Organizational Change Inside and Out:
The Impact of an Appreciative Inquiry

Sherry Rockey, *Vice President of EnCompass LLC, and* **Laverne Webb**, *CEO of EnCompass LLC CEO*[1]

A s it began its tenth year in 2003, the Evergreen Cove Holistic Learning Center entered a critical point in its history, transitioning from the founding leadership to a new executive director. The organization decided to use this opportunity to reconsider its relationships within the community and invited EnCompass LLC to help it explore its potential for outreach and growth.

EnCompass used an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) methodology to engage the organization in an internal process to reflect on organizational values and successes, and an external process for defining and expanding its role in the community.

The Appreciative Inquiry process had a significant and potentially long-term impact on Evergreen Cove (EC). The AI process offered EC some valuable insights about its image and role in the community. It also compelled EC to define and articulate its values and launched a dialogue within the organization and within the community that is helping EC clarify its visions for the future.

The process of engaging in an Appreciative Inquiry marked a distinct shift in how EC interacted with the community. Throughout its history, EC consciously chose to operate out of the mainstream of community life. The general public and the health care community were wary of EC and its alternative approaches to health. In fact, Evergreen Cove treasured its status and autonomy as a safe harbor for its members' personal growth and development.

However, through the AI process of engaging the community, EC generated a dialogue about health and well-being that put its own philosophy and services at the center. Community leaders and health system leaders began to see EC in a new light. In fact, the organization has begun to see itself in a new light.

This case study presents the Appreciative Inquiry process designed for Evergreen Cove and the impact of that intervention on the organization and its role in the community.

EVERGREEN COVE

Evergreen Cove, a holistic learning center in Easton, Maryland, was founded in 1993 as a proactive, experiential learning center that would foster the personal growth and development of its members. The members, in turn, would learn to function more creatively and resourcefully in their larger communities. Launched as Psyche's Well, the organization became Evergreen Cove Holistic

---

[1] Sherry Rockey can be reached at srockey@encompassworld.com, and Laverne Webb can be reached at lwebb@encompassworld.com.

Learning Center in 1999 with construction of a permanent facility nestled among old evergreens in a beautiful and peaceful cove on the Tred Avon River on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

Over the last decade, the center has expanded its programs and its reach. EC offers a wide range of health and well-being programs for the local community, and its workshop leaders are now in demand around the United States. While the Center's programs flourished and it could boast a loyal membership base, it had attracted a relatively narrow slice of the local population. Some EC members were comfortable with its place apart from the community. However, others were concerned that this separateness from the larger community, especially the traditional health care system, had become an obstacle to future growth.

With these concerns in mind, EnCompass LLC worked closely with the EC leadership to develop an Appreciative Inquiry process that engaged the community in conversations about health and vitality, and how Evergreen Cove could creatively and more effectively contribute to growing a healthier community over the next five to 10 years.

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Appreciative Inquiry, a leading-edge organizational development methodology, was developed in the mid-1980s by David Cooperrider at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University. It is now considered to be the leading edge approach to change management in the nonprofit, government and private sectors.

Briefly defined, AI is a process that inquires into, identifies, and further develops the best of *what is* in organizations in order to create a better future. This focus on assets and strengths, as opposed to problems and gaps, moves participants away from a negative orientation towards a learning experience related to best practices. Appreciative Inquiry assumes that an organization moves in the direction of the questions it asks, and that the inquiry process, itself, acts to shift organizational focus and energy. AI uses storytelling and dialogue to create change.

The basic concepts behind AI are:

- **Image and action are linked**. The images that exist within us are a powerful reality. Successful organizations and communities have positive visions and images that lead to change and transformation.

- **Organizations move in the direction of the questions they ask.** The questions we ask determine what we find. AI seeks to find and understand successes and innovations to discover the passion and the values that inspire an organization to move toward its preferred future.

- **Valuing the best of the past contributes to continuity in times of transition and change.** When the past is honored, people are enabled to build on past successes to create a better future. People find it easier to let go of what must be left behind, and take forward the best of the past. Resistance toward change is greatly reduced as members of a system embrace a shared image of the desired future, and begin moving in that direction.

- **Organizational realities are not fixed.** Change is constant. Organizational habits, systems, and structures are open to interpretation and change. Through inquiry and dialogue, organizations build understanding, which leads to different behaviors and actions, and which in turn, create new realities.

The power of Appreciative Inquiry is the way in which participants become engaged and inspired by focusing on their own positive experiences. Usually in a workshop setting, participants remember and relate personal experiences of success, identify the common elements of these experiences, and devise visions and action plans for making those experiences occur more often in the organization. Because AI focuses on the positive and is grounded in participants' actual experiences, they "walk away with a sense of commitment, confidence and affirmation that they have been successful" (Coghlan, et al, 2003).

THE EVERGREEN COVE APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY PROCESS

Over a period of four months in 2003, Evergreen Cove conducted AI interviews with more than 125 citizens throughout the community. The interviews explored questions about exceptional examples of what makes a healthy community, what people valued about their own health – mind, body and spirit, and how Evergreen Cove could support the health and vitality of the community in the future. The interviews were followed by a Summit on Healthy Communities that provided a highly interactive community experience through which to harness a rich diversity of interests and voices. The ideas generated at the Summit guided and inspired EC in developing strategies and programs to promote a healthy, vital community and to expand its inquiry and engagement with broader networks within the community.

EnCompass assisted EC in implementing an Appreciative Inquiry using what is known as the *4-I* process – *Inquire, Imagine, Innovate* and *Implement* (Some AI practitioners use a similar model referred to as the *4-D* model – Discovery, Dream, Design and Delivery). The process and steps are illustrated in the Phases of the Appreciative Inquiry Model below. The focus of each phase is presented, followed by a description of Evergreen Cove's activities. The entire process occurred over a period of a year, with the implementation phase still ongoing.
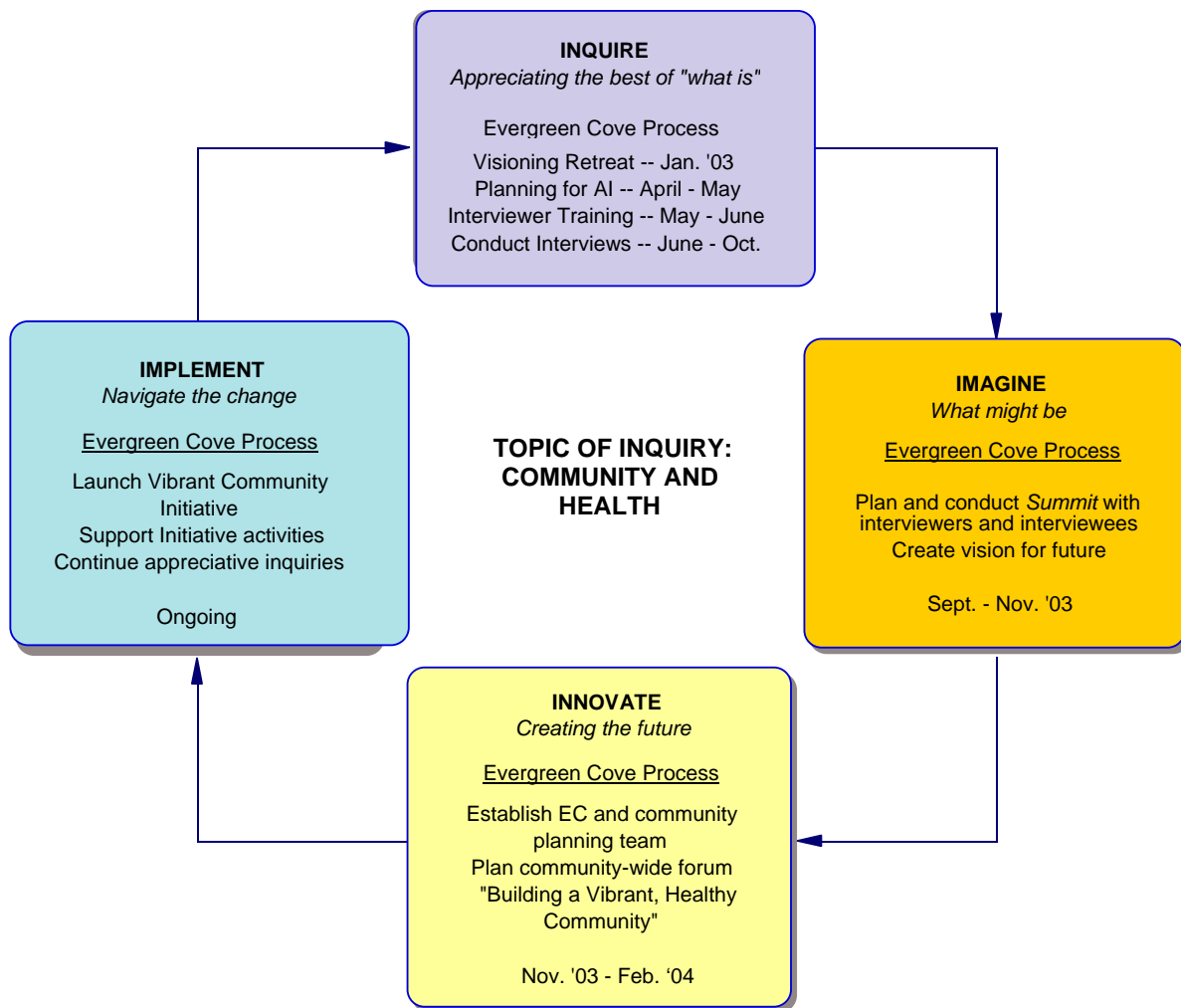
THE INQUIRY PHASE

The Inquiry Phase focuses on the discovery and appreciation of the best of *what is* by seeking stories about high points or exceptional experiences from past history. Interviews reveal powerful stories and illuminate the key factors of success that made these exceptional experiences possible. Through questions focused on values and wishes, groups are enabled to discover common ground as a basis for future action. This phase begins with planning and focusing the Appreciative Inquiry and includes the interview process.

Board and Practitioner Vision Retreat
The AI process began with a visioning retreat for the board of directors, the executive director and EC staff and practitioners. Through this retreat EC learned about the AI process, identified EC's core values, examined EC's factors of success, and identified its wishes for the future. The

participants struggled with the dilemma of being open and listening to the larger community, and at the same time protecting the unique qualities of the Center. Using AI to address this dilemma proved to be the first step in creating real organizational change.

Phases of the Appreciative Inquiry Model
The 4-I Process

INQUIRE
Appreciating the best of "what is"

Evergreen Cove Process

Visioning Retreat -- Jan. '03
Planning for AI -- April - May
Interviewer Training -- May - June
Conduct Interviews -- June - Oct.

IMPLEMENT
Navigate the change

Evergreen Cove Process

Launch Vibrant Community Initiative
Support Initiative activities
Continue appreciative inquiries

Ongoing

TOPIC OF INQUIRY: COMMUNITY AND HEALTH

IMAGINE
What might be

Evergreen Cove Process

Plan and conduct *Summit* with interviewers and interviewees
Create vision for future

Sept. - Nov. '03

INNOVATE
Creating the future

Evergreen Cove Process

Establish EC and community planning team
Plan community-wide forum "Building a Vibrant, Healthy Community"

Nov. '03 - Feb. '04

Planning Team
A planning team of board and staff members launched its work with the challenge of focusing the community-wide Appreciative Inquiry. A key role of the planning team was to decide on the stakeholders to be engaged in the Appreciative Inquiry process. It was agreed that involving

stakeholders from throughout the community would provide EC with a diversity of perspectives and experiences and enrich the interview results. They settled on the following key groups: the EC community, donors, community groups, healthcare community, clergy, and retirees/newcomers. They then identified potential interviewers to be invited to an AI interview training session.

The planning team was also charged with finalizing the AI interview questions. This team labored with getting the questions right, concluding that there were two audiences for this inquiry – the internal EC community and the larger external community. In the end, the interview protocol reflected the interests of both groups.

Training Interviewers
In this phase of AI, EnCompass conducted three half-day training sessions to prepare more than 50 interviewers. The goal of the workshops was to help people become ready to listen in a different way than they are accustomed to listening. The interviewers were trained in interview techniques that included ensuring confidentiality, how to ask probing follow-up questions, taking notes using the respondents own words, and reframing negative responses by helping the respondent to express what is desired rather than what is lacking.

During the training sessions the participants had opportunities to experience the AI interview process and were given interview guidelines and tips for effective interviewing. The workshops also served the purpose of testing and refining the interview protocol and selecting stakeholders to contact for interviews.

Conducting the Interviews
The interviewer team conducted over 125 face-to-face interviews lasting about one hour each between June and November 2003. Each interviewer was supplied with a kit of materials that included AI background information, effective interviewing tips, an introductory letter, a script, the interview protocol, a debriefing form and a sample thank you note.

Interviewers were asked to send a letter of introduction to each individual on the contact list, letting them know about the process and its objectives and that the interviewer would be calling to schedule a meeting. A third of the interviews took place with people who were part of the Evergreen Cove community. However, even public officials who had no connection to EC were willing to spend an hour talking about the community and its needs. Because the interview questions asked about a story the interviewees had experienced, they were willing to share their experiences and help a nonprofit in the community.

After the interviews, the interviewers compiled their notes on the debriefing form provided in the kit, which was submitted to EC either electronically or on paper. A sample of the AI questions in Chart One shows the spirit and focus of the Inquiry.

The Appreciative Interview Data: Mining the Gold
As the interviews were drawing to an end, EC began planning for the "Evergreen Cove Summit on Healthy Communities." EnCompass convened a half-day *data mining session* for the planning team and a core group of interviewers to reflect on the interview process and the stories they had heard. The interview data had been captured in spreadsheets and sorted by question and stakeholder

groups. Stories and quotes that best illuminated each AI interview question were identified and later organized for use in the Summit conference.

Chart One
Evergreen Cove– Sample Questions for Inquiry

Topic 1: Community
We live in many communities – for example, families, neighborhoods, faith communities, where we work, and our towns. Today we want to explore what makes a community exceptional.

- Reflecting on your experience as a member of a community, one of these, or some other community – remember a high point, or an exceptional experience you had that enriched your life and/or that of the community. Tell me a story about that experience.

We see children and youth as important assets for the future of the community and the world. We hope to discover important ways Evergreen Cove could contribute to their support and development.

- Tell me a story that shows how the community, or an individual in the community, provided exceptional support for a child – either an experience you had, or one you have observed.

Evergreen Cove Members or Program Participants Only
Many of our members have told us that they value the sense of community they experience at Evergreen Cove. They describe this community as a place where it is safe to be authentic, a nurturing place where one has a sense of connection, acceptance and support, and a place where one can grow in mind, body and spirit.

- Reflect back on your entire experience with Evergreen Cove and remember a time when you experienced this sense of safety, nurturance, support, or acceptance. Tell me a story about that experience.

Topic II: Health
Good health is a treasure. It includes health of mind, and spirit, as well as body. If we have good health, many things are possible for us. Take a moment to think about what health means in your life.
- Tell me what health means to you.
- Tell me a story about a time you felt particularly healthy and alive.

Imagine that you live in a truly healthy community,
- What would be different from the way things are now?
- What steps could the community take to ensure a healthy future?

Values:
- What do you most value about yourself? This local community? Evergreen Cove?

Wishes:
- If you had three wishes for what Evergreen Cove might contribute to the health and vitality of our community over the next 5 to 10 years – something that would make the most difference to the future – what would they be?

This process created synergy as the group made meaning of the data. In focusing on themes from the data they had already begun to collectively imagine what the organization would be like if the exceptional moments shared through the interviews became the norm.

THE IMAGINE PHASE

The Imagine Phase asks the question, "What might be?" as interviewers and interviewees come together in a Summit conference to explore the positive past and create new images of the most desired and preferred future. During this Summit conference, Evergreen Cove, along with its key stakeholders in the community, answered the question, "What is the world calling us to become?" A macro vision for EC emerged out of this Summit that was used to focus the subsequent steps in the AI process.

The Evergreen Cove Summit on Healthy Communities
This one-day Summit brought together over 50 participants – EC interviewers and a diverse cross section of the community members interviewed during the Inquiry Phase. Participants were invited to dream and imagine the possibilities for the future – to create shared images and visions for a healthier community.

The exemplary stories identified in the *data mining* session were printed onto cards that were placed at each table. Participants read the stories on these cards and then shared them in small groups and in plenary, continuing to listen for common themes and patterns. Small groups examined the root causes of success in the stories and had a dialogue that led to clarifying the most enlivening, exciting possibilities for Evergreen Cove. Participants imagined ideal futures and created skits to bring them to life. Through an action planning exercise, they identified the most important activities Evergreen Cove should undertake to realize these visions. They then spoke to what they were individually ready, willing and able to commit to help bring them into being.

There was a strong, resounding message that emerged from the common themes of the stories. Evergreen Cove has a valuable role to play by networking and bringing together players across the community in a dialogue about creating a healthy community. This message became the macro vision for EC that provided a focus for planning the next steps of the Appreciative Inquiry.

THE INNOVATE PHASE

In this phase of AI, organizations build on the visions and positive images of the future to create what is called *provocative propositions—*bold, actionable statements about that ideal future, written in present tense, as though they were already happening. These provocative propositions are powerful images that act as magnets for drawing organizations toward their visions. They form the basis for creative and innovative strategies and actions for individual, organizational and systems changes.

Forum on Building a Vibrant, Healthy Community
In the Innovate Phase of the AI process, Evergreen Cove sought to explore further the macro vision that emerged from the Summit. It began by recasting its annual Health Expo to a "Forum on Building a Vibrant, Healthy Community." Building on the foundation and vision articulated at the Summit conference, they set a goal "to establish a committed network of leaders and *agents of*

change—for knowledge sharing and learning – to discover, plan and implement ways to move toward the future that we imagine and create together."

Evergreen Cove successfully enlisted new co-sponsors and Forum planners from every part of the health system, human service sector, education community, faith community, minority organizations, business community and the arts. The planning committee assembled 90 people -- the most diverse group anyone could remember coming together in this community to participate in this phase of the Appreciative Inquiry process.

The Forum began with AI interview questions conducted in pairs. The AI interview questions were designed to address the topics**:**

- How do we each define health and well-being in our own lives?
- What does a vibrant, healthy community look like?
- How can we build on our positive past history and current strengths to promote a healthier community?
- What would an "epidemic of health and well-being" look like for our neighborhoods, organizations and communities?
- How can we create this together?

The interviews began by sharing stories about when "you felt especially healthy and alive – or in a state of well-being." Participants told their interview partners' story in small groups, and many were then heard in plenary session. This process created a sense of understanding, shared values and common ground. From these stories, small groups identified top themes and wishes from each table and presented them to the plenary. In a large group dialogue, participants made meaning of these stories and themes through a guided discussion that explored what participants had heard, what inspired them, and what was most significant for the future.

The groups then developed *provocative propositions* derived through an exercise that asked participants to imagine three years into the future when the *Washington Post* is writing a story on the epidemic of health on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. They were asked to write this story, describing in some detail what is happening in this future time. Each group then presented its story and its visual image to the plenary group.

Several of the provocative propositions served to guide the work of the Implement Phase. A provocative proposition titled *Web of Interconnectedness* builds onto the overarching vision of EC that emerged from the Summit – EC as a **convener** of community dialogue about health and well-being, and not simply as a service provider. This vision was the foundation for what would later become an ongoing initiative, the Vibrant Community Initiative, implementing many of the ideas that grew from this one-day forum.

THE IMPLEMENT PHASE

This phase is about grounding the visions, making the provocative propositions actionable, implementing change, and keeping the Appreciative Inquiry philosophy alive by creating an appreciative learning culture. It is during this phase that questions such as the following are addressed: "How can we make this happen?" "How do we navigate the change?"

The Vibrant Community Initiative
Following the Healthy Community Forum, Evergreen Cove hosted a meeting with the forum planning committee and additional forum participants interested in being involved in next steps. Under an umbrella title of the Vibrant Community Initiative, the group divided itself into task teams -- healthcare, education, youth and elderly – to embark upon the work ahead.

Vibrant Community Initiative task teams have continued their work. The task group on youth is planning an Appreciative Inquiry Forum type event for young people. The Health Care task group is designing an AI approach to convening a think tank of health systems professionals and community and business leaders to explore alternative healthcare delivery models relevant to rural community needs.

The task team on ageing brought energy for new projects, including creating a Seniors' Resource Guide and finding ways for seniors and youth to connect through volunteer activities – a vision created at the Healthy Community Forum.

In 2005 Evergreen Cove is sponsoring an annual reunion celebrating the Vibrant Community Initiative where task teams and other Healthy Community Forum participants will come together to celebrate accomplishments and reinvigorate the spirit of the AI work. They will use AI stories to dialogue about their past accomplishments and their hopes for the coming year. They plan to keep the appreciative culture growing through a quarterly newsletter.

IMPACT OF THE APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY PROCESS

Evergreen Cove made a significant commitment to the AI process as a way to engage its providers of services and education programs with a diverse audience from the external community. The organization spent an entire year in conversations, listening to multiple voices and realities as they genuinely pursued the question, "What is the world calling us to become?" It was an act of courage and leadership for this *fringe dwelling* organization (as they sometimes referred to themselves) to reach out to the larger community.

In late 2004 EC conducted an evaluation of the AI process. The objective of the evaluation was to measure changes in perception, knowledge and behavior among individuals, Evergreen Cove, and the greater community since the AI process began. The evaluation findings clearly demonstrate that as EC pursued questions about health and well-being in the community, about what an epidemic of health would look like, and about how they could support the community's visions, it too was changed.

The evolution of the organization is reflected in its new mission statement that refers specifically to community. The new statement reads: *To offer programs and services that nurture body, mind and spirit and cultivate community*. The previous statement focused solely on the individual's health and well-being.

By engaging the community, asking for its feedback and responding with new programs and outreach, the AI process had a significant impact by focusing EC's agenda on community needs. EC even expanded its mission statement to add the words, *cultivating community*. People have

begun to see EC as being connected to and concerned for the community. EC is now engaged with sectors of the community and in activities that its members claim would not have happened before the AI process. The organization is now working with the county health department, the school system, teens, seniors and the under-served, as well as its core members.

One of the key objectives of the AI process was to increase growth of funding sources and revenue streams. In 2003, after the AI process began, EC increased its donor base by fifty percent. It has also been invited to form partnerships with mainstream health organizations, and its increased visibility and reach in the community has laid the foundation for significant future increases of both individual and institutional supporters.

According to the evaluation findings, EC is now more recognized as a potential partner by the established health care community, and increasingly by the greater community. The process of becoming more visible has allowed some community members to see EC and its services as non-threatening, viable and as making an important contribution.

One example of its new partnerships is with the Talbot County Department of Health. At the Health Forum, representatives of the department began to see EC as a potential partner and invited EC to work with them on a new obesity program. The obesity program brought EC into communities and services that they would not otherwise have ventured—including minority, youth, and low-income—and is further connecting the center to the school system. EC is also now working in partnership with the Mental Health Association, the Commission on Aging, the Chamber of Commerce and other local groups.

The evaluation also confirmed for EC that there is still work to be done to achieve wide-spread credibility and acceptance. This will take more time and concerted outreach efforts on the part of EC. It also highlighted that EC's internal debate about its image and its role in the community will continue.

ELEMENTS FOR SUCCESS IN AI CHANGE PROCESSES

The Evergreen Cove AI processes provided a wonderful opportunity to engage in an in-depth and full-scale Appreciative Inquiry. The techniques of AI are often applied to discrete activities or within limited time frames. A full-scale AI process requires a considerable commitment from the organization seeking change. Clearly, this level of commitment created significant change with Evergreen Cove.

For EnCompass, the experience highlighted the elements that create a successful change management process using Appreciative Inquiry. These include:

- Leadership and commitment are essential elements of success for an AI process. In a nonprofit organization this must include both the executive director and the board of directors or at least a majority of the board. Appreciative Inquiry presents a new world view that requires leaders to develop appreciative leadership skills. AI is not a project or activity, but rather a way of being in organizational life.

- Taking time to plan properly is critical to a successful outcome. Planners become believers. The planning team must have an understanding and commitment to AI and what it means to become an appreciative learning culture. This learning should be embedded throughout the AI process.

- The diverse mix on a planning team ensures a deep understanding of organizational or system culture, priorities and interests. A planning team that truly reflects the diversity of the organization is in the best position to address the questions that are most important for the organization's future.

- While, the consultant often acts as a coach as well as facilitator, it is important for the consultant to allow the organization members to become champions of their own success and take ownership of the process and the results.

- The Evergreen Cove AI experience was a concrete reminder that AI processes do not, and should not, necessarily follow a strict formula. The processes need to be tailored to the organization and the context.

CONCLUSION

Evergreen Cove set out on a journey of discovery. Through the use of Appreciative Inquiry, EC was able to get in touch with its value base, expand its role in the community, create new relationships and broaden its base for support and outreach. The process itself and its results were transformational for the image of the organization within the community and its image of itself and its role. As one member said, "It's like the difference between being on the bleachers and being in the game. We're in the game now."

References

Coghlan, A. T., Preskill, T. H., & Catsambas, T.. (2003). *New directions in evaluation,* 100, December.

Also see the AI Commons - http://ai.cwru.edu managed by Case Western Reserve University