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Appreciative Inquiry: The Practitioner is as Important as the Process



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Appreciative Inquiry is a powerful tool for creating sustainable change in organizations of all sizes. It is a structured process that identifies past successes and provides a method for repeatedly replicating them. By way of background, Appreciative Inquiry is the organizational effectiveness practice originated by David Cooperrider, Ph.D. It challenges the deficit-based approaches most commonly utilized to create change. It is rooted in Social Constructionism, which holds that there is power in positive images. Further, this theory holds that language does not merely describe and define; rather, language is the most powerful tool of creation. The belief is that we create meaning through dialogue and that we use the power of the tongue to create the organization's future.[1]

Heliotropism is the second theoretical component of Appreciative Inquiry. Heliotropism is borrowed from the natural sciences and teaches that all living systems gravitate towards life-giving forces. This is a very condensed, simplified synopsis of these theoretical frameworks.

Moving towards such a nontraditional approach to organizational transformation requires that the practitioner have the appropriate skill set. Whether you are an external consultant looking for new ways to lead your clients to their fullest potential or an internal human resource professional, you will benefit from developing the self before launching an AI intervention. This article details the competencies required to be successful using appreciative approaches to organizational change.

The Practitioner's Skills

Beginning with the skill set, there are three proficiencies that are invaluable in leading the Appreciative Inquiry. The first skill is *Courageous Listening*. This happens when we listen not just with our auditory functions, but with our whole selves. We bring our hearts to the process, suspend all judgment and are willing to risk being persuaded. We acknowledge the value of other perspectives, even those with which we do not agree. Appreciative Inquiry requires that we teach people to probe and delve into incidents when their best selves, both as individuals and collective groups, were most evident. We are able to lead them on that journey when we are able to listen intently to both what is said and the messages that go unstated. Our capacity to listen is critical. It enables us to connect with the participants more deeply. Further, by listening courageously we model one of the essential skills required to create sustainable transformations.

The second ability is both a skill and an ongoing activity. It is *Climate Setting*. W. Brendan Reddy describes this as a function of the consultant or facilitator in process consultation. [2] It is the stage when the consultant sets the stage for success by identifying roles and expectations. In an Appreciative Inquiry it is when the model for the intervention is introduced. The organization may opt to use the 4-D model developed by Dr. Cooperrider. It may decide to use the 5 Generic Processes developed by Jane Magruder Watkins and Bernard Mohr. Whichever approach is accepted, it must be welcomed by the group who will be integrating it into almost every aspect of their work. The climate setting skill is in the ability to help people own the process they selected, embrace it and use it consistently in their efforts to create lasting change. It requires that the practitioner be constantly attuned to the climate of the group. Equally as important, the practitioner is required to help the

group become able to monitor their own climate. They must be able to create and maintain an environment that will breed collaboration, creativity and communication.

The final skill is *Visioning*. This is the ability not only to see the preferred future for the organization, but to communicate it clearly to all stakeholders. The practitioner's ability to see and share the vision dreamed by the group is important. It is equally important that the person leading the Appreciative Inquiry not interject their own vision into the process. Instead, they must be able to believe the successes that the organization has enjoyed are replicable. Once the practitioner shares that belief and formulates a positive vision of probable success around that, they are better able to help the group maintain its momentum. As the Appreciative Inquiry progresses and expands throughout the organization, it is increasingly important that everyone involved be able to spread the vision.

Conclusions

Appreciative Inquiry offers a unique method for transforming whole organizations or business units within. It is a different approach in that it is not prescribed or formulaic in any way. Instead it is a process-oriented technique that allows the organization to come into its own based on the shared dreams of the stakeholders. The practitioner who is leading this journey must demonstrate the ability to listen courageously, set and maintain the right climate and envision the very best future for the organization. All of this assumes a high degree of optimism and a commitment to disrupting the status quo with the intent of optimizing the organization.

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[1] Adapted from *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*, by Jane Magruder Watkins and Bernard Mohr.

[2] Adapted from *Intervention Skills: Process Consultation for Small Groups and Teams*, by W. Brendan Reddy.

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