Appreciative Inquiry

Solving Problems by Looking at What's Going Right

Imagine that your organization's order book is full, and you're desperate to expand your business – but you just can't find the staff you need. What's worse, cash is tight, your recruitment budget is stretched to breaking point, and you strongly suspect that some of the approaches you're using just aren't working.

One approach here is to focus on the things that aren't working, and think about how you can fix them. This is the conventional approach to problem-solving. In many cases it's the right one to use. However in others, all it does is bring you up to the same bland level as everyone else.

Another approach is to shift to a positive perspective, look at the things that are working, and build on them. In some situations this can be very powerful because, by focusing on positives, you can build the unique strengths which bring real success.

This is the premise behind "Appreciative Inquiry", a method of problem solving that was pioneered by David Cooperrider of Case Western Reserve University in the mid 1980s.

To understand the basis of Appreciative Inquiry it is useful to look at the meaning of the two words in context.

- *Appreciation* means to recognize and value the contributions or attributes of things and people around us.
- *Inquiry* means to explore and discover, in the spirit of seeking to better understand, and being open to new possibilities.

When combined, this means that by appreciating what is good and valuable in the present situation, we can discover and learn about ways to effect positive change for the future.

Using Appreciative Inquiry: The 5D Approach

To apply Appreciative Inquiry to a problem solving situation, it's important to focus on positives. A positive energy approach helps you build on your strengths, just as conventional problem-solving can help you manage or eliminate your weaknesses.

The first step of the process is to identify and describe the problem you're trying to solve. From there you go on to look at the issue in four phases: **Discovery, Dream, Design and Deliver.** This approach is described in the 5 steps below.

Tip 1:

Appreciative Inquiry is often explained using four Ds: "Discovery", "Dream", "Design" and "Deliver"/"Destiny". We like to put a fifth D ("Define") in as the first step.

Step 1. "Define" the Problem

Before you can analyze a situation, you need to define what it is you are looking at.

And, just as your decision to look at the positives will move you in a positive direction, defining your topic positively will help you look at its positive aspects. So, rather than seeking "Ways to Fix Recruitment Problems", for example, you'll choose "Ways to Accelerate Recruitment." This subtle change in wording can have huge implications for what you focus on.

Also, make sure that your topic does not unduly constrain you: You want to explore many possibilities and avenues for change so keep your topic broad.

Step 2. "Discovery" Phase

Here you need to look for the best of what has happened in the past, and what is currently working well. Involve as many people as sensibly possible, and design your questions to get people talking and telling stories about what they find is most valuable (or appreciated), and what works particularly well.

Using the example from the first stage, a good way to do this would be to get new recruits to interview one another, focusing on getting to the core of what they liked about the job before they joined, and what they've enjoyed about the organization since joining. In this situation, the following might be good discovery questions:

- When you think back to when you decided to join the company, what was the thing that most attracted you?
- Tell me a story about a time when you were very enthusiastic about your work.
- What do you think is most important for success at the company?
- Tell me about the time you felt proudest about the company.

Another approach to solving this problem could be to look at the different approaches you use to recruit people, and identify the ones that bring the greatest volume of good recruits.

When you've gathered enough raw information, you need to analyze the data and identify the factors that most contributed to the team or organization's past successes. What is most valued? What did people find most motivating or fun? What instills the greatest pride? And so on.

Step 3. "Dream" Phase

In this phase, you and your team dream of "what might be". Think about how you can take the positives you identified in the Discovery phase, and reinforce them to build real strengths.

The way forward may be obvious from the results of the Discovery Phase. If it's not, a useful approach is to bring a diverse group of stakeholders together and brainstorm creative and innovative ideas of what the organization and team could accomplish.

In our example, you might choose to enhance and build the good points that everyone likes about the organization, and use this as a strong message to attract potential candidates during the recruitment process. You may also stop doing the things that aren't working, and use the money saved to reinforce the things that are.

Once you have agreed upon your dream or vision, you can take it to the Design phase.

Step 4. "Design" Phase

Building on the Dream, this phase looks at the practicalities needed to support the vision. Here you start to drill down the types of systems, processes, and strategies that will enable the dream to be realized.

Step 5. "Deliver" Phase

Sometimes called the Destiny phase, the last of the Ds is the implementation phase and it requires a great deal of planning and preparation. The key to successful delivery is ensuring that the Dream (vision) is the focal point. While the various parts of the team will typically have their own processes to complete, the overall result is a raft of changes that occur simultaneously throughout the organization, that all serve to support and sustain the dream.

Tip 2:

The real strength of this technique comes from steps 1 and 2. Steps 3 to 5 are just standard implementation steps. If you have your own preferred approach for implementation, use this.

Tip 3:

In this article, we're looking at Appreciative Inquiry as a problem-solving technique. You can also use it powerfully either as an organizational strategy tool or for personal development. In these contexts, you can simply focus on what you do well, and divert your efforts towards this, and away from the things you're not good at.

Key Points

When faced with your next challenge or problem, take a step back and look at if from the standpoint of what is good and is currently working well. This positive perspective brings about a whole new set of positive solutions you and your team may not have previously discovered. Use this process to get your organization looking at itself in unique and positive ways.

The Deliver phase of the cycle is not so much an end but a place to start to re-evaluate and continue the process of Appreciative Inquiry to continuously improve. Once you embrace the idea of positive change you can apply the cycle over and over again to various aspects of your team or organization, and enjoy the positive outcomes that positive thinking brings.