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Creating a New Paradigm of Unstoppable Positive Social Change

ABSTRACT

In 2010, we conducted an Appreciative Inquiry Visioning summit with the purpose of igniting a nationwide dialogue to transform culture in Australia. The goal of the one-day summit was to create a shared vision and roadmap for the Big Conversation's contribution to unstoppable positive social change. A values diagnostic tool provided a key innovation in the 4-D planning model. This article walks you through the steps of the summit, outcomes and learnings.

'It is the language of values that people use to map their world. It is what can inspire them to take action and move them beyond their isolation.' Barack Obama

The Big Conversation

The Big Conversation¹ is a cross-sectoral network that is seeking to create unstoppable social change in Australia through values dialogues. Its objectives are simple – start a broad dialogue, through small group conversations, on values in Australia – what they are currently, what we want them to be, and what we need to do to get there. Instead of waiting for someone else to have these conversations, we are beginning and facilitating a grass roots national dialogue to build awareness and ownership of the cultural agenda.

The Big Conversation began as a group of passionate individuals from the private, NGO and public sectors who were concerned about the impact of the global financial crisis on the future direction of the country. They sensed that this was a critical moment in time when proactive dialogue about who we are and who we want to be could create a powerful viral effect at all levels in society. It could shift the level of consciousness in the country.

We need to make these important conversations **bigger** and **louder**. We need to talk about **our values**, because this is where our decisions and our actions come from. What values best reflect how our society should operate? What values does our society want to see in the future? We want to know what Australians think. We want to start a conversation. A Big Conversation!

The interest spread. A committee was formed to take the idea into reality, spearheaded by the Emerging Leaders for Social Change (ELSC), a network of emerging leaders from all sectors – social, government and private – who

1 <http://bigconversation.org.au>

'The collective vision and potential to create mass change is indeed a reality.'
Margo Ward, CEO

want to create positive social change in Australia. The committee also included management consultants to the private sector. There were challenges in our ability to represent 'the whole system': aligning on what success would look like; determining how to narrow down such an all encompassing topic to one that is manageable and can create tangible impact; and finally, creating an outcome that sustains people's energy and commitment.

With these challenges in mind, our answer was to organise a Visioning Summit.

The Visioning Summit

On 13 September 2010, 'the Big Conversation' conducted an Appreciative Inquiry Visioning Summit with the purpose of igniting a nation-wide dialogue to transform the culture in Australia. The goal of the one-day summit was to create a shared vision and roadmap for how the Big Conversation could contribute to unstoppable positive social change.

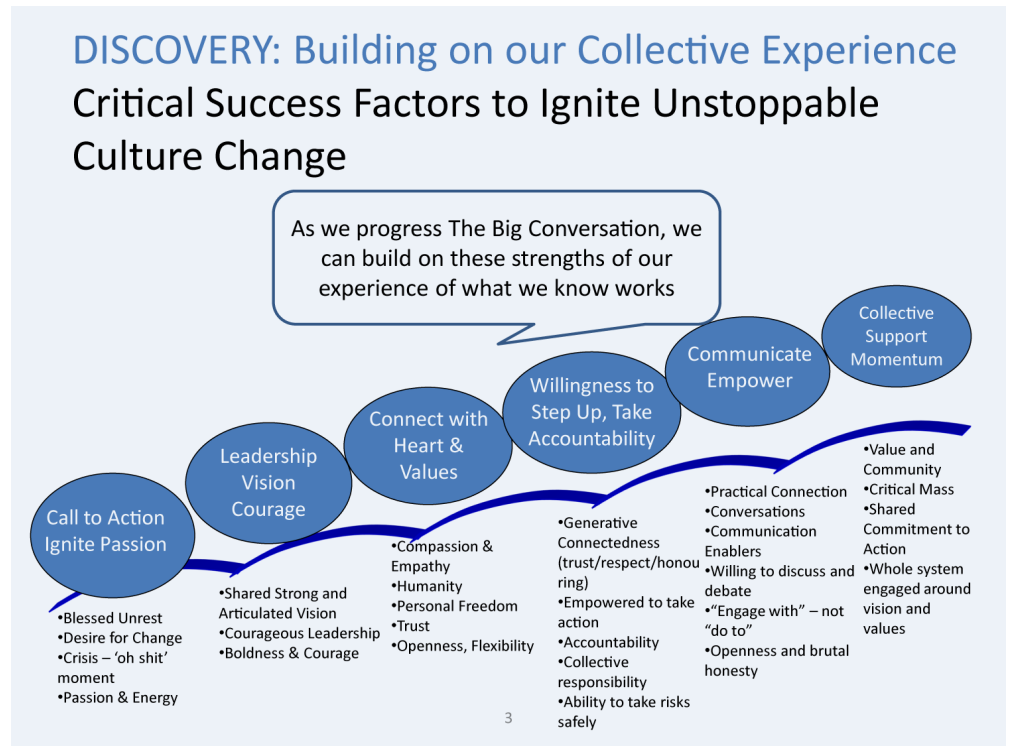
In launching such a big process, we learned new lessons that we believe add value to the current practice of Appreciative Inquiry. A values diagnostic tool provided a key innovation in the 4-D planning model: the addition of a new 'D' – a Diagnostic phase prior to the Dream. This diagnostic tool measured Australia's personal values, current culture values and desired culture values. Its value in this AI Summit is that it provides a picture of the where we are now – current perceived reality – and then lifts the group to a higher level dialogue around who they are (their personal values) to what the group most desires for the future (the desired values) – an invaluable set up for Dream.

We conducted the one-day Visioning Summit through a 5-D process. We will walk you through the steps of the summit and outcomes, to demonstrate how the Diagnostic phase fit as well as to share how using AI advanced the definition and direction of the Big Conversation.

Table 1: Visioning Summit: 5-D Process

	Purpose	Outcomes
Discovery	Build on our passion and best of the current culture; experiences of what creates unstoppable positive change, and wishes for the future	Critical success factors of what creates unstoppable change for culture transformation
Diagnostic (new)	National values survey debrief: reality check on what are the current personal values, current culture and desired culture – both at a society and organisational level	Compelling case for change Understanding of the gap between where we are and what we desire as Australians
Dream	Ignite the interest and passion of the participants to create an inspiring picture of the future in which the Big Conversation has played a part	Shared vision of what the Big Conversation could achieve
Design	What are the key themes for what we need to do to achieve the vision and some high level steps for how to get there	High level vision themes
Delivery	What we can do in the next 30 days to maintain momentum	Next steps to action

Figure 1: Building on the collective experience



‘What excites me about change is: it’s big, it’s coming and it’s inevitable. It’s so exciting to meet a group of people who know that and who realise that. We can’t avoid that, it’s the future.’ Cale Johnston, Year 12

Discovery phase

The Discovery phase followed the AI process of paired shares in tables, identifying the strengths and passion of the participants. The questions included:

- Recall a high point time in your life when you felt you were living one of your values that you are most passionate about – either at work or in the community.
- When have you been part of, or observed, positive change that then became unstoppable? It could have been a major change (e.g. Obama’s election, the end of apartheid, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the ‘Sorry’ apology, company restructure), or something smaller, but meaningful to you (a local community movement, a change in a school or work team).
- Imagine, if anything were possible, what would be your three wishes for the ideal Australian culture of the future?

The shares and synthesis at the tables created high energy and connected the diverse group of participants. There was a buzz in the room. The outputs from this phase outlined the strengths upon which to build towards our desired future:

Diagnostic phase (prior to Dream)

One of the innovations that the authors have included in their AI summits in the Australia/Asia region is a Diagnostic phase that we share with participants prior to the Dream phase. Because our audience is primarily large corporates, with often cynical and skeptical senior managers, we have found greater engagement by creating a ‘Current Reality Check’ between Discovery and Dream. This meets participants’ IQ needs to have well-researched analysis and scenarios and can strengthen the compelling case for change. It allows participants to let go of their IQ needs (and fears) and frees them to enter the EQ/SQ arena of Dream. In

'A "social movement" to enable greater social change inclusion can and will happen.' Belinda Morrisey, Executive Director

Maslow² terms, it allows participants to have their safety, emotional and mental needs met first, which then allows them to let go and move to a self-actualised dream.

In this summit, the Diagnostic phase incorporated the first-ever national values survey of Australia as the compelling case for change. A statistically valid sample of Australians shared how they see the current culture, their aspiration for a future desired culture, and their personal values which can be used to leverage this culture shift.

Using Barretts National Values Assessment

We used the Barrett Values Centre 'National Values Survey' diagnostic.³

Barrett Values Survey: Who we are, what we value and who we want to be	+	AI Process	=	Powerful AI Dialogue
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Originally based on Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs', Barrett Values Centre [BVC] has developed a model called the 'Seven Levels of Societal Consciousness' depicting how all human beings, organisations and nations grow and develop in seven specific stages.

We have used this diagnostic for corporate culture transformations with our clients for about ten years and now incorporate it into most AI visioning summits. It offers an analytic window on what is usually regarded as intangible: people's core personal drivers, their current perceptions of reality, and their desired future. At the same time, the nature of the values survey taps into emotions and an individual's sense of meaning. It immediately creates a heart-connected basis for conversation.

It is a good fit with AI's approach. The personal values indicate core strengths that can be built on. The current values bring to the surface the reality of today's starting point, while the desired future values relate to the dream. The alignment or tension among the three lenses leads to more grounded, yet at the same aspirational, dialogue between the Discovery phase outcomes and the Dream. It gives the client language and a great sense of alignment as they enter the Dream phase. The database was compiled by one of the country's leading public opinion polling houses in December 2009 at the height of the global financial crisis (GFC). (See Figure 2 on p. 28)

Australian personal values

The top ten personal values rang true of Australian values, including humour, family, honesty and, interestingly, compassion. The pattern of values showed a people who value relationships, self-development and a strong sense of cohesion.

Australian current culture values

The top five current values showed were limiting – bureaucracy, crime / violence, blame, wasted resources, materialistic. In Barrett terms, limiting values represent entropy, or the amount of dysfunction in the system. The appreciative

² Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs'. See http://www.valuescentre.com/culture/?sec=barrett_model for the way Barratt Values Centre has adapted the model.

³ <http://www.valuescentre.com>

view of entropy is that it represents the amount of positive energy that can be released and applied to creating our desired culture and dream. The only positive values in the current society were freedom of speech and economic growth.

Australian desired culture values

The desired culture values were a reaction to the current limiting values and included care for the elderly and future generations, and creating effective government services.

Current values were seen as less about personal experience and more about media headlines. It created that burning platform for change – ‘why should I get involved in this dialogue’ – and ignited a vision that allowed people to get in touch with their innermost desires for the Australia of the future. The lesson we learned for AI Summits – this is a powerful diagnostic to use to elicit meaningful conversations.

Figure 2: Australian personal, current and desired culture values



Dream: vision

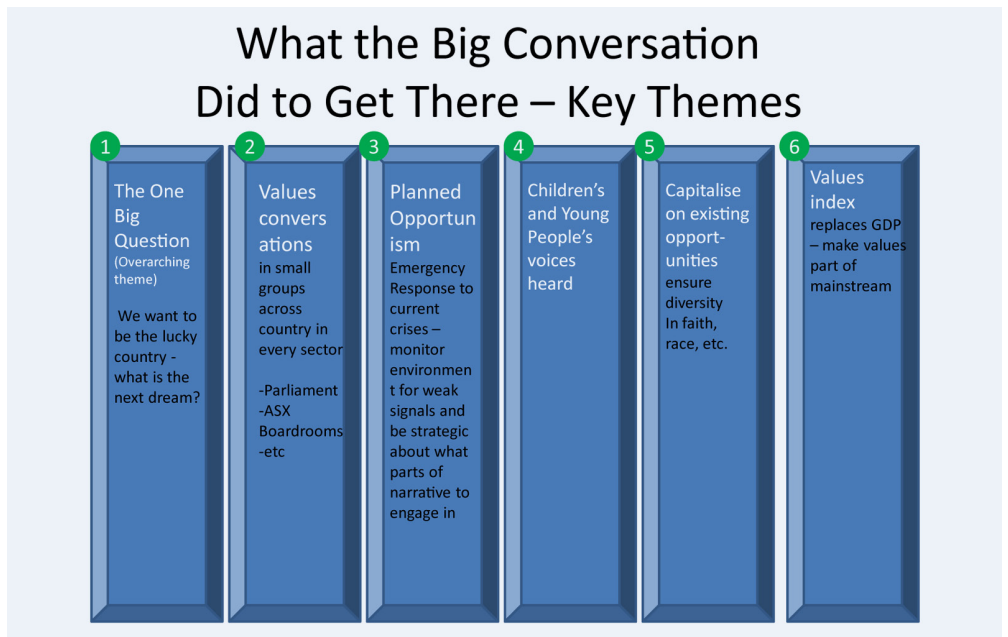
We followed a process for dream through self-reflection, sharing of dreams as a table and then developing a creative expression of the dream. We voted on the dreams that evoked the most energy from the group. What emerged was a realisation that Australia is currently lacking an Australian Dream – an Australian identity. In the past it was ‘the lucky country’. What became clear through the dialogue was that there is a vacuum in the national dialogue around the new Australian Dream. It was an ‘aha’ moment. This was something that the Big Conversation could bring into the national dialogue.

Sharing the dream



Design: vision themes

Figure 3: Design: Vision themes
Looking back from success



Delivery: taking accountability

‘Kick start the process with key leaders in my context.’

‘Get involved. Make sure I’m living my values regardless of my environment, it’s too important to ignore.’

‘Keep on keeping on! I try and weave the Big Conversation into most meaningful conversations that I have.’

The new conversation has begun ...

'Today reinforced my belief that at our core we all want to live in a better world.' Amanda Fajak, Group Manager Business Transformation

Key takeaways from the summit

Through a diverse group of forty key influencers in Australia, a common view emerged that what we yearn for most is a new Australian dream. We confirmed that values data and the AI conversations are a unique way to create conversations that connect people at a deeper meaning level and add value to many current conversations about Australia's future. Actionable ideas emerged and attracted excitement in the room, to be implemented by participants who signed up to each theme area.

What next?

Following the summit, members of the working group met to consider the Design themes that had emerged, together with data from values debriefs that had been run. In prioritising the ideas, they used a number of criteria, including impact on community wellbeing, unique contribution and passion and enthusiasm. As a result, three focused initiatives have been established for 2011:

- Create greater public awareness around the need to define a new Australian Dream. Plans are underway to develop a narrative about how the Australian Dream has developed and changed in the last half century and to provide a call to arms to define what it should be now using social media and community conversations. Many of the ideas surfaced in the 'Dream' presentations at the summit.
- Influence greater values-based decision making in a broad range of decision makers in Australia by promoting conversations and values-based tools.
- Influence the inclusion of an annual values survey, alongside the Well Being Index, for inclusion in the national measures of health of the country. This was another of the ideas to gain traction in the summit.

A task force, including some of the attendees from the summit, has been established to address each initiative. The agenda for the Big Conversation seems more focused, more manageable, and aligned to the passions of the group and wider stakeholders.

In addition, the national values data are being released freely through the Big Conversation website so all parts of the system can initiate values dialogues in their communities. We have developed a 'facilitator pack' to guide people through the values debrief. At the end of the session, we ask three questions that will be forwarded to the Big Conversation for collation and synthesis of what is emerging from within the whole system:

- What is positive about the values survey results? What can we build on for the future?
- What are the top three 'Big Ideas' for what we can do to get to our desired culture?
- What mindset shift is required?

To close the sessions, we asked each participant 'what action will you now take?' – and to share this around the room. The feedback we got from this last question was that this was the most powerful part of the session – when people take personal accountability and choose to 'be the change they want to see in Australia'.

The focal point for synthesis of the national debriefs is the Centre for Social Impact (CSI) – a partnership between the Business Schools of the University of New South Wales, the University of Melbourne, Swinburne University of Technology and the University of Western Australia. We are working with CSI to have the greatest impact at a national level.

Lessons learned

There were a number of lessons learned:

Adding the Diagnostic phase prior to the Dream created more validity and greater grounding to the AI aspirational visioning process, ensuring that Dreams are not divorced from reality. An alternative we have used in other work is to place the Diagnostic after the Dream, before Design. In this case, the Diagnostic informs the Design and Delivery phase and results in expansive and practical ideas and action plans.

The values survey is a useful addition to a visioning summit. As it works at three levels – intellectual, emotional and meaning – it quickly engaged the group, critical for developing an inspiring vision. While the current values were not entirely consistent with the idea of focusing on strengths, they are the current perceived reality. Participants found hope and inspiration in the shared personal values and desired values for Australia.

In most AI Summits, there is a clear owner – the client organisation and the client leader who is responsible for the summit process and outcomes. In this scenario, there was no organizational 'hierarchy' or inner decision making core, and thus no one owner. The working group was the primary decision making group, a moveable feast of some 20-plus people! This made defining topics more complex. In hindsight, running a mini- summit with the working group would have helped us refine the agenda.

A pre-summit would also have helped the working group to communicate to the invitees. While there was a written invitation, the key method of recruitment was one-on-one conversations. On the summit day, we found there was more than the usual need to position 'why we are here'.

We were limited in time from 9am-3pm to achieve the objectives. This was a real stretch and towards the end of the day we were not able to offer the level of dialogue around key themes in Design that the group desired. In hindsight, we would have limited the AI process to include Discovery, Diagnostic and Dream only.

Finally, this experience has reinforced our belief in the power of AI to provide generative structure to complex situations to deliver productive results. One of the participants summed it up nicely at the end of the Summit: 'Today we experienced the impact of mobilising/harnessing the latent power of existing groups towards a singular, unifying and inspiring purpose.' (Paul O'Byrne, Sustainability Project Manager)

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