

## **“You helped us looking at ourselves with new perspectives”**



One of the social workers said: *“This opened my eyes. If there is something bothering me, I should say it honestly.”* The office manager said: *“I feel we are a stronger team now. We feel the importance of open communication now.”* The receptionist said: *“You helped us looking at ourselves with new perspectives.”*

Another staff member said: *“The sessions gave us new insights and positive energy. We should focus on the human potential of our team. To focus on similarities between us will make us stronger. It is like the TV commercials about our National Dialogue saying ‘We are all Libyans.’ That is not enough. We need to feel and live the appreciation towards the other.”*

## **Dealing with Tensions in Libya**

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### **Team and organization development**



A Libyan non-governmental organization (NGO) focusing on capacity building for women funded with internationally donor funding was just launched. The core business of this women’s center is to help female victims of domestic and sexual violence with socio-psychological support from social workers. As this type of work is still sensitive in a conservative society, the victims reach the center through an informal (word of mouth) referral system. To make the center accessible and accepted to the outside world, it organizes classes in English language and computer skills to stimulate capacity building for women and enlarge their means to make a living.

The center just opened when I was contacted by H.M., the program manager Middle East and North Africa from the European organization, that funds the center. *“Would you be interested to stay in Libya for a longer period of time and help this women’s organization with team development and organization development? This is a two-fold request, from us as funding organization as well as from the staff of the women’s center and the Board of Directors who are its founding mothers.”*

The European organization knew that as a facilitator and Arabist I know my way in working with groups in the region. My specific knowledge of Libya would certainly be beneficial as the Libyan society tends to seem ‘closed’ to outsiders. For an initial period of three months we agreed that I would be working in Libya’s capital Tripoli to be a mentor-on-the-spot for the NGO.



### ***“We don’t know what we might need”***

Before settling in Libya the European organization and I made an exploratory mission to get to know the staff and the ladies of the Board of Directors. In Tripoli the first thing the ladies of the Board as well as the staff in the center told me was: *“We need you to tell us what we need, as we don’t know what we might need.”* This matter of fact, very open attitude provided me room to maneuver and discover the true needs of both the *European organization and the NGO*. As the NGO is funded by international donor money, it was clear the organization needed to meet several international standard requirements in administration, financing and reporting. After this mission I returned to Libya for three months.

### **Appreciate good things**

During my first week, several incidents occurred between the staff members. As there existed no working or reporting procedures, nor any communication structures, team members were obviously testing how far they could go in setting their own limits. This resulted in severe clashes between the social workers and the office manager who felt her authority was not being acknowledged. For me this indicated a need for a team development session.



Conversations confirmed the approach I wanted to take: to apply Appreciative Inquiry to this micro-cosmos of ladies.

A Libyan university professor in philosophy encouraged me to do so: *“We need self-confidence, collective education and positive thinking to counter the current negative wave. People need to learn to re-use the intrinsic motivation at the time of the 2011 revolution again, and use it for constructive, active citizenship.”* Focus on what goes well brings out strength and enables co-creating a common future together.

### **Mutual confidence and co-creation**

The primary goal of the session was to establish confidence and trust among the new colleagues, a secondary goal was to have the staff co-create work and reporting structures and communication lines. I asked the staff for preferences. Their answer was: *“We don’t know what we need, so please do as you believe is good.”*



### Release the tensions first

The night prior to the session armed clashes took place between opposing militia's in certain neighborhoods of Tripoli. This usually causes tension among citizens as it remains unclear who is fighting whom, and more important how these incidents will impact the security situation for the coming days.

As the seven staff members arrive in the morning I listen to their conversations and observe their postures. Shoulders are pulled towards to the ears, eyes move rapidly and conversations hop from one topic to the other. Some upper backs are rounded. As a Critical Alignment yoga teacher I know that the human mind is influenced by the posture of the body. Our motoric system influences our cognition subconsciously. In turn, our mind influences our body movements.



I decide to start with yoga exercises to enable the participants to release physical tensions of the past night. Initially, the staff members are giggling and feel a bit uncomfortable, worried how they might look and what others might think. They had heard of yoga, yet had never practiced it. After several minutes an ice-breaker slips out of the receptionist's mouth: *"This feels like praying, only we use different movements."* From that moment I notice the ladies surrender easily, focus on themselves and feel less need to talk.

After three quarters of an hour a serene silence takes possession of the room. Eyes lay deep inside the skull, heads balance lightly on necks and participants move body parts with more self-confidence. One social worker rubs her neck with contentment and says with an infinite view in her eyes: *"Can we do this every day, please? I feel so deeply relaxed, this is what everybody in Libya needs."*

### Appreciate dialogue

With this energy we start the first exercise. I ask the participants to pair up with a colleague they are not familiar with and interview the each other on what provided them with energy in the past week. This will make them aware of their positive emotions and enables them to discover the person behind colleague. After 30 minutes, positive vibes and laughter fill the room. After this the staff is individually invited to take 5 minutes and think of a moment that made them happy, and to share this in the group.

As they are in a mood of sharing their personal experiences, I decide to take a bigger step and invite them for a more thorough self-reflection exercise. Each participant is invited to take 5 minutes and make a description verbally of herself and to present this to the group. The group becomes increasingly aware that how you see yourself, is not necessarily how others perceive you. There is always a blind spot. I invite the colleagues to add different descriptions to each individual colleague to have more perspectives. The faces of the staff members radiate energy, with surprised expressions on hearing what colleagues value in them. Tears come to their eyes hearing their colleagues speak so openly to each other.

### Wall of Wonder



After two hours the moment has come to ask them to draw a Wall of Wonder in order to assess all positive and negative events since the birth of the women's center one and a half month ago. Through this tool we can identify the main shared events:

- **Past**  
“Misunderstanding”, “positive team work”, and “feeling like home”.
- **Present**  
“Misunderstanding”, “you don't know what the others think”.
- **Future**  
“Continue cooperation”, “new friends”, “more successful”, “progress”, “better understanding”, and “more courses and activities”.

The Wall of Wonder strengthens the trust among the team members as it made visible the shared frustrations, high lights and ambitions. This provides me with enough ingredients to organize a follow-up session in which the participants will analyze how to avoid misunderstandings in the future. They co-create their own communication lines and reporting mechanisms. Besides that they decide to start their weekly work meetings with a round of “what they valued in their colleagues in the past week” and a reflection on how to improve their own way of working.

### Eye-opener



The yoga intervention released bodily tensions. It showed that, although unfamiliar, Libyans ladies can open up, just as the average European participant. They easily got out of their head, into a physical experience. Physical exercises stimulate the mind. My expectation, that all staff members had almost similar shared experiences of the good and bad events in the history of the center was confirmed by the Wall of Wonder. Yet, my biggest surprise was to see how open the ladies were to learn from each other and to feel their eagerness in personal and professional development to work for a better future. This spirit really touched me.

The current situation in Libya (September 2014) makes it impossible to work in the country. We hope to organize workshops and trainings in neighboring countries to ensure continuation and follow-up.