

Leaders building professional learning communities: Appreciative inquiry in action

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Abstract

This article explores an approach to developing organisational and leadership capacity through the development of a professional learning community. The project involved 25 managers of adolescent-focused non-government organisations (NGOs) who participated in a 14-month collaborative development project that incorporated appreciative inquiry processes. Two guiding principles of appreciative inquiry – a positive focus and collaboration – framed the process for the development of a professional learning community that led to a highly productive collaborative learning space. Five key success components emerged during the project: a flexible and negotiated structure to the professional learning; a focus on positive stories; cycles of exploration and amelioratory modification to their work; individual and collective reflection; and a substantial period of time over which to conduct the development process. The potential transferability of these components to development of professional learning communities in education is explored.

Keywords: *Leadership capacity; professional learning communities; appreciative inquiry; positive focus; collaboration*

Introduction

The Non-Government Organisation (NGO) Leadership Project was initiated within the University of Canterbury in 2008 with the aim of increasing leadership capacity in adolescent-focused NGOs operating in Christchurch, New Zealand. The project involved 25 managers of NGOs from a range of settings including education, recreation, residential and community therapeutic support. Throughout the leadership project, the managers explored their leadership beliefs and values and how they expressed these in their roles. The process involved a peer-supported professional learning community that was informed by the principles of appreciative inquiry, from which the various learning processes were co-created with the participants. Key success components in this process are explored in depth and then linked to other education settings.

Literature

Appreciative inquiry

Appreciative inquiry grew out of the work of David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva in the 1980s where they originally developed the approach as a conflict resolution process (Harkness, 2004). Appreciative inquiry involves the art and practice of asking, in collaboration with others, questions that seek answers likely to strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. It is, in its broadest sense, according to Cooperrider, Sorensen, Whitney and Yaeger (2000), a systematic discovery of what gives 'life' to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. As such, the purpose of such inquiry is "the creation of generative theory, not so much the mapping or explanations of yesterday's world, but anticipatory articulations of tomorrow's possibilities (Cooperrider et al., 2000, p. 34). Harkness (2004) defines appreciative inquiry as "the cooperative search for the best in people, their organisations, and the world around them" (p. 49), and positions it as a process that identifies the best of what is happening in the present moment to pursue what is possible in the future. Walker and Carr-Stewart (2004) highlight the relevance of this process for leaders:

Those involved in organisational development, leadership development or appreciative research, choose to give the positive their attention. They inquire of others about stories that have life giving forces. Having heard these stories, the participants in the inquiry work to locate the themes of these stories, and from these stories create shared images of a preferred future, which then leads to designing ways to create that future. (p. 18)

In this project we also used appreciative inquiry as both a capacity-building change process and as a research tool. In their discussion of new inquiry-based methodologies such as appreciative inquiry and bricolage, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggest that these approaches could wholly reconstitute the conception and practice of research. They state that, "if we abandon the traditional goal of research as the accumulation of products – static or frozen findings – and then replace it with the generation of communicative process, then a chief aim of research becomes that of establishing productive forms of relationship" (p. 1039). Reed (2004) applauds, as a research tool, the two key characteristics of appreciative inquiry methodology – 'focus on the positive' and 'collaboration' – characteristics that distinguish it from other processes. "Appreciative inquiry focuses on supporting people getting together to tell stories of positive development in their work that they can build on" (Reed, 2004, p. 42).

This focus on the positive is also based on the heliotropic hypothesis that social systems evolve towards the most positive images they hold of themselves, toward what gives them life and energy, in much the same way that plants grow in the direction of the sun (Cooperrider et al., 2000). The process of focusing on the positive is based on a number of assumptions, one of which is the idea that organisations move in the direction of the topics they ask questions about; the idea that 'what we focus on becomes our reality'. Examples of this positive focus are widespread. One is the placebo effect, in which patients are given a pill that has no active ingredient but still has positive treatment results based purely on the recipient's belief that he or she is ingesting active ingredients. Another is the power of positive visualisation, where athletes mentally rehearse motor skills, such as a golf swing, which then results in improved physical performance. The widely used concept of 'positive deviancy' in the health sector also has this positive focus. Here, practices that are innovative and highly effective are identified and then considered according to the question, 'how can we replicate this success elsewhere?' Similar links can be found in solution-focussed counselling and narrative therapy, where 'exceptions' –

snapshots of times when things are going well – are extrapolated on to longer time frames (White & Denborough, 1998).

Appreciative inquiry research is commonly described as being ‘research with’ instead of ‘research on’ (Reed, 2004). As such, information collected during the investigation is utilised in the learning space, rather than taken away to be analysed, and contributes to ameliorating modifications for improvement. In this sense, the process relative to investigation findings is more about data creation and data synthesising than about data collection (Reed, 2004).

Capacity building in non-government organisations

Organisations can be divided into three major sectors; government (public); business (for profits); and non-government organisations (NGOs). Many of these NGOs fall into the legal definition of not-for-profit, community based, social service and charitable organisations (Morris, 2006). Paton, Mordaunt and Cornforth (2007) describe the changing status of the NGO sector, and discussed the moves in the late 70s to use knowledge and experience from the private sector to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the delivery of public services. This also affected the NGO sector as the government envisaged a greater role for nonprofit NGOs in delivering public services. Nonprofit NGO associations constitute a major force in the U.S. economy spending over \$75 billion annually and employing nearly a million individuals (Sherlock & Nathan, 2007).

We are entering the ‘golden age’ of nonprofits, an era in which nonprofits organisations will grow in numbers on an international scale, take on more and more critical problems, and achieve more and more success in addressing the issues of the day. (Wether & Berman, 2001, p. 215)

This ‘professionalisation’ of the NGO sector affected many areas including the funding context which became increasingly competitive, moving from grants to tightly defined tenders and contracts. Another impact was the promotion of leadership and capacity building in this sector; for example, in the United Kingdom there are in excess of 20 college and university NME (nonprofit management education) programmes being offered (Paton et al., 2007).

The concept of capacity has been linked with a wide range of overarching constructs (Hopkins & Jackson, 2003). Newmann, King and Young (2000) define capacity as the collective competency of the entity to bring about effective change. Hopkins and Jackson (2003) believe that the two key components of capacity are “professional learning communities” and “leadership capacity” (p. 89). Another perspective is provided by Mitchell and Sackney (2000) who define capacity as a combination of three pivotal components: personal; interpersonal; and organisational capacities. Personal capacity relates to leadership knowledge and skills, while interpersonal capacity involves “working together on shared purposes – and taking collective responsibility for each other’s learning and well-being” (Hopkins & Jackson, 2003, p. 91). Finally, organisational capacity is concerned with developing flexible and sustainable organisational processes – “a system which invests heavily in professional learning and relationship building” (p. 91). Hopkins and Jackson (2003) state that as capacity develops within an organisation, the result is the creation of a flexible system that is open to innovative ideas leading to greater confidence to work in creative and resourceful ways.

Professional learning communities are an integral means with which to mobilise, grow and expand the capacity of organisations to manage multiple changes. Fullan (2000) believes that professional learning communities make a crucial contribution to school capacity and Hopkins and Jackson (2003) agree, stating that “the stronger and more interconnected the elements of professional learning community, the greater the schools capacity” (p. 92).

Leadership and professional learning communities

A professional learning community is an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways, inside and outside of their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all pupils learning. (Stoll et al., 2005, p. 5)

The notion of professional learning communities (PLCs) is popular in a range of contexts, particularly in their focus on supporting the implementation of improvement initiatives (Stoll et al., 2005). An effective PLC has the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals in a school community with the collective purpose of enhancing pupil learning (Stoll et al., 2005). DuFour (2004) describes PLCs as “a powerful collaboration created by a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyse and improve their classroom practice (p. 8). The key focus is on enhancing professional learning processes. Senge (2002) writes about learning communities, and coins the term ‘learning organisation’ where:

... people continually expand their capacities to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together. It’s just not possible any longer to figure it out from the top, and have everyone else following the order of the ‘grand strategist’. The organisations that will readily excel in the future will be the organisations that discover how to tap people’s commitment and capacity to learn at all levels of the organisation. (Senge, 2002, p. 78)

Other authors lend support to this argument, for example Peck (1991) suggests that “a healthy organisation is one in which all participants have a voice” (p. 62), while Rudman (1999) defines a learning organisation as one where people have opportunities to share their collective wisdom and build on it. According to Fullan (1993), “For complex change, you need many people working insightfully on the solution and committing themselves to concentrated action together” (p. 34).

The notion of a PLC has implications for leadership roles. Pascale, Millemann and Gioja (2000), for example, suggest that the leader’s role in such organisations is that of ‘context setter’. Senge (2002) goes further by contrasting this with the role of the traditional leader. Traditional leaders, he argues, are ‘special’ people who set the direction, make the key decisions, and ‘energize the troops’. Senge suggests that this archetype is deeply rooted in the Western psyche and in an individualistic and non-systemic world view. He argues that traditional organisations require management systems that control people’s behaviour, whereas learning organisations invest in improving the quality of thinking, the capacity for reflection and team learning, and the ability to develop shared understandings of complex issues. Wheatley (2006) suggests that “We need leaders to understand that we are best controlled by concepts that invite our participation, not policies and procedures that curtail our contribution” (p. 131).

Pascale et al. (2000) suggest that leaders in a learning community are designers of learning experiences – not authority figures with solutions. They go on to say that “... once the folks at grassroots level realise they own the problem, they also discover that they can help create and own the answer – and they get it very quickly ... very creatively, with a lot more ideas” (p. 98).

Hill, Hawk and Taylor (2001) and Sergiovanni (2005) concur in respect of school principals. Hill and her colleagues argue that schools need principals who want to lead the development of a learning culture – enabling, encouraging, recognising and rewarding the learning of others – and who see themselves as active learners. Sergiovanni (2005) suggests that

the principal's role should today include that of cultivating the intellectual capital that schools need to increase what he calls their organisational IQ: "No doubt smart leaders help, but it is smart schools that will make the difference over time" (p. 52).

What specific processes do leaders use to create professional leaning communities? This question underpinned the early stages of the appreciate inquiry sessions experienced by the NGO managers who participated in the study.

The Non-Government Organisation Leadership Project

The Christchurch NGO Leadership Project was initiated in 2008. Its target was to enhance leadership capacity in adolescent-focused NGOs operating in Christchurch through the creation of a professional learning community comprised of the managers of each of these organisations. Such an initiative has not been previously undertaken in New Zealand, particularly with its focus on gathering the majority of adolescent focussed NGO leaders in one city, and also the use of appreciative inquiry processes for the project.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was the choice of process for several reasons. AI is a proven change process that has been used successfully in a wide range of settings, including the NGO and community sector, and as such provided a promising process that the managers could use to develop learning communities within their own organisations. It also involved a continuous learning process managers could engage with over a period of time, rather than one-off workshops, and this process could be customised to the particular needs of the group.

The philosophical underpinnings also aligned well with what we were trying to achieve with respect to the managers' personal and professional learning. The 'accentuation of the positive' process of appreciative inquiry aligns well with a strengths-focused orientation, such as that of the positive psychology movement, which has had a growing influence in research and practice across the human service sectors, as mentioned earlier re the fields of health, counselling, etc. (Seligman, 2002). In addition, the Youth Development Strategy of Aotearoa (YDSA) is a source document for all work with young people in New Zealand, a central tenet of which is the adoption of 'strength-based approaches' (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002).

A third rationale was that this process was seen as having the potential to bypass the deficit focus and problem saturation that tended to be the reality for many of the NGOs, given their wide-ranging clients' needs and the tight funding environments they operate in.

The organisations involved ranged in size from 20–80 people and covered a range of settings including:

- alternative education providers;
- residential treatment centres;
- counselling and therapy providers with specific foci;
- youth justice programmes;
- community development organisations;
- recreation providers and trainers; and
- whanau-based Māori youth development organisations.

All participants were managers of adolescent-focused NGO's with at least 10 staff, at least five years leadership experience in a leadership role and their organisations must have existed for at least five years. We deliberately accessed known networks and relationships to facilitate connections with others as part of a process known as snowball sampling (Babbie, 2004) allowing managers to recommend people they knew who fitted the criteria above. One of the authors, Chris Jansen, had the role of project coordinator and facilitated the emerging process.

An initial one-day focus group for the participants was held in November 2008. This involved scene setting followed by 'appreciative interviews' in which pairs of managers interviewed each other for an hour about their leadership pathways, a peak leadership experience, and the values and beliefs that underpinned their experiences. These ideas were

collated in these pairs and shared with the full group. The managers then decided how best to conduct an inquiry about their leadership in action over the next eight months. A range of strategies were devised including:

- leadership learning sets (groups of three to four leaders meeting regularly);
- communicating through email/conference calls and face-to-face meetings;
- an online web-based forum site;
- input from leadership consultants; and
- access to, and distribution of, relevant literature.

These strategies were scheduled throughout 2009.

In keeping with the collaborative nature of the leadership project, the original initiatives of the project were evaluated with the participants as the study progressed and were progressively adapted to fit their needs. Participants had ongoing input into all aspects of the project, including:

- the design of interview questions;
- selection of participants;
- direction of discussions;
- choice of input from books and speakers;
- analysis of data;
- ongoing modification of methodology; and even
- presentation of results.

All decisions were informed by the intention to maximise the effectiveness of the NGO director group as a professional learning community. The development of a shared space, in which all the participants had input into the direction, process and outcomes of the project, was also a vital aspect of the collaborative nature of the project. This inclusiveness of the participants had, we believed, the potential to generate rich data and enhance participants' motivation through their 'buy in' of the process.

Developing a professional learning community

Our analysis and monitoring, in collaboration with the participants, of the effectiveness of the inquiry process for developing a professional learning community amongst the 25 leaders led us to refine the two guiding principles of appreciative inquiry – focus on the positive and collaboration – into five key 'effectiveness' components which emerged as the inquiry progressed. Participant comments are included in italics.

1. A flexible and negotiated structure

One of the first findings after three months was that although, in the initial focus group, the leaders had all agreed to be involved in leadership learning 'sets' (i.e. groups of three to four peers meeting regularly), all of which had been fully planned at the time, only one of these sets had met, and then just once. In addition, the online web-based forum site established early in the process had only been accessed by a few of the leaders.

At the second focus group (March 2009), the participants unanimously agreed with their colleague who said, *"It is difficult for us to prioritise and organise meetings with our peers."* In preference to the self-directed and more informal processes of learning sets and web forums, the participants requested *"regular day-long focus groups that we can diary in advance."* As one participant said, *"It's much easier to diary a day out with good notice."* Said another, *"If it doesn't happen on the day, it doesn't happen!"*

In response to comments such as these, it was collectively agreed that the ongoing inquiry should involve one-day focus groups scheduled and implemented every two to three months throughout the year. The purpose of these sessions was clarified as the creation of a

‘think tank’ or ‘incubator’ where the leaders could explore leadership collectively and critique other leadership perspectives from other sources.

This new approach worked well. The groups were highly successful in terms of participant attendance, motivation, and learning outcomes. They quickly developed into rich learning communities that were highly valued by the participants. These comments were typical:

It has been a great initiative, getting people with our collective focus together. It has been great to interact with other leaders I didn't know.

Being able to take time out from 'normal' routine to learn, reflect and be fired up about my place in leadership and our place as a group in leadership.

We considered the high level of commitment to these focus groups a little surprising given the intensely busy schedules of these managers. As they said themselves, they had become highly engaged with their groups and the inquiry process and so were prepared to prioritise these meetings in their diaries: *“I am really growing in the process and I want more of it!”* They also appreciated the opportunity to negotiate with us and one another about the scheduling of meetings and what was discussed. This gave them choice, ownership of the process, and contributed to their willingness to participate.

2. *Sharing positive stories*

In all types of organisations, too many are filled with people who are exhausted, cynical and burned-out. I have witnessed the incredible levels of energy and passion that can be evoked when leaders or colleagues take the time to recall people to the meaning of their work. It only takes a simple but powerful question: ‘What called you here?’, ‘What were you dreaming you might accomplish when you first came to work here?’ (Wheatley, 2006, p. 132)

A distinctive aspect of the appreciative inquiry approach is the use of peer interviews. When reflecting at the end of the inquiry on what they had found most valuable, nearly all of the participants mentioned the opportunity to interview one another during the first and last focus group meeting.

This was the best part for me, reflecting on my own leadership style and approach.

The one-on-one interview was helpful for me to understand my own leadership; many personal insights have come from our discussions.

During the first focus group, the high level of personal engagement was very noticeable as the pairs of leaders returned to the larger group after having interviewed each other and shared their leadership stories. We consider that this outcome was promoted in part by the interview questions being framed in positive terms and answered as narratives. Reed (2004) states that appreciative inquiry questions must have two parts: first, the question must evoke a real personal experience and a narrative story, that help the participants identify and draw on their effective learning from the past; second, it must allow the interviewer to go beyond the past to envision the best possibilities for the future. Reed also observes that the art and practice of asking questions according to the appreciative inquiry approach strengthens a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. According to the leaders participating in the project, the nature of the interview questions helped them access stories that surfaced their passions and core motivations; says Hammond (1998), “When you ask people appreciative questions, you touch something very important to them. They don’t give politically correct answers, they give heartfelt answers because we ask soulful questions” (p. 48). The fact that the interviews were an exchange, that is, the participants interviewed each other, personalised the

process for them. Creating this initial connection with another leader increased engagement in the project as it progressed.

I really valued talking with other leaders, stretching my thinking.

Why do I keep coming back? It [the process] is rich in allowing good communication with others in similar roles, clarifies and renews what we know.

One of the most interesting conversations was related but external to the exercise, so the environment and context set up this possibility brilliantly.

In the final focus group meeting in early 2010, the value of sharing stories through peer interviews was again apparent when we and the participants agreed to have another round of peer interviews. This time, however, the questions focused on each leader's narrative of the changes to his or her leadership thinking and practice over the duration of the project. Again, these interviews were highly engaging, and it was evident that an enormous amount of learning had occurred during the project; "There were many gems that I could take away and reflect on in my leadership."

3. Cycles of exploration



Figure 1. Exploring our leadership

Figure 1 maps the cyclical process of learning that was developed throughout the project. The arrows in the centre of the diagram denote the leaders exploring and pondering their leadership roles, and considering how they could experiment with and nurture their leadership. This generative process was not only cumulatively cyclical but also complex, organic, and emergent. While the reflection tended to be triggered during the focus group meetings, much of it, along with experimentation, occurred in the interval between the scheduled meetings. The process also involved a number of stimuli and inputs that were fed into the process as described below.

One such stimuli related to the peer interviews based on appreciative inquiry questions held during the first and last focus group session. As mentioned earlier, many common themes were synthesised and the transcribed interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. Eight initial themes were identified, namely:

1. transformative change;
2. creating space to empower people;
3. deeply held values;
4. sharing the journey – sharing leadership;
5. the influence of our stories – looking back, looking forward;
6. flow – getting in the ‘zone’;
7. building positive relationships; and
8. walking our talk – congruence.

For each of these eight themes, participant quotes were collated on large posters and presented to small groups of participants during the subsequent focus group. Reflections were written on the posters and discussions recorded on dictophones; these ideas were subjected to the same process of thematic analysis as previously, and the responses fed back at the next focus group. Examples included:

An amazing amount of knowledge and experience spread over these posters.

It seems incredibly important that the taonga [treasure] that exists here reflects the way forward not only for the NGO sector but also in the greater planet that we inhabit.

Another stimuli involved input from a range of consultants in various areas of leadership, following which group discussion and reflection was recorded by video recording. We also made available at each focus-group meeting a wide range of leadership literature and most leaders took a number of books to read. Several wrote reviews of these books and these were presented for discussion at subsequent focus groups.

Over the course of the project this iterative process resulted in increasing depth to the quality of the analysis and reflection, and also built up successive layers of practice-based information and ideas. Informal interviews and conversations over the duration of the project were also recorded and collated. Ongoing opportunities to collectively critique all these sources of information, with regards to their applicability to the leaders’ individual settings, also reinforced the participants’ sense of ownership of the process.

I found the holistic approach inspiring, interesting and motivating. Very challenging questions! I seem to be so caught up in the doing [during my work] ... that I don't stop to reflect on the whys.

Really useful process – fascinating, inspiring, an honour.

4. Individual and collective reflection

Reflection on the material fed into cyclical processes that were essential to the project's effectiveness as a vehicle of change for the leaders. Reflection was both collective and individual, and was both structured (facilitated by one of us) and unstructured (left to the participants to determine, either individually or with one another).

We also put in place, as part of the reflection process, a means of collecting and capturing the experiences, thoughts, comments, and questions from participants relating to these discussions. The technique we used is called the 'one-pager' (Mayo, Henson, & Smith, 2008) which involve writing one page about an idea, collection of related ideas, action taken or a discussion point. Other than observing the one-page restriction, participants can write what they want to say, however they want to say it. We collated all 'one-pagers' and used this material as another stimuli in the collective reflection cycle. According to a study conducted by Mayo et al. (2008), 'one-pagers' are effective communication and reflection tools that can be shared by all partners in a research process. The participants agreed:

One pagers have been a useful way to reflect while it's still at the forefront of my mind.

I am enthused [by the one-pagers] to read more, reflect more!

Rich conversations, different perspectives showed in each interview; space for discussion and debate.

It's the creation of a place from which to reflect. We have developed an inspiring, creative, exciting space to share.

Some of the managers also began to apply the processes used in this project to their own organisations in order to re-create their organisations as learning communities. For example, the focus-group process and reading literature prompted one manager to implement some new strategies in her next staff training day. She said that "*engaging in a combination of intellectualising and very practical talk about ourselves as leaders*" had given her the understandings and tools to introduce appreciative inquiry methods to her staff so that they could discuss and reflect on workplace matters of importance to them. "*Taking the time out of work to reflect, to get organised and to develop new ideas – this is exactly what this process has allowed me to do.*"

5. Significant time frame

The project was initially planned to have an eight month duration, but, as part of the negotiated process, this was extended out to 14 months. An extended time frame was critical for the managers to develop their learning community collaboratively and for them to effectively explore their leadership ideas and practice. Fourteen months provided enough time to develop strong relationships among the participants, thus increasing trust and commitment to the group. This long-term commitment created a platform for the leaders to experiment with new ideas and actions.

We observed, and the participants agreed, that over the course of the project, the development of professional relationships between the managers had resulted in a subsequent increase in trust amongst them. "*This group has been like an oasis in the desert for me, I have benefited so much from having this opportunity to meet spending this time focussed not on my organisation, but on me and what makes me an effective leader.*"

In addition, during the last focus-group session for the project in early 2010, the leaders began to plan ways that this collaborative group could be sustained now that the formal research project was over. "*It would be great to work on a collaborative group, on a group project*". The group has, in fact, continued to meet with the process being facilitated by members of the group.

Possibilities for schools

In November 2009, the New Zealand Ministry of Education released the findings of its best evidence synthesis (BES) titled *School leadership and student outcomes: Identifying what works and why*. The authors of the publication synthesised the literature on the impacts of leadership on educational outcomes and identified five key links between school leaders' behaviour/practice and student achievement. We considered one dimension particularly relevant to this present study, namely Dimension 4: "Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development" (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009, p. 15). The authors explained that effective leaders promote teacher learning by facilitating the development of school-based teaching and learning communities directed at improving student success. Accordingly, learning communities are characterised by opportunities to "engage in open-to-learning conversations" (p. 75) and are receptive to "learn[ing] how to improve student success (p. 120). They claim that the way forward for leadership is to focus on "creating a community that learns how to improve student success" (Robinson et al., 2009, p. 120).

Teacher learning in New Zealand schools is addressed through professional development that takes a variety of forms. Current areas of focus include: improving Maori achievement; literacy; behaviour management (i.e. restorative practices, etc.); New Zealand Curriculum key competencies; effective pedagogy; and so on. Historically, professional development involved attending a course and then implementing the ideas in practice.

Regardless of the relevance of the content of the professional development initiative, a flawed implementation process can result in issues such as resistance and lack of 'buy in' by staff and minimal uptake of the strategy (Rudman, 1999). As Hargreaves and Fink (2000) point out, a critical success factor in relation to educational reform is whether "it can be sustained over long periods of time instead of fizzling out after the first flush of innovation" (p. 30). Hill et al. (2001) suggest that "professional development is more likely to bring about change if the programme is inclusive and if all the stakeholders have ownership in the process" (p. 4). They also argue that leaders need to "build commitment to the innovation amongst those who have to implement it" (p. 4), and that doing so takes time and a planned approach. The BES authors have these potential problems in mind, when they state that, "To establish such learning communities, leaders may need to challenge or change cultures that are not focused on collegial discussion of the relationship between what is taught and what is learned" (Robinson et al., 2009, p. 42).

An emphasis on the development of professional learning communities is not new to schools (Carnell & Lodge, 2002). However, the five 'effectiveness components' that emerged from the NGO leadership project may have relevance for schools when developing professional learning communities. Facilitation of a 'flexible and negotiated structure' could give educators the power and choice to co-create a customised exploration process that works for them which in turn often leads to a greater sense of empowerment. This negotiation may involve the formation of groups, negotiating the specific focus of inquiry for each group as long as it is aligned with school-wide goals, the type of inputs and stimuli accessed, the timing of meetings (days, times, frequency), etc. The negotiation could take into account the pressured time frames of teachers work. In a study of schools in New Zealand, it was found that it was common for staff to have three to four professional development topics to focus on in any given year (Hill et al., 2001).

Like the NGO Leadership project participants, these educators could also engage in peer interviews, 'sharing positive stories' from their own practice, identifying what motivates them as educators, and uncovering the values and beliefs that they hold in regard to their roles in education. Because the peer interviews used in the NGO project used positively focussed questions, the NGO managers were able to bypass a deficit focus, and simultaneously promote emotional engagement, thus building commitment to the ongoing learning process. In schools, this focus on educators' successful experiences in promoting learning could be used as the impetus for ongoing peer support.

Ongoing 'cycles of exploration', such as that depicted in Figure 1, could be adapted to a school setting. Crucial to the facilitation of these cycles would need to be active awareness of building participants' feelings of commitment and emotional safety, given that they would be asked to share their successes and their struggles (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). This caution brings to mind Robinson et al.'s (2009) finding that effective professional education-based learning communities are those with a strong sense of collective responsibility and accountability for student achievement and wellbeing (Robinson et al., 2009). Such responsibility, the authors claim, is best generated by connecting with teachers' core values about their work (their intrinsic motivations) rather than relying solely on extrinsic motivators such as compliance and performance appraisal.

A powerful combination of individual reflective practice supported by collaborative group reflection could also be adopted. Reflection on professional reading, DVDs, websites, etc., as used in the NGO project, have also been used in schools, but its success relies not just on handing out readings but incorporating discussion of them into professional development sessions (Hill et al., 2001).

A 'significant time frame' to develop a PLC is not difficult to achieve in a school setting, given that most schools already have regular professional development built into the weeks of the school year. The challenge is more likely to be one of maintaining a sense of momentum and energy over an extended period. Findings from the NGO project include the importance of good quality concentrated input, such as a number of short workshops over a relatively long period of time in order to stimulate thinking, as well as significant time to allow the growth of trusting relationships between participants, in order to create an ongoing learning community that is sufficiently robust enough to create sustainable change. This finding is supported by Hill et al. (2001), who argue that one-off, one-day courses may improve professional knowledge but not necessarily change professional practice. What is required instead is "on-going, on-site professional development that meets the real needs of teachers and their students" (p. 6). Addressing this issue may be the beginning point for leaders and teachers intent on developing collaborative learning communities within their schools through appreciative inquiry.

Conclusion

Our experience with the NGO Leadership Project suggests that collaborative professional learning communities can be successfully established, even in the face of highly time-pressured and demanding NGO leadership requirements. The success of the learning process developed in this NGO project suggests that the learning from the project may well have applicability in the equally demanding context of the school system. Five key success components emerged during the project:

- a flexible and negotiated structure to the professional learning;
- a focus on positive stories;
- cycles of exploration and amelioratory modification to their work;
- individual and collective reflection; and
- a substantial period of time over which to conduct the development process.

A key pre-requisite for effectiveness is a 'high trust, high accountability' environment that gives professionals agency in their own learning, that can then enable them to comprehensively address the complex issues associated with developing their schools as professional learning communities.

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Leaders building professional learning communities: Appreciative inquiry in action