

# Leaders Growing Leaders: Using AI Every Day To Deliver America's Dream

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*"Civil servants deliver America's dream."  
 Ron Brade, NASA Goddard Space Flight Center*

*What is it like to work in a flourishing organization where people feel appreciated and inspired to deliver America's dream on a daily basis? Just ask the folks at NASA Goddard Space Flight Center (Goddard) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), who are members of the Creative Learning Groups (CLG) where they have incorporated the principles of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a way of being at work every day.*

## Introduction

Creative Learning Groups (CLGs) are the innovation of Joan Wangler, EDIN Associates, who launched the first CLG for project managers supporting the missions at NASA Goddard Space Flight Center (Goddard) in 2000. (For more information on some of the practices used in CLGs including Naikan, see below)<sup>1</sup> Two years later Lee Salmon of the Federal Consulting Group partnered with Wangler to introduce the CLGs to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). These invigorating communities of practice incorporate AI into everyday behavior fostering breakthroughs in established routines and encouraging new ways of thinking and relating to one another. In essence, a CLG is a small group of talented people with complementary skills and experience who commit to a common purpose, utilize each other's gifts and talents, and hold each other mutually accountable for making things happen. They are involved in a self-managed process of action learning with the support of professional coaches like Salmon and Wangler. CLG members are committed groups of civil servants who are stewards of positive change. The qualities of their everyday interactions make a viable difference for the American people and for people all over the world (EPA Intention, March 2004).

## Leaders Growing Leaders

Over the last four years, CLGs at Goddard and EPA have chosen to focus on leaders growing leaders. Recognized as a best practice in government by the Council for Excellence in Government, CLGs have helped these agencies in two significant ways: (1) developing members' core leadership competencies and (2) serving as AI "incubators" by providing a place for the principles to take root and flourish beyond the group itself into other parts of the organization.

"While we knew that we could not control or dictate the behavior of others, our vision was about how we wanted to conduct day-to-day business; that tone of being would attract

others,” Salmon shared. “Having a vision is not the same as living a vision.”

Chris Tirpak, Deputy Project Manager at EPA’s Office of Pesticides Prevention and Toxic Substances, agrees wholeheartedly. “The members of our CLGs are pioneers blazing a trail towards a new way of being in our agency,” she says “CLGs have awakened something that has been dormant in people for a long time. It is a great place to explore unfulfilled expectations. CLGs are creating an environment where people open up.”

### **Claiming Time to Think**

One of the things that Dot Zukor appreciates most about the CLG is that it is a true learning environment. Zukor is the Acting Deputy Director of the Earth-Sun Exploration Division for Goddard. “For us to be a true learning organization, we have to take time to learn from our own successes, our own failures and those of others.”

CLGs offer a time and place where people can reflect, be in community and have conversations at a deeper, more meaningful level than is possible in the heat of daily doing. By accessing group wisdom, members tap the knowledge of a rich, cross-functional team to address organizational challenges and find new solutions. In turn, trust builds not only among the participants but also across the agency as titles are left at the door and people bring their talents to the table, according to John Alter, Environmental Protection Specialist.

“I learned to let go of old patterns that weren’t very useful,” said Carolyn Casey, Leadership and Career Development Coordinator, Systems Engineering Development Program, Goddard. “In a CLG, you learn you don’t have to solve everything yourself. More importantly, you learn there is nothing wrong with you if you can’t solve it yourself. Instead, we have the benefit of using the resources of the entire group.”

The benefits spread beyond the confines of the CLG and its members. “Having practiced [AI principles] in the CLG and gotten input, I feel that I can put any idea on the table in a non-CLG environment. I am better prepared and practiced in the art of speaking up and eliciting feedback from others,” explains Ron Brade, Deputy Procurement Officer, Goddard.

### **Creating Communities to Support AI**

These are some of the ways you can set up CLGs to help AI become a way of being each day in your organization:

- **Commit the time**

The most important resource is time – time for the CLG sessions themselves, time to focus, time for trust to grow among participants, and time for participants to absorb and incorporate what they learn. Cheryl Jones, Program Support Manager, Goddard, calls this time “Oasis Time.” Since time is a critical but limited resource, and CLGs are a catalyst for broad cultural change, senior level commitment is critical. In addition to giving CLGs a green light, senior leaders further demonstrate their commitment by periodically attending CLGs, which typically meet once or twice a month.

- **Explore meaningful content**

“Through the CLG, we have explored a variety of leadership competencies, such as personal influence, decision making and managing conflict, in non-traditional ways,” said Salmon. In addition to traditional leadership subjects, CLG sessions have covered

historical lessons from the Battle of Gettysburg and Native American culture, the principles of leadership storytelling, and the art of the question. Through CLGs, participants learn to ask provocative questions rather than feeling they need to have all the answers.

- **Work to build trust**

Engage in exercises and activities designed to build team cohesion and trust. A facilitator who is committed to nurturing the group is essential. "It took about four months for the first group to go from being wobbly with AI for it to become a 'WOB' (way of being)," said Wangler.

- **Apply the lessons outside the CLG**

Look for opportunities to tell the stories of what you are learning inside the CLG to receptive groups in other parts of your organization. Invite others to bring their talents to the table in search of increased wisdom, knowledge and better solutions.

Creative Learning Groups emphasize experiential learning and integration of strategic inquiry with authenticity, awareness and stewardship. They help future leaders develop resilience and build credibility in the face of change. Offering a unique blend of belonging and individuality, CLGs offer support without being a support group.

### **Naikan as a CLG practice**

Whether or not your organization is willing to commit to a full CLG initiative, you can still create a safe space to talk about what really matters and focus on attracting and retaining talented innovative civil servants at little or no cost.

One practice Wangler and Salmon recommend is Naikan ("nay-KAHN"). Rooted in Japanese tradition, Naikan is a structured method for intensely meditating on life, interconnections and missteps. Through Naikan, participants develop a natural and profound sense of gratitude for blessings always there but often unnoticed. At Goddard and EPA, CLG members often express gratitude for being part of organizations serving humanity and their individual roles in fulfilling their organizations' missions.

CLGs begin with participants reflecting on the following three questions and then sharing something that they are grateful for.

What have I received from...?

What have I given to...?

What troubles or difficulties have I caused...?

### **Applying Naikan**

"Naikan reawakens what's important and helps people focus on the here and now," says Wangler. It is a practice that opens self-awareness, an understanding of the impact of one's actions on others, and generates a sense of humility- all important leadership qualities.

To maintain the sense of hope and inspiration generated through Naikan exercises, Wangler captured one conversation that unfolded in the CLG and later wove those words into a poem, "CLG is a World of Movement." This poem has served not only as a touchstone for those who attended the CLG that day, but also as an enrollment tool for using AI and Naikan in the larger organization – and as an invitation to attend the CLG.

### CLG is a World of Movement

©Joan Wangler, CLG coach

We live in a world of "Yes,"  
 A community where  
 We can practice  
 A way of being  
 That is nourishing and  
 powerful.  
 In this caring place  
 We deeply appreciate that  
 We don't have to go it alone.  
 There are many openings  
 Ahead of us

Making us feel  
 Satisfied with today  
 And awake to a reality  
 Of moving toward  
 A better future.  
 This optimism exists  
 In a robust field  
 Of trust and gratitude  
 That is generative and healing  
 And directly related  
 To the rhapsody of the heart.



*Artist Laurie Marshall and members of the CLG at Goddard and EPA created the Gratitude Tree based on this poem as an expression of the CLG's thanks for being able to work together in an environment of trust, collaboration, learning, and creativity.*