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## Strengthening Community with Appreciative Inquiry: Stories From a Learning Network

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Image courtesy of Griet Brouwen

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# Building a Community

## Many Small Beginnings Can Grow Into A Large-Scale Movement

**This article argues that building a community is like growing a movement: the end point is unknown, uncertainty is constant, and progress happens through many small steps. Getting stuck is inevitable but generative when met with curiosity. Movements grow by broadening participation, deepening practice, and providing direction at the right moments, guided by attentiveness to context, intuition, and reflective learning.**

My son says, as he takes another big bite of his peanut butter sandwich, “the final year of primary school is the best year so far, Mum”. He settles a little deeper into his chair. “It’s kind of like you’ve finished the game.”

I recognise that feeling. Finishing something feels good: pressing the send button to submit the final version of an article, or clinking glasses cheerfully after the closing session of a project. Although some people have a higher tolerance for loose ends than others, the need for closure is deeply human. We want to know how things will turn out – or at the very least to have some certainty about the steps that will lead to success.

What if we thought of a community as a movement? In building that movement, the desire for certainty can get in the way. Regardless of the community’s subject, in many cases the ambition is enormous while the true end point remains unknown. The movement is always in the making and an end point might never be truly reached. It means people are constantly searching for what the best next step might be.

### Seeing your initiative as a movement: Getting stuck – and finding your way again

In recent years, we have interviewed a wide range of movement-makers about how they move their initiatives forward step by step (Verdonshot, 2020; 2022; 2025). These movement-makers work in a wide variety of contexts. For

example, we have been following an initiator who, together with colleagues, is building a positive living and working climate for clients and staff within an organisation providing care for people with disabilities. We also interviewed a group of colleagues, both medical and support staff, in a hospital who aim to foster multidisciplinary collaboration in their hospital. Each of these movements can be seen as processes of building a community around a certain innovation initiative.

*Building a community to help the initiative move forward doesn't happen without a struggle.*

The innovation initiatives of the people we interviewed differ from one another, but one theme consistently returns in their stories about fostering them: building a community to help an initiative move forward doesn't happen without a struggle; it means getting stuck along the way. Movement-makers repeatedly encounter moments in which progress stalls and they find themselves unsure of the way forward. This may happen because it proves difficult to get others on board, because unexpected resistance arises, or because it is unclear what the smartest next move might be.

#### The story of the community police officer

A community police officer I interviewed told me how he was working to create a safer neighbourhood. He had no master plan, no phased approach, and not even a clear picture of how to achieve his goal. What he longed for was greater social cohesion and a tidy street where people felt safe.

Time and again, he managed to create small breakthroughs. For instance, he received reports of nuisance behaviour. These reports often came from the same people. Wanting to hear other voices as well, he came up with the idea of chatting with dog owners walking their dogs in the morning. He gave them a notebook and asked them to note down anything they observed, both positive and negative. A few weeks later, he talked with them again.

In this way, more people became positively involved in the neighbourhood, strengthening the shared desire to work together on developing a safer environment. The notebook idea was not revolutionary, yet it was one of many small breakthroughs that, together, contributed to the gradual creation of a safer neighbourhood. The officer's manager had confidence in him and gave him the space to approach things creatively.

*What helps is activating your own curiosity in search of a small next step.*

When you are doing something new, getting stuck is inevitable. It is not a matter of preventing it. Rather, what matters most is not seeing it as an end point. What does help is activating your own curiosity in search of a small next step – something you can imagine, that seems promising, and that is small enough to try out immediately with renewed energy.



Tapping into intuition: knowing what to do when you don't know what to do.

*How to increase the chances of realising breakthroughs. By: Broadening, Deepening, Providing direction.*

Mara Spruyt (2020) interviewed leaders and board members about how they deal with not knowing. They all appear to be good at something best described as “knowing what to do when you don’t know what to do”. One calls a friend to reflect together; another creates a moment of silence during a walk to think and tap into intuition. Such an in-between step is also a step forward. The essential idea is: there is always something after getting stuck.

### Three dimensions for growing a movement: Broadening, deepening, and providing direction

If a movement progresses by turning moments of being stuck into breakthroughs, the question arises of how to increase the chances of realising these breakthroughs. Our research shows that a movement can develop in several ways:

- **By broadening** More and more people become enthusiastic about the initiative and join the community.
- **By deepening** Those involved develop new knowledge and new ways of working in order to bring questions that underpin the community’s existence further.
- **By providing direction** The initiator is able to take leadership and make choices that matter for the continued growth of the movement.

For strategies aimed at broadening and deepening, the principle seems to be: the more, the better. Strategies for providing direction, however, require careful timing; they are much more about choosing the right moment.

#### The story of colleagues working together for good care in a hospital

An anaesthesiologist was working in his hospital on a movement focused on interdisciplinary collaboration: delivering good care together with all healthcare professionals. In the early phase, he and a colleague from the learning centre visited several other Dutch hospitals to learn from their practices. They later adapted various ideas to their own context, contributing to the deepening of the movement.

They set up a working group comprising people from all parts of the care system: a physician, a nurse, a manager, a psychologist, a physiotherapist, the chief nursing officer, and a care manager. The composition of this group reflected what they were seeking to achieve: interdisciplinary collaboration.

Acting congruently in everyday decisions, based on the values underlying the movement, is a way of providing direction.

The plan developed by the working group consists of a shared ambition and several programme lines. They conducted a hospital-wide tour to present the plan to operational managers, care managers, policy staff, medical staff, and the nursing advisory council, inviting their ideas. In this way, they succeeded in broadening the movement and engaging more people to join the community.

### Strategies for making a start

We have been following the initiative described above since 2019, and there have been countless moments of broadening, deepening, and providing direction. The moments described in the boxed text all stem from the early phase. Our research identified a wide range of strategies for broadening and deepening (see Verdonschot, 2020) that can help move things forward. From this emerge several suggestions for dealing with the uncertainty inherent in doing something new with an unknown ending:

*Think in terms of tangible outputs and create something together.*

- **Think in terms of tangible outputs; create something together.** For example, a thoughtfully designed invitation to a kick-off meeting, or a magazine featuring learning stories from people who participated in a pilot. In this way, something is completed (the pilot phase concludes with an online magazine), even though the movement continues. Creating something together is satisfying and contributes to knowledge productivity (Verdonschot, 2009).

*Link the not-knowing to active curiosity*

- **Link the not-knowing to active curiosity** (Vera, 2024). When you find yourself wondering, “What next?”, turn this uncertainty into action by reflecting, alone or with a partner, on questions such as: Who could bring new energy at this stage? Who do we know with an unconventional perspective? Who has expertise here?

### Provide direction by alternating between zooming in and zooming out

Providing direction means regularly shifting between zooming in – fully immersing yourself, e.g. facilitating a meeting with new interested parties – and zooming out – hovering above your initiative to see who else is involved. Wicked questions such as “How can we collaborate in an interdisciplinary way?” or “How can we work more sustainably across the value chain?” cannot be solved with a single solution. Many people are involved and multiple local initiatives are needed to make forward steps.



*Connective work is needed to stitch together small patches (local initiatives) into a quilt (the larger movement).*

Zooming out and seeing who else is working on similar questions, target groups, or actions is crucial for connecting local practices. Vermaak (2025) calls this “a matter of connecting”. He uses the metaphor of a patchwork quilt: connective work is needed to stitch together small patches (local initiatives) into a quilt (the larger movement).

**When you do not know where you are headed, bring your attention to the here and now**

In an innovation movement, you never know exactly where it will lead to (the end point is unknown; indeed, there is essentially no end point). Often, it is unclear how separate actions and initiatives will add up to a larger movement. While the instinct may be to spend more time at the drawing board and plan ever more carefully, the experiential knowledge of movement-makers teaches us something else.

What proves crucial is recognising the ambiguity that resides (Holmes, 2015) and staying attentive to the here and now. We have come to call this the “Kairotic principle of direction”. Kairos is one of the two Greek gods of time. Chronos is the god of clock time, schedules, and planning. Kairos is the god of the opportune moment. The Kairotic moment arises when you manage to seize an opportunity. Such moments reveal themselves through focus, alertness, and attentiveness to the context in which you are working (Hermesen, 2015).

Kairos is often depicted as bald with a single lock of hair at the back of his head, the idea being that you must seize this as he passes. Your own intuition is an essential tool. The more skilled you become, the stronger your sensitivity grows for moments when it is right to deviate from your agenda or plan and embrace the unexpected (Luna & Renninger, 2015). Whether it is a meeting with someone, a book that catches your eye, an unexpected invitation in your inbox, or a conversation with your child at the breakfast table – such everyday moments, nudged slightly by your own action, can unexpectedly set a great deal in motion.

**If you want to move forward, occasionally look back**

*When you find yourself at a crossroads, it helps to look over your shoulder and reflect on the progress you’ve made.*

When building a community around an innovative initiative, you often do not know exactly what you are working towards. Usually, there is no clearly defined, pre-set goal, but rather a shared ambition or a dot on the horizon. When you find yourself at a crossroad, unsure of what to do and seeking orientation, it helps to look over your shoulder and reflect on the progress you’ve made.

*From a shared understanding,  
of what you've experienced,  
the next step becomes clearer.*

By reflecting back, you can see the progress you have made. This can be done by revisiting meaningful moments in the process with a small group (creating a learning history) and by identifying valuable outcomes (exploring impact). From a shared understanding of what you've experienced and achieved, the next step becomes clearer.

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