

The Value of Values for a Business in Transition in India: Using Appreciative Inquiry and Open Space Technology

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This is a story of Appreciative Inquiry and Open Space Technology creating wealth in the chaotic marketplace of India in 1999. The characters are Anil Sachdev, then the Managing Director of Eicher Consultancy Services Ltd. (ECS, Ltd.), his colleagues, their parent company, The Eicher Group, and their clients. The author takes us through the steps where the company completed a blueprint for evolving the organization as its Founder and Managing Director moved on.

For ten years, ECS worked with over a hundred clients spanning the Indian economy: the giant Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation, linking thousands of rural villages; heavy industry; cement; engineering; vehicle manufacturing; and information technology, as well as pro bono work creating social value.

ECS founding directors saw the company's work as creating value out of values. Through strategy design, deployment and implementation they created four kinds of wealth: physical, social, intellectual and spiritual. The founders were highly respected consultants, specializing in human resources, TQM, and high performance leadership. They were committed to the evolution of wealth for India, their clients, their stakeholders, and for ECS.

They faced a challenge of growth and transition: founding Managing Director, Anil Sachdev was moving on, and ECS had organizational growing pains. Starting with a handful of people in New Delhi, the organization now had 62 people, in 3 offices: Delhi, Bangalore and Mumbai.

Beginning the process of Discovery: A.I. Process choices and protocol

I began working with the Executive Team so they could move quickly into inspired and trustful collective leadership, open to the emergence of new possibilities. I also wanted to remind them of the collective partnership they had forged during the ten years of very challenging work. This would form the basis for allowing their Founder and colleague to move on.

So I, as a person who had no stake in the outcome, did the interviews, asking:

1. Remember a time when your personal best and ECS's best were aligned in a creative project or situation. Who was there? What happened?
2. What were the hallmarks, the points of significance that made things work so well?
3. What key attributes characterize ECS at its best—attributes without which ECS would lose its unique character?
4. If ECS were to work like this all the time, what areas of emphasis would give it greatest leverage for such a transformation?

We're in a small, back room of a fourth floor office suite in Bandra, Mumbai. In front of us are an astonishing number of consultants and support staff in an open plan office. An even smaller office, a hallway housing a library and large table, two bathrooms plus a tiny kitchen and reception area complete the layout. This is the ECS Mumbai headquarters.

It is warm, very warm, but the AC is too cold, so a ceiling fan ruffles my papers. The young man I am interviewing leans forward animatedly saying "I'm creating a new track for ECS. It's very challenging because it forces me to understand Western ideas about business strategy, contrasting them with what we know about relationships, managing people and operations."

He changes position, sighs, folds his arms and starts telling me his difficulties. I invite him to continue describing his consulting experience exemplifying ECS at its best. "Who was with you? What happened?" I ask. The animation returns to his face and body. "We were asked to help a client with human resource and quality issues. After understanding their needs, we told them, you need to look at strategy before working on human resources and operations. "We were just learning about strategy, so we told them that. We gave them a presentation of our proposed contribution. Long story short...we got the job! This is becoming my area of expertise."

Several days later, after interviewing 60 people, the owner and President of the Eicher Groups and all but two employees, and with data from ECS clients and stakeholders, I present my Appreciative report to the ECS Executive team. The stories and information highlight the strengths ECS brings to organizational transformation in major sectors of the Indian economy. I also understand how the Indian business ethos, as expressed by ECS, focuses on creating value out of values. Together, we review the ECS vision and mission.

Opening the Space for Visioning

We reflect on the data, examining the Appreciative report. Then, I apply Open Space principles, opening the space for visioning, asking each person to get in touch with what truly has heart and meaning. Our Calling question: "How does the ECS way of consulting express its highest purpose?"

When we finish a short period of silent reflection/meditation, I invite everyone to draw or write — using no more than five or six sheets of paper — whatever comes: images or words and display them on the floor so everyone can see. We go around the circle describing what we'd received. Then, in silence, letting their reflective eyes and hearts make choices, people walk around, picking any sheet they're drawn to, placing it wherever they are guided to elsewhere on the floor. The pattern begins to form—one sheet at a time. When completed, we view it from all angles. There is a palpable sense of excitement and pleasure as people comment on what they see. There is a pause. I ask "What's next?", opening the space for new initiative to emerge. The suggestion comes: "Let the wordsmiths work on our statement of purpose, and the rest of us map what we need to work on".

Now, this doesn't look like Open Space. But the whole process adapted Open Space patterns and principles. We opened the circle ten days ago, engaging the whole system in an Appreciative Inquiry, asking: Is there an ECS way of consulting, and if so, what is it? Each person told his/her story of what had heart and meaning, revealing how people took responsibility for what they loved on behalf of ECS. Their stories illuminated what had health and vitality, and what expansion was called for.

The Executive Group reviewed the data and accessed higher consciousness in silent reflection opening to the higher purpose of ECS, forming the marketplace while we surveyed what had emerged. Self-chosen working groups converted the creative stream to practical actions. By evening, we had two large posters: the purpose statement, and a strategic map of work areas needing attention.

Opening the circle to the whole community

ECS employees came to an evening conversation, dinner and party. Each had received the Appreciative report with an invitation to add anything they wanted. We began discussing the report. People clustered around the posters, providing suggestions, amendments and ideas on Post-Its applied directly to the Purpose and Mapping sites, forming the group narrative.

Cause for rejoicing: Surfacing ECS' health and vitality for the new marketplace

The dinner and party were an exuberant gift exchange. We sang, danced, and expressed our varying talents in drumming, singing, recitation and playful joking. There was cause for rejoicing. This passage had not been easy. ECS principals had experienced an erosion of confidence over the past few years as the Indian marketplace opened to outside participation. Global multinationals, including the consulting world heavyweights, had fought for a share of India's nine hundred million people marketplace. Many in ECS reacted to Western standards for judging value without asking themselves how those standards squared with their own core values and experience in the Indian marketplace. ECS's strengths: its tremendous commitment to learning; employees' freedom and responsibility to make mistakes and demonstrate brilliance; supporting India's evolution of wealth, its clients, and ECS itself; with its staunch commitment to partnership and sustainability. These had not been visible in the avalanche of work and steep learning that ECS consultants were experiencing.



*Celebrating the blueprint:
Mission Accomplished!*

The Appreciative Inquiry and the Open Space visioning process surfaced ECS' health and vitality, reframed their purpose in light of their learning and inspiration, and identified key arenas for expanded attention. Only the most important stuff emerged.

Championing The Blueprint For Evolving The Organization

Overnight, working with people who'd taken responsibility for each poster session, we amalgamated the information. When the Executive Group met the next morning, their task was to agree on shared purpose and develop actionable propositions. Any proposition lacking a champion for whom it had heart and meaning and who agreed to take it on, was not included. By the end of the day, we completed what became the blueprint for evolving the organization, a springboard for manifestation as its Founder and Managing Director moved on.

Following this intensive period, ECS held periodic community meetings, continuing to open the space for emergent possibilities and issues. At the annual learning conference, Open Space kept the organization on course through the transition.

Two Years Later ...

Two years later, I facilitated an Open Space at ECS's annual learning conference. It was the first such conference without Anil Sachdev, the former Managing Director. ECS had fared well. A new Managing Director was about to be selected, and no one knew who it would be. In spite of uncertainty, spirits were high. And although several in the closing circle said "I miss Anil. This is the first time we've gathered without him.", it was a statement of personal affection, not an expression of organizational woe.

At Grow Talent, Anil Sachdev's new company, all ten employees and I spent two days asking questions using Appreciative Inquiry and Open Space principles for revealing shared purpose and working possibilities. A new adventure in creating value out of values has begun—opening space for spirit to emerge, and through AI, tracking its presence and articulating its form.

Marrying Open Space Technology and Appreciative Inquiry

The synergy of AI and OST is awesome! Truly a dynamic duo! Open Space patterns for staying in the flow of spirit provide the culture for Appreciative Inquiry to spotlight the life force in any organization. And more, OST/AI widens the bandwidth for the emergence of leadership and form grounded in what has heart and meaning. Used in transitions, it supports regeneration while opening to the unknown.

When Anil Sachdev decided to move on, no one could plan or predict how to 'make' the right things happen. When the process concluded, the Executive group had shifted from a group of committed individuals managing big challenges to a reenergized team—united in vision and strategy, opening the space for continuing partnership with their colleagues—shepherding the transition, not fearful or angry about the changes they were facing. They clearly modeled their values in action.