

The Case Story of Avon Mexico

By: Marge Schiller

Focus of the Appreciative Inquiry: Gender plus More

Client organization: Avon Mexico is among the most successful of the companies that make up Avon Products. Avon is an international direct sales organization that serves the wants, needs and aspirations of women around the world. Avon's vision statement to be the company that best understands and satisfies the product, service, and self-fulfillment needs of women globally. Avon has been a leader in the cosmetics, skin and hair care business. It also sells a variety of other services and merchandise by direct sales, mail order, and in retail stores. 34,000 people work as salaried employees for Avon in 46 countries. Avon sales representatives - over 2.8 million worldwide, work on commission. Avon Mexico has 3,000 salaried employees in its Mexico City headquarters, and a sales force of 250,000.

Client objectives: The initial client was Avon International, a division of Avon Products located in the United States in New York City. The objective was to increase the number of senior women in the organization worldwide. While Avon was often thought of as one of the best places for women to work, there were very few women executives and no female representation on the executive committee at Avon Mexico. The Appreciative Inquiry project described in this case study was intended to address the issue of gender equity in Avon Mexico.

What was done: This case was interesting because the consultants were hired and paid by the parent organization to serve a particular business unit. The project was analogous to a three-legged sack race: Avon International, Avon Mexico and the consulting team were tied together at the ankle and trying to run together. If one group got too far away from the others, we would all trip and fall. Keeping all three organizations in sync was continuously challenging.

Here are the steps we took: At Avon Mexico we used the Four D Model to conduct the inquiry.

Here is our road map:

DEFINITION: The contracting developed a relationship with the clients and extended their understanding of Appreciative Inquiry. We began building the internal/external team with a mutual construction of the topics, the impetus for change and the methods we would use. Later we worked together on site to plan an upcoming AI workshop, define everyone's roles and responsibilities, consider logistics and decide who would attend the upcoming workshop.

DISCOVERY: The first of several two day workshops introduced AI theory, practice and philosophy to the people who were to conduct interviews and serve as the "Pioneers" of AI. We became a learning team, developing the questions, practicing and planning for the interviews. The internal/external team debriefed after the workshop. We shared our own experiences and

stories, refined the interview protocol and determined how we would manage the information that came back to us.

The interviews brought best practices and compelling stories to light. We learned what gives vitality to the ways that men and women are working together in Avon Mexico. The internal/external team came together again to build on what was working best in our inquiry and, once again, to modify the questions. We selected some of the most telling and inspirational stories from the conversations that had been held and we began to construct models of exceptional practice to help us vision the ideal.

DREAM : A report was written to capture the best stories and clarify the image of the organization at its very best. It presented a variety of organizational and relational possibilities. The key learnings were supported with story examples. It provided glimpses of the future based on the assumption that the ideal exists in what has and is happening already. The report articulated the best of what the interviewers found. The purpose of the report was to guide the organization to go beyond the actual data and provoke our thinking about what is possible. The next major event was a Futures conference (sometimes called a summit). About 100 of the people who did the interviews gathered together to validate and extend their collective images. The consensus around what could be possible was a celebration and a clarification of collective positive energy around our topic: Men and women working together in teams. To quote the author Alix Hailey we were able to "find the good and praise it."

DESTINATION: The internal/external team produced a second report that presented the collective vision of the preferred future. It was clear and short. An internal advisory committee was formed and still continues its work. While the words "Appreciative Inquiry" may have faded, the philosophy lives. As the director of human resources said, "This is not a program, it is a process." When we moved to the destination phase the external consultants moved out. The client was clear how they could use what they had learned to enhance individual and organizational life. The capacity was built inside Avon Mexico because AI is in alignment with the mission, goals and values of Avon Products.

Outcomes

- Avon Mexico's profit increased dramatically. The intervention was one element that helped a successful company becoming even more successful in terms of profits.
- Avon Mexico and Mujeres y Hombres Trabajando en Equipo (men and women working together in teams) was the winner of the Catalyst Award. This award is given annually to a company that is honored for their policies and practices that benefit women in their corporation.
- The first woman officer was appointed to the executive committee within six months of the appreciative inquiry project. Four years after the initial intervention in 1996, the spirit of

Appreciative Inquiry lives and thrives in this very successful company.

Learnings

- Appreciative Inquiry blends into the organization. It is like disappearing stitches. AI is part of the way work gets done at Avon Mexico. I am not sure the words Appreciative Inquiry are still used, but I am sure that what the Mexicans called "the philosophia" remains.
- Because the consultants were US-based English speakers, simultaneous translation of all presentations was required. This turned out to be an asset rather than a liability for two reasons: first, the consultants had to spend a good deal of time with the translators to be sure that they understood the concepts that were to be simultaneously translated. This meant that the clarity and care of communication was enhanced. Second, the resultant slowing down of the communication process and inclusion of examples to illustrate each point enhanced comprehension. People would ask for further explanation or an illustration to augment information. We went deeper because we went slower. This was in stark contrast to the "Ya ya; Sure sure" reaction that sometimes happens when people who speak the same language assume that they give words the same meaning.
- Mexico is a "relational" culture with a rich oral tradition. Stories are a major way of sharing and transferring information and meaning across the society. This made the Appreciative Inquiry culturally comfortable for everyone who was asked to elicit or to tell stories.
- The involvement of a powerful and thoughtful chief executive officer gave the work stability in an organization that is short term driven because of a continuous cycle of sales initiatives and campaigns.

For more information:

Contact: Marjorie Schiller, Ph.D.

49 Rockwood Road, Hingham Massachusetts 02043

(781) 749-4373

Email: margeschiller@yahoo.com

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