'What we focus on becomes our reality' tapping into client and stakeholder expertise

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Building on the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach discussed last month, Lynne Irvine explores how the tools and techniques of AI combine with the craft of questioning to provide an effective and powerful approach to managing client and stakeholder expectations

Client and stakeholder satisfaction is key to the success of any project - so how is it that this area is so difficult to to manage? There are few organisations who do not recognise the value of encouraging a client centred culture, yet when you talk to people there is confusion and mystery about how to achieve it. Part of the reason is that we simply don't know how to do it.

Client satisfaction is often linked to dealing with complaints and associated blame. Focusing on 'soft' skill issues makes it difficult to measure. Our solution has been to employ mechanisms of measurement that again focus on problems, mistakes and dissatisfaction. We call these mechanisms names like 'customer satisfaction surveys' and yet our questions focus on areas of dissatisfaction.

To recap from last month, AI is a way of viewing the world that encourages organisations to focus on past and current successes as a way of directing and informing the future. This approach draws on two fundamental resources: project successes and the people involved in and connected to the project - stakeholders and clients alike. In this article we will focus on the second resource - the people involved in the project. By linking this approach with the craft of questioning you begin to see the enormous resource that clients and stakeholders can become for each project.

The craft of questioning is an approach to questioning that recognises the power of carefully crafted questions. People will go in the direction you question them. For example, if I were to question you about your journey into work today and the focus of my questions were on the difficulties and problems you faced - chances are that by the end of our conversation you will focus on how bad the commute home is going to be, especially given that it is Friday. If however I was to ask you about the plans you had for the weekend and explored how this might help you to relax, spend time with your family and friends, increase your levels of fitness etc, there is an equally good chance that your mood will be lighter and your sense of the future more positive.

The craft of questioning is based on the following assumptions:
● There is more than one purpose for asking questions.
● There is always more than one answer.
● Few answers can be seen as right or wrong.
● Questioning techniques are a transferable skill.
● It is important to constantly develop your repertoire of questions.

What does this mean for client and stakeholder relationships?
For the purposes of this article we will use the example of client and stakeholder management during project start-up. Using AI and the craft of questioning you can develop a clear understanding of the client and stakeholder expectations before the project gets underway. Fear of getting into discussion about potential differences and conflict, reminding clients of past failures and an assumption that we know what our clients and stakeholders want, all result in many project managers paying little attention to this aspect of the project start-up. Once trained in AI and craft of questioning interviewing techniques, project

managers and teams can engage with confidence at the beginning of the project.

The kinds of questions that would be useful to explore in these interviews include:

- What will need to happen in order for this project to be a success for you?
- Drawing on your past experience of working in projects, what have been the three key factors that have ensured the project was a success?
- What role did the project manager play in ensuring the project was a success for you?
- In order for us to reach the end of the project and you to identify our work as top quality, what will need to happen?

The above questions will not only provide the project manager with valuable insight into the critical success factors for the stakeholders, but will contribute to the development of good personal relationships with stakeholders.

Combining the AI approach with the craft of questioning provides valuable opportunities to tap into the skills and expertise of our clients and stakeholders. During the master class we will be exploring how this approach can be used during project closure - a time often dogged with claims, missed deadlines, unmanaged conflicts and 'personality clashes'.

In conclusion you may want to think about the most successful client or stakeholder relationship you have had as a project manager. What did you contribute to that relationship? What skills, tools and techniques did you employ? How did your project team contribute to the success? How did the client or stakeholder work with you to ensure that it was a quality relationship? What are the lessons you can learn form this to inform your current relationships?

The last article in this series (next month) will explore how, by combining Appreciative Questions with effective conflict management techniques we will capitalise on what is working in projects and manage the obstacles to our success.