

Appreciative Inquiry 101:

A Primer for HR Practitioners

By Joanne L. Smikle



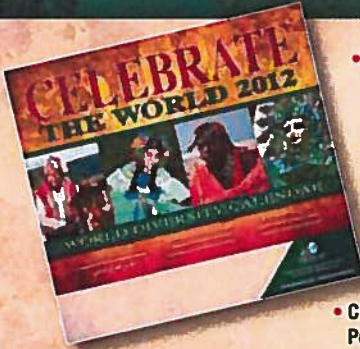
Appreciative inquiry is the systematic process of moving an organization beyond its present capabilities to a preferred future. This collaborative, generative organizational effectiveness strategy was developed by David Cooperrider, Ph.D., during his doctoral research at the Cleveland Clinic. Cooperrider holds that organizations are not compilations of problems, but, rather, mysteries—miracles that are constantly unfolding.

Cooperrider's model uses a cycle of four Ds:

- Discover stellar successes, processes and practices.
- Dream of what will work well in the future.
- Design creative, innovative structures to make the dream reality.
- Deliver or implement the design.

The model is deceptively simple. More is required than simply gathering a group of stakeholders and asking them to hash out the four Ds. First, in designing your intervention you must commit to hearing from a full range of stakeholders. The collaborative nature of the process requires a commitment to hearing from diverse, often-competing groups that ultimately shape your enterprise. Second, anyone entering the process must be comfortable with the unknown. Leaders embarking on this journey cannot control

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a generative process or its outcomes. Appreciative inquiry disrupts what is known and accepted with the provocative propositions inherent in the process.

Appreciative inquiry has the potential to completely revolutionize service and customer care. Imagine having legions of end-users raving about your products, processes and people. Appreciative inquiry can unearth secrets to healthy retention of the very best talent. Using the approach could enable companies to spend more time on developing people and far less on discipline.

Making a transition this dramatic requires abandoning the mindset that is wedded to deficit-based communication problem solving. Appreciative inquiry focuses on the possibilities, not the problems.

The power of appreciative inquiry can be illustrated with a small-scale dilemma. One of my clients decided it would be best to use the process with their board of directors at their annual planning retreat. They formulated a succinct inquiry that gave them the opportunity to conceptualize a new path for the association. They then translated the results into the measurable action items that are managed in an online format with shared ownership of goals and reporting of action steps.

A long-term care management company decided that it would be best to begin by testing the viability of the concept rather than embarking on a complete intervention. The CEO used the focused on language during annual performance discussions with senior managers.¹ While managers expected the conversation and evaluation to

focus on deficits, as is the tradition with many evaluation methodologies, they were surprised to be greeted with a conversation about successes and accomplishments.

Their new goals focused on how to continue the successes they had created in the last year and on how to enlarge themselves professionally. This turned out to be a tricky endeavor, because there were a few senior managers who had marginal, if any, successes. However, the use of affirmative language and propositions opened up honest discussion about their dreams for themselves and the organization.

Appreciative Inquiry presents a positive framework for addressing dilemmas that plague leaders. While the approach is dramatically different from the deficit-based, problem-centered models to which most are accustomed, it has tremendous potential for excavating buried potential. Pay attention not only to outcomes, but also to the energy and engagement that it generates. ■

Joanne L. Smikle specializes in leadership development, collaboration and customer satisfaction. Visit www.smiklespeaks.com for articles and resources. She can be reached at joanne@smiklespeaks.com or 301-596-3140.

¹*Social constructionism is one of the theoretical foundations of appreciative inquiry. It teaches that language is a powerful means of creation. Language does not simply reflect or describe the world around us; instead, it creates our reality and experience of that world.*

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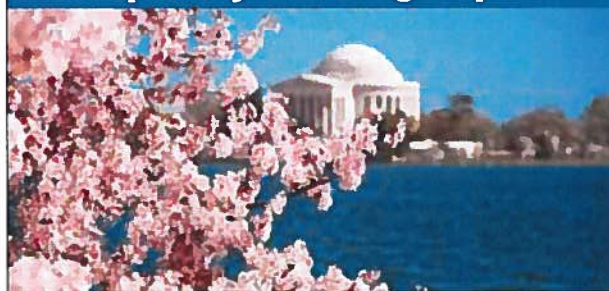
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