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Appreciative inquiry

Explore organizational possibilities

Question:

"In your Nov. 13 column, *'Building Bridges: Interdepartmental Collaboration is Critical,'* you made reference to large group change initiatives. You then outlined a four-step process. I wonder if you could extend your comments on this topic. How does a company effectively pursue large-scale change?"

Answer:

In the column the reader references, I wrote about the need to work interdependently and interdepartmentally. The four-step process had to do with structured discussions, grouping of issues, action planning and implementation, and follow-up. In this column, I will spend time talking about an emerging change technology called "appreciative inquiry" (AI).

I'm not sure many readers are familiar this framework. It is a powerful methodology for small- and large-scale change that has been widely used and is powerfully effective. Hopefully, after you've read the column in its entirety, you will have a clearer sense of what AI is and how it might be relevant to your organization.

The underlying assumption of appreciative inquiry is that people and organizations are by nature full of assets, capabilities, resources, and strengths that are just waiting to be located, affirmed and encouraged. The steps include: (1) discovering and valuing; (2) envisioning; (3) designing through dialogue; and (4) co-constructing the future. In brief, appreciative inquiry is, "The systematic study of what works—what gives life, health, and vitality to organizations when they are at their best in human and economic terms."

Originally developed by David Cooperrider and Frank Barrett, and later refined by Gervase Bushe, AI is part of a positive revolution that has been underway for the past 10 years or so in the applied be-

havioral sciences. By positive revolution I mean the pursuit of strengths-based approaches that maximize the contributions of individuals by identifying their areas of proficiency and developing them to the fullest. For, as Peter Drucker, legendary business and organizational researcher, observed, "The key task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths so that weaknesses become irrelevant."

In contrast to the typical deficit-based

approach to problem solving, decision-making, and development, AI emanates from the foundational belief that organizations are opportunities to be embraced. As a result, focused attention is given to:

- » **Appreciation:** What gives life?
- » **Imagination:** What might be?
- » **Determination:** What should be?
- » **Creation:** What will be?

From an AI perspective, foundational questions that must be answered include:

- » What have been the peak moments

in the life of the organization? When did people feel most alive, most energized, most committed, and most fulfilled in their involvements?

- » What do staff members value most about themselves, their tasks, and the organizations as a whole?
- » Where excellence has been demonstrated, what have been the organizational factors that fostered realization of the excellence?
- » What are the most significant possibilities, perhaps latent within the system, that indicate "realistic possibilities for

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an even better organization?"

Sounds nice, you might be saying. What evidence is there to support the effectiveness of this methodology?

In simple terms, does AI "work?" Well, for starters, here is a list of just some of the organizations who have deployed AI interventions: McDonald's, John Deere, U.S. Cellular, GTE /Verizon, Roadway, Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, United States Navy, United Religions Initiative, Lovelace Health Systems and World Vision Chicago.

Here are just some of the business concerns that have been targeted in AI interventions: extraordinary customer service; staffing and retention; cost, quality, and cycle time; culture change; union-management partnership; exceptional through-put; improved business processes and increased profits; leadership development; forming a global interfaith organization; increasing nurse retention; and international development.

In a 2005 meta-analytic study, researchers Gervase Bushe and Aniq Kassar identified that AI can be a powerful transformational organization development tool. They specifically identified that AI differs from traditional organization development and change management approaches in two significant ways: (1) focuses on changing how people think instead of what people do and (2) focuses on supporting self-organizing change processes that flow from ideas.

In AI, the process of positive change begins with rich discovery of an organization's "positive core" (i.e., analysis of and identification of when an organization and its people are at their best). This knowledge is then used to mobilize a systemic, strategic, and systematic change agenda. At the heart of the AI approach is taking care to ask the right kinds of questions that open up possibilities to be pursued.

Excellent AI questions are consistent with Albert Einstein's inquiry, "What would the universe look like if I were riding on the end of a light beam at the speed of light?" AI questions are positive, strengths-based and possibilities-oriented. An example might be, "When you are at your best in satisfying your customers, what are you doing? Who else is involved and what are they doing? What resources are utilized? What is the customer's role?"

AI can be used to address individual, team or work area, or organization-wide possibilities. In AI, a "summit" is the specific organization-wide technique (i.e., large-

scale change) used to accelerate positive change throughout the organization. An AI summit is a systemic intervention that involves all members of the organization and focuses on clear strategic priorities. It involves a 4-D process of discovery, dreaming, designing and delivering. Typically, it is a three- to five-day event with full attendance from the organization. In practice, AI summits have involved anywhere from 30 to 3,000 people. Self-management and dialog are defining features. Alignment of the organization for innovation and quick, strategic action is the typical outcome.

For example, an AI summit, might be pursued as follows:

- » **Discovering** - Mapping the "positive core." Spending time talking with others to discern and explore, "We are at our best when..."
- » **Dreaming** - Imagining what we "might become." For example, can we imagine an ideal work environment of engagement where a total organization mindset exists, where everyone can see how their job connects to the bigger picture?
- » **Design** - Defining what we "should be." Establish peak expectations such as: zero defects, 100-percent satisfaction, new product cycle time, flawless new product introductions, enhanced role for supervisors, greater self-management for employees, innovative customer connections, continuous cross-training, etc.
- » **Delivering** - Sustaining what "will be." Putting the right pieces in place so the designs can be implemented. Key elements to be considered include:
 - Fast (i.e., a "critical mass" of people make simultaneous changes in a common direction)
 - Flexible (i.e., vision-led change spurs innovation and experimentation—one size does not fit all)
 - Intelligent (i.e., a "total organization mindset" fuels more informed,

more effective change)

- Committed (i.e., people define their own reality, support with the help to create)
- Strength-based (i.e., individuals are set up to succeed and their pursuit are tangibly connected to the positive core)
- Results (i.e., personal passion, public responsibility for action lead to uncommon follow through)

So, what do you think? Does AI sound too good to be true? Does it sound like a touchy-feely methodology that only people who wear rose-colored lenses might use?

I sure hope not.

AI has a strong track record of delivering tangible business results. Sophisticated leaders are already acquainted with AI and its underlying principles. They learned long ago that using scare tactics or managing by fear or intimidation produce short-term results at-best.

Do you want to maintain a path of sustained excellence in your organization? Then spend some time investing appreciative inquiry and how you might become more familiar with this powerful framework for catalyzing individual and collective performance. ■

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