

Greg Smith Testimonial

For several years I was Senior Vice President of Sales & Delivery at AAA-NCNU (Northern CA, NV, UT), the renowned travel, insurance and road services company. During that time, Lawrence Ellis was my *consulting right-hand man*. In business and operational activities greatly influencing people's livelihoods, billions of dollars, and life-and-death issues of roadside safety, he's the person to whom I turned whenever I needed a consulting or facilitation assignment done with excellence. He also served as my executive coach.

After I left AAA, I stepped into the role of Chair of the Board for the American Red Cross – Bay Area (ARCBA) Chapter. I immediately saw some pressing needs to raise key aspects of ARCBA's organizational effectiveness. Like with AAA, the stakes were high – this time including lives and property in disaster relief efforts. So I sponsored a team of Harvard MBAs to do some preliminary work with us over several months. Once they'd laid a solid foundation, I needed to take the work to a level of breakthrough – so I brought in Lawrence.

ARCBA was, and remains, one of the best disaster relief agencies in the world. Nonetheless, in our day-to-day operations, we weren't able to deliver the levels of organizational and operational excellence that we deliver in times of crisis. In fact, as a person who had dedicated much of his life to service delivery and operational excellence in a multibillion-dollar corporation, some of ARCBA's shortcomings concerned me.

Lawrence and his colleague, Keith, were central to turning around this situation. First, they used a series of conventional approaches: stakeholder engagement, design teams, phased deliverables and the like. The outcomes of this work, conducted over several months, hit the mark. However, it was the second approach that got us to breakthrough results. They convened a wide cross-section of ARCBA stakeholders to optimize our future. I don't remember all the buzzwords for what they did. I've asked them to list them for me: Positive Deviance, AIWACT (Appreciative Inquiry With A Complexity Twist), Open Space Technology, Wicked Questions and more. Very few of us had been exposed to those kinds of processes. They were very innovative, and they had us deeply engaged from the very start. In essence, they helped us discover and map out something akin to the "DNA" of ARCBA: the structures, work processes, staffing, etc. of ARCBA at its best. Next we envisioned what was needed in the future. Then we built onto the DNA to arrive at an organization meeting our future needs.

What was especially impressive is that they set up the activities so that the group process and outcomes were driven by the expertise, knowledge and passion of the participants. As each new step and each new result emerged, these helped determined our direction for the next set of steps and results. This created very high levels of buy-in and ownership.

The outcomes were stellar. We had dramatic improvements to a number of core business processes. Key departments and teams were notably more cohesive and collaborative. Also, we excelled on numerous results metrics. ARCBA and I are immensely grateful for their contributions, and their impact on the important work of disaster relief in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Greg Smith

Former SVP, AAA

Former Chair of the Board, American Red Cross of the Bay Area

SVP, Business Solutions at EIS Group