- careful setting of the questions (72 and 475)
- process led by group members; inclusion of all stakeholders in the group (78 and 125)
- use of authentic language throughout (102)
- newness of the AI approach (150)
- AI allowed for fast movement through the stages (182)
- flexibility regarding timelines - not moving on before the group is ready (267)
- a tangible resource at the end of the project (278)
- sharing of the information generated following the end of the project (280)
- communication via a range of media (447).

External support was a common factor assisting outcomes:

- a [external] facilitated process (27 and 266)
- support from the Reframing the Future team (28)
- support of senior management; long lead times (35, 72 and 302)
- senior management support (200).

AI is a time-consuming process that requires substantial investment if it is to succeed.

- Project 72

Following is an example of one of the projects, describing the critical success factors.

#### Figure 5. Critical success factors (Project 200)

This project focused on Goal 1: to develop staff capabilities to continuously improve the quality of competency based training and assessment.

“This project was ultimately about change; attitudes, structures, perceptions, ways of working, assessment methodologies and tools, and took the participants on a journey of exploring and building on strengths and possibilities.

The main goal of the project was to get trade teachers (in particular) to engage with the notion of continuous improvement, to reflect on their current practice and to make change!

There were a number of factors that assisted the participants learning, the methodology, the open questions, the acknowledging of fear of the process, the facilitation, the sharing of ideas and trust amongst the participants, but I believe that by providing a supportive environment in which to explore and experiment was the most critical.

This included:

- Time and Space, the most productive factor for the teachers; there was compelling evidence that the trade teachers engaged in, and developed the skills to build robust and logical assessments when given the time and space to reflect on their practice.
- Ownership, teachers remarked that “It was helpful to know that *they* were going to do the work”, and also fed back that they felt they were moving towards more effective and rigorous assessment methods, and that assessment design was an “important topic” and “part of our job”. These comments further reinforced the belief that, in particular with the plumbers, they had taken stronger control of their overall program and assessment structure/design.
- Senior management input, again the plumbing teachers in particular appreciated having the senior managers attending and when asked why this was important the teachers expressed that it was important because they felt validated and that it “offered them hope” and further developed trust in the AI methodology.”

## Conclusion

Although a diverse (and occasionally contrary) range of factors were identified as contributing to learning and positive outcomes, all 25 projects stressed that these objectives were comfortably achieved.

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