

TOOL BOX

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

"What problems are you having?" vs. "What is working around here?"

These two questions underline the difference between traditional change management and Appreciative Inquiry. Traditionally, we isolate a problem, diagnose it and find a solution. The unfortunate side effect of this approach is that we amplify the problems and keep finding more. Appreciative Inquiry takes a different approach by focusing on what works in an organization and creating a series of statements that describe where the organization wants to be, based on the high points of where they have been. Because these statements are grounded in real experience, people know how to repeat the success and thus have a greater energy to make more moments of success than when presented with a nebulous vision of the future.

Appreciative Inquiry is an approach to thinking that works from the propositions of affirmative action and visions of the possible, rather than problem solving, finding what is wrong and looking for difficulties.

We also know from research in a number of different fields that if we think positive, then positive things happen.

Appreciative Inquiry builds on this research. By focusing on the successful examples in the past and present, we build a picture of the themes and ideas that we know we can do, and that work. We develop an individual and collective mindset of what we are capable of that is grounded in reality. It is a definite shift from our traditions of education, training and institutions where the concentration is on what is wrong. When developing propositions and possibilities, Appreciative Inquiry envisages what might be (based on what is), and stimulates a dialogue on what should be, before finally focusing on what will be. By involving everyone's experience and energy in developing the themes and possibilities we have a greater chance of getting there. If we all have a stake in the creation of a clearly defined, attractive and achievable destination, we are more likely to get there.

Appreciative Inquiry is not new. Much of history has been impacted by those who see the possible even in the most desperate of times. David Cooperrider, one of the originators of Appreciative Inquiry, gives the example of Winston Churchill's leadership during World War II. Isaiah Berlin's account reads:

"In 1940, he (Churchill) assumed an indomitable stoutness, an unsundering quality on the part of his people... He idealized them with such intensity that in the end they approached his ideas and began to see themselves as he saw them: 'the buoyant and imperturbable temper of Britain which I had the honor to express'—it was indeed, but he had the lion's share in creating it. So hypnotic was the force of his words, so strong was his faith, that by the sheer intensity of his eloquence he bound his spell upon them until it seemed to them that he was indeed speaking what was in their hearts and minds. Doubtless it was there; but largely dormant until he had awoken it within them.

Appreciative Inquiry in Action

Appreciative Inquiry is based on dialogue. The first step is to collect opinions and observations of everyone involved through telling stories of what has been and is successful. These observations are then shared in a workshop format to identify the themes and topics that run through the stories. Finally, a selection of the most important of these themes forms the basis for building a series of provocative proposition that describes how the organization will be. Often, the Appreciative Inquiry process collects the strategic information that can then be used in a future search conference or other event to image a complete vision for the organization.

None of this is easy. The ingrained beliefs and models from the dominant, problem-solving paradigm are not easy to overcome and people have a high stake in rationalizing what they have always believed and finding it hard to expand their vision to include a larger reality. The key is not to focus on saying the current way is wrong; rather, it is about freeing ourselves to see larger and more expansive realities that are right under our noses.

Here is an example of *AI* questions that were used to develop stories around collaboration and teamwork, exemplary leadership, effective crisis management, and staff management and supervision.

TOPIC: COLLABORATION AND TEAMWORK

1. Think of an example of a time that you have experienced this team as exemplars of collaboration and teamwork.
2. Tell a story of what happened. What made this team experience effective? What was present in the system to allow this experience to happen?
3. As you look to the future and build on this success, describe one thing you/this team/this school could do to heighten exemplary collaboration and teamwork?

TOPIC: EXEMPLARY LEADERSHIP

1. Think of an example of the most effective exemplary leadership experience you have been a part of as a member of this team or this school community.
2. Tell a story of what happened. What made the leadership experience effective? What was present in the system to allow this experience to happen?
3. As you look to the future and build on this success, describe one thing you/this team/this school could do to heighten the quality of the leadership at this school?

TOPIC: EFFECTIVE CRISIS MANAGEMENT

1. Think of an example of the most effective crisis management effort you have been a part of at this school.
2. Tell a story of what happened. What made the crisis management experience effective? What was present in the system to allow this effectiveness? Page | 3
3. As you look to the future and build on this success, describe one thing you/this team/this school could do to heighten the quality of its crisis management.

TOPIC: STAFF MANAGEMENT AND SUPERVISION

1. Think of an example of the most effective staff management and supervision experience that you have been a part of at this school.
2. Tell a story of what happened. What made the effort effective? What was present in the system to allow this experience to happen?
3. As you look to the future and build on this success, describe one thing you/this team/this school could do to heighten the quality of its staff management and supervision.