

# Developing Provocative Propositions from Evaluation Conclusions and Recommendations

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Frank G. Cookingham

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## **Features of a provocative proposition**

Provocative propositions, a key concept within the appreciative inquiry framework, may be adapted to encourage propelling a project forward based on conclusions and recommendations (see Appreciative Inquiry Commons, and Elliot (1999)). A provocative proposition is designed to inspire imagining a better future. It is stated in the present tense to describe something just beyond reach at the moment, something that calls members of the organization toward an attainable vision.

Provocative propositions are not recommendations; they do not describe what should be done. They describe what the organization would look like if it were designed to maximize the best practices, the peak experiences, in a sustainable way. Some variables to consider as propositions are framed are strategy, style and structure in the organization.

## **Hypothetical case study**

I have prepared a hypothetical case study to illustrate how formulating provocative propositions can be included in an evaluation exercise.

The project provides agricultural training at a model farm. Graduates of the training are certified, which makes them eligible for some types of assistance from the Ministry of Agriculture in the country. The training is much less expensive than university training, and the training approach is learning by doing at the model farm.

The implementing agency is a NGO that has established good relationships with other agricultural programs in the country and the Ministry of Agriculture.

One of the objectives of the training program is to enhance spiritual development in trainees so that they can resist engaging in typical corrupt practices in agriculture.

## **Conclusions**

The evaluation exercise developed a number of conclusions. Suppose that there were two that the Evaluation Team Leader selected for the provocative propositions exercise. One is about the ethics training in the program and the other is about spiritual nurture in the program staff.

## ***Ethics Training***

Twenty-five farmers were asked if the eight ethics principles that they had been taught were applicable in their context. For each principle all but 1 or 2 said “yes”.

The principles were discussed with university agriculture professors as the program was being implemented. There is general agreement that such principles should be taught in agricultural programs at various levels.

## ***Spiritual nurture***

Various activities were implemented with the four farm staff and their families for Bible study. There is no evidence that these activities are causing staff to engage in deeper Bible study, or that they are leading to stronger commitment to follow Christ. However, during the interviews comments were made such as:

- I feel like we are one family (comments from two people had this meaning).
- “When I step in here it is like the Heaven.”
- “We are not quarrelling as much as before.”

In one community there were tensions between various denominations. Trainees from different denominations didn’t want to be in the same room for the training classes. The spiritual growth component in the training helped them be more tolerant and understanding with each other. Eventually they formed an agricultural association and they have continued to work together since then.

This illustrates one outcome of including a spiritual component in the project. But after implementing many activities related to spiritual development over the years, there was little evidence that spiritual development was in fact being enhanced significantly in students and participants. There are some positive results, but there is a long way to go to meet expectations set at the beginning of the project.

## **Process for Developing Provocative Propositions**

The evaluation team leader (ETL) went over the evaluation conclusions and recommendations with the project team. After answering questions and responding to various comments about the evaluation, ETL explained the characteristics of provocative proposition with examples.

In the following three hours:

- The project team members wrote 22 statements (in their native language) that described an attainable vision for the next phase of the project. They put 15 of the statements into four groups that had a common idea, and expressed the common idea in each as a composite proposition.
- They cast votes on the 7 remaining statements and the 4 composite statements according to the idea in which they were willing to invest considerable effort themselves.
- All votes were cast for the 4 composite statements.

- The 4 composite statements were translated into English for ETL, who then facilitated discussion about re-expressing the core ideas as compelling possibilities for future planning.

### ***Provocative Proposition: Ethics Training***

The Ethics Module has potential applications beyond the current certificate training programmes.

What if the Ethics Module in the certificate training courses was adopted in an appropriate form by all agricultural training programmes in the country?

What if other vocational training programmes developed a similar module with practical examples?

Discussions with potential partners involved in agricultural education could energize fruitful efforts over time.

### ***Provocative Proposition: Spiritual Nurture***

Biblical transformation is the work of the Holy Spirit in individuals that have accepted Jesus Christ. Transformed individuals create opportunities for others to accept Jesus and to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit... i.e., to become transformed.

God has shown people throughout history that there is no one method that creates opportunities for transformation. Transformation is the work of the Trinity, who works through the local church and outside the local church, who works through Bible classes and outside Bible classes.

For some people, an inspiring pastor/evangelist creates the opportunity to accept Christ. Where there is no inspiring evangelist, ordinary transformed folk create opportunities through their personal relationships with others in which they demonstrate godly living.

The model farm is managed and staffed by local people that are known throughout the community. What if their observable attitudes at work and home made it clear that they were serving God moment by moment in the cow stalls and pastures, in their homes, and in their community, regardless of where they worshipped or what ecclesiastical doctrines they practiced?

What if every trainee at the farm experienced being loved by the staff as a neighbour?

### ***Provocative Proposition: Empowerment of Farmers***

Farmers provide essential products for people to eat. They have more power than they realize to influence local and national agricultural and economic policy by cooperating together. One example is building bridges and access roads so that they can travel shorter distances with their

agricultural machines to reach their cultivated lands. This cannot be done by individual farmers. It can be done by cooperation between farmers and local authorities.

It is possible to build on the good experiences that trainees have in the diploma training to overcome reluctance they have in participating in formal associations or getting involved in policy making beyond their immediate community. It is possible to work with the local authorities who are successful in getting state or international funding to consider preparing appropriate proposals.

The objective is to facilitate interested farmers and local authorities to talk with each other about efforts that could improve the quality of life in the community as well as the prosperity of the farmers. The objective is to empower small farmers to make a positive difference in the quality of life for their families, community, region and nation.

This idea is in alignment with the national program that will be implemented in the next years. The program idea is to link the authorities, businesses, NGOs, civil society of a certain territory where communities share common features and needs, in order for them to design a strategy for the area development and implement it by 2020. The development agency can be actively involved in the dissemination of the program among farmers, train them for this program and advocate for their representation in the new created entities.

## **Summary**

In this hypothetical case study program staff developed three provocative propositions for two evaluation conclusions. They provide evidence-based guidance for the agency in developing strategic directions beyond the program that was evaluated. Engaging in these directions could inspire energetic commitment within the agency and partners to transforming lives and institutions.

## **Resources**

Appreciative Inquiry Commons, <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/>. This site managed by David Cooperrider and associates contains links to many resources.

Elliott, Charles. (1999). *Locating Energy for Change: An Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry*. International Institute for Sustainable Development. Excellent resource for the transformative evaluator.

Preskill, Hallie & Catsambas, Tessie Tzavaras. (2006). *Reframing evaluation through appreciative inquiry*. Sage. Reframing, not replacing, evaluation.