

## Learning on the Run13: Appreciative Questions for Conflict Resolution

How to encourage the valuing of different perspectives and contributions in a positive way?

**The Request.** A Director of a small division requested help in re-establishing trust with a valued direct report staff person. The Director had not followed through on work that was promised and was inaccessible to the staff person who needed decisions made on a planning project they were responsible for. The staff person was angry and frustrated with their supervisor, the Director. The Director wanted to reconcile his professional relationship with the staff person.

**Larger Context.** The lack of follow-through had happened slowly over 6 months. The staff finally confronted the Director that he was seriously impeding progress with a project plan that the staff member was responsible for. The Director realized he had created a problem for himself and wished to regain the trust and collaboration he had had once before. The Director felt guilty that a relationship issue with his significant other was spilling over into his professional life.

**Consulting Intervention.** We started with individual discussions with both parties to understand their unique perspectives and prepare them for dialogue. We decided that there would be three conversations that would build on each other in sequence and based on a series of questions.

First, we asked them to understand each other's view of their current and past patterns of communication and trust. Even at this first meeting, we asked them how they might build on past effective communications they had had. For example, we asked them to explain to each other the filters/lens(feelings, beliefs, goals) that they use when communicating with each other and how that serves each of them and their relationship.

Second, they discussed how they might define incremental improvements that would signal positive movement and bring out the best in each of them. These improvements would serve as tangible proof that each could use to validate improvement.

Third, we asked them to plan together, in detail, how they individually and collaboratively could create a partnership to complete the project plan. We asked them to speak to the importance of the plan to themselves and others and to review their roles given what is left to complete.

This intervention generally follows the Venting, Owning, Planning (VOP) Model for helping others work through a difficult interpersonal issue.

**Last Line.** Appreciative questions help folks in conflict understand what their contribution is and what they might need to learn to consider alternative views and options. (1)

(1) For an excellent theory and practical questions for a dialogic approach to conflict, see: *Managing Conflict in a Negotiated World*, Peter Kellett, Diana Dalton, Sage Publications, 2001