

Prologue: Choosing an Evaluation Path

Miranda and Ben work for Evaluation, Inc., a 20-person evaluation consulting firm. They have recently begun an evaluation of a Department of Health's service quality and client satisfaction. The evaluation was commissioned in response to the negative publicity the Department has been receiving in the media. In particular, news stories have highlighted the Department's inability to address the needs of the poor and underserved in the state, its non-responsiveness to Medicaid patients, and its seeming disinterest in being accountable to its constituents.

In collaboration with their boss, Marietta, and several Departmental staff, Miranda and Ben develop an evaluation plan that describes a two-phase evaluation process. The plan includes background information on the Department's services, a list of stakeholders, key evaluation questions, data collection and analysis methods, a timeline, and a budget. The first phase of the evaluation is to gather data from the Department's internal staff. Depending on these findings, phase two will be implemented with a sample of the Department's clients. One of the data collection methods they have chosen to use in phase one is telephone interviews. Based on the evaluation's key questions, Miranda and Ben decide to design an interview guide that includes questions concerning the staff's roles and responsibilities, how the Department functions, how information is communicated internally and externally, how decisions are made, how they receive feedback on their work performance, and how that feedback is incorporated into their decisions for improved services.

Ben has just heard about an approach he wants to try in the interviews – it's called Appreciative Inquiry. However, Miranda does not think this is the time to be trying something new. After some discussion with Marietta, they get approval to conduct the interviews using two

different interview guides (approaches), and to compare the data obtained from each one. The following are the two interview guides:

<i>Miranda's Interview Guide</i>	<i>Ben's Interview Guide</i>
<p>Good Morning. This is Miranda B. from Evaluation, Inc., the company conducting an evaluation of the Department of Health's quality of service. As indicated earlier in our request to talk with you, this interview will take approximately 30 minutes. Your responses will be confidential – your name will not be used in reporting the results of this evaluation.</p> <p>Your name:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is your job title? 2. What are your main responsibilities? 3. Who do you report to? 4. Do you have a job description? If yes, may I see a copy of it? 5. How often does your supervisor communicate with you? 6. Do you feel that this communication is adequate? (Ask for examples.) 7. What decisions are you authorized to make on your own? 8. When you need approval, what is the process you follow to get approval? 9. How long does it take to get such approvals – are decisions made in a timely fashion? 10. How do you receive feedback on the quality of the services you provide? 11. If you receive feedback, how do you use it? 12. Do you have any other comments? <p>Thank you for your time.</p>	<p>Good Morning. This is Ben M. from Evaluation, Inc., the company conducting an evaluation of the Department of Health's quality of service. As indicated earlier in our request to talk with you, this interview will take approximately 30 minutes. Your responses will be confidential – your name will not be used in reporting the results of this evaluation.</p> <p>Your name:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is your job title? 2. What are your main responsibilities? 3. Do you have a job description? If yes, may I see a copy of it? 4. I would like you to think about a time when, as a staff member in this Department, you had an exceptional experience -- when you were most proud of being here doing this work. You knew that you were making a difference in the lives of people you were serving. Think back and tell me a story about this experience. 5. What made this exceptional experience possible? 6. What did you do to make it possible? Who else contributed to it? 7. What decisions led to this exceptional experience? How were these decisions made? 8. What feedback from your supervisor and others were most useful in making this experience possible? 9. What do you most value about the work you do? 10. What do you most value about this Department? 11. If you could make three wishes for this Department so that you could have more of

	<p>these exceptional experiences, what would they be? I really enjoyed hearing about your experiences. Thank you for sharing these with me.</p>
--	--

Miranda is concerned that Ben’s interview guide is too broad and will fail to address the evaluation’s key questions. Ben believes that using the appreciative approach will be more effective at illuminating the “real” issues. In addition, he explains that if for some reason, the interviewees’ responses do not address the main evaluation topics, he will ask about these directly to make sure that the evaluation questions are answered. Ben also thinks this approach will be more productive since the staff’s morale has been low since the Department started receiving the negative press. He senses that this type of questioning will encourage the staff to be more forthcoming in their responses and that the resulting data will be more useful.

At the end of the first day of interviews, Miranda and Ben get together to debrief. Miranda explains that she spoke with six staff members. She complains, however, that, by the end of the sixth interview, she was drained and angry at the incompetence she learned about. There were no job descriptions in sight, there were no formal feedback loops, and the staff seemed apathetic, not caring about performance or customer service. She also felt uncertain about how decisions were actually being made, and wanted to get more information so she could develop a variety of decision making flow charts.

Ben also interviewed six people. His interviews took a little longer than Miranda’s, but says that he came away energized and amazed at what the staff had been accomplishing under such difficult conditions. He heard stories about staff who had used their own money to buy disinfectants that could be used to clean community health clinics; he heard about staff who went out of their way to make coalitions happen and make funding available to serve those in need,

and about staff who went beyond the call of duty helping out in crises when there was a shortage of personnel. From these stories he has documented ineffective work processes, examples of how staff have invented creative methods to provide good service in spite of significant obstacles, about the staff's need to have greater direction from management, and about how the staff have developed ways to provide client feedback to the Department.

While Miranda was drained, Ben was energized. While Miranda felt stonewalled, Ben felt trusted. While Miranda felt like she was stuck on the worst possible project, Ben felt hopeful about producing a constructive and useful evaluation report. Miranda and Ben's use of the different interviewing approaches led them down very different paths, and as a result, they were exposed to very different realities that existed in the same organization. While Miranda chose to study problems and gaps in the organization as a way of learning about its performance, Ben chose to study successes or peak experiences. Both Miranda and Ben learned about the organization's problems, but only Ben saw how things worked when they worked well. While Miranda saw a static picture of problems and gaps, Ben saw a fluid, constantly adapting, dynamic system.

The choice of language and perspective is at the heart of what it means to apply Appreciative Inquiry to evaluation. We can choose to see the glass as half empty or half full, and by our choice, we begin to co-construct the reality we see. It is not "I will believe when I see," but "I will see when I believe." Miranda went into this work looking to identify and document gaps, and to make recommendations; Ben went into the same work looking to identify successes and to discover what is getting in the way of people's dreams and hopes. Both Ben and Miranda wanted to benefit from the rich qualitative data that interviews can produce, but they asked very

different kinds of questions. Consequently, the staff provided very different types of evaluative information.

This book represents a theory to practice philosophy and approach. As such, we will look at the ideas that guided Miranda's and Ben's choices, and illustrate how to apply Appreciative Inquiry to evaluation carefully and deliberately. It invites evaluators to explore how the sincere and systematic study of success can lead them to discoveries about goals, desired outcomes, indicators, evaluation use, and recommendations for improvement. The book aims to expand the evaluator's thinking and toolkit, and to become a guidebook for immediate application of this approach. The reader will benefit most from this book by following Ben's example of staying open and curious about how AI can contribute to effective evaluation practice. If after reading this book, you integrate Appreciative Inquiry into your evaluation repertoire, we would be most pleased to hear of your experiences, questions, and thoughts.

"Every day you may make progress. Every step may be fruitful. Yet there will stretch out before you an ever-lengthening, ever-ascending, ever-improving path.

You know you will never get to the end of the journey. But this, so far from discouraging, only adds to the joy and glory of the climb."

---Winston Churchill (British Orator, Author and Prime Minister during World

War II. 1874-1965)