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Using appreciative inquiry to build organizational capacity to learn, risk and grow

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Abstract

Appreciative Inquiry is a vehicle for achieving lasting positive social change within an organization. By tracking the progress of a single organization over a four-year period, this research demonstrates that Appreciative Inquiry can be used to build a strengths-based culture that encourages and fosters learning, risk-taking and growth at the individual, team and organizational levels. During the observation period, the four-phase Appreciative Cycle was repeatedly applied, reinforcing positive emotional associations and forming the basis for a common language which became a tool for enhancing communication, increasing buy-in, improving relationships, and cultivating greater accountability, collaboration and shared leadership, all of which have led to overall enhanced productivity and a willingness to take on deeper and broader levels of change.

Keywords: organizational development, communication, relationships, accountability, collaboration, and leadership

Introduction

Appreciative Inquiry (AI), developed by David Cooperrider, is an organizational transformation tool focused on learning from successes and building upon strengths. By paying attention to what has worked, exploring why it worked, and collectively and collaboratively imagining what is possible, sustainable system changes occur.

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By tracking the progress of a single organization over a four-year period, this case study demonstrates that Appreciative Inquiry can be used to build a strengths-based culture that encourages and fosters learning, risk-taking and growth at the individual, team and organizational levels.

During the observation period, the four-stage appreciative cycle was repeatedly applied, reinforcing positive emotional associations and forming the basis of a common language which became a tool for enhancing communication, increasing buy-in, improving relationships, and cultivating greater accountability, collaboration and shared leadership, all of which have led to overall enhanced productivity and a willingness to take on deeper and broader levels of change.

Background

The Leadership and the Organization

The subject organization is a large division of a leading Canadian university. The key senior leader was newly appointed, with a mandate to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of his service units. It was anticipated that this work would include tumultuous changes, such as portfolio realignments, staffing adjustments and new ways of doing business inside of a traditional, publicly-funded university system that was anticipated to be a slow adopter of deep change (based on anecdotal evidence within this institution and the broader views of poor results of change adoption within public sector post-secondary educational institutions).

This new leader had a collaborative, consistent and discerning leadership style, and was open to exploring unconventional means of achieving his goals. As a first step, he was willing and aware of the need to assess the talent in his leadership team with an eye to identifying both strengths and developmental needs as a means of establishing a culture of constructive, growth-inducing communication and setting expectations of shared leadership and joint accountability for innovation.

The Approach

The AI practitioner has a background in organizational development and designed a Growth Framework that incorporates the strengths-based principles of AI as a key foundational element in creating resilient, sustainable change (Andrus, 2003).

Culture and communication are critical elements in any organizational system. Culture is the web, the "unseen but real forces that influence people's behaviour" (Wheatley, 2001). This cultural web is supported and infused by the communication

patterns of the people within the organization. Solid, open communication forms the basis of both the practitioner's Growth Framework and AI.

Open communication includes risk taking, the sharing of hopes, dreams, and often fears, as well as sharing support for growing a collaborative vision. This sharing creates tension and disequilibrium on two fronts: firstly, in the change itself – asking people to shift away from the status quo and move beyond their comfort zones — and secondly, in reframing the criteria for organizational learning to focus on strength-based storytelling, as opposed to the more traditional gap analysis data review. The strength-based methodology runs against our accepted cognitive construct of problem solving as the superior method for inducing change.

In the AI approach, storytelling is the primary means of discovering both the best of what is and what's possible. Storytelling is an effective means of engaging participants in change initiatives in that it makes the learning readily accessible *in common language*. AI research indicates that if the storytelling lens is about seeking and seeing possibilities by looking exclusively at strengths, the potential to induce innovation and organizational growth is magnified (Cojocaru, 2010). Margaret Wheatley, a global change agent leader, says "all that's required for the world to change is for us to notice what we care about and get started" (Wheatley, 2007). AI storytelling creates an opportunity to learn from our stories and agree on what we care about. We need to create spaces where people can become relaxed, where it is safe to take risks and to use the intrinsic motivators of challenge and creativity. AI fosters these change-inducing conditions.

Case study report

Phase 1: Setting the Tone.

Discovery and Dream

The goal of the initial change work was to set the tone and begin establishing a culture wherein leaders in the division are willing to listen, accept feedback, grow, and change to meet the needs of the department. After completing a leadership assessment process using a strengths-based assessment tool, the leadership group embarked on a Discovery and Dream Session to learn from their collective and individual assessment process experiences. The session, entitled Management Excellence: Tying Our Collective Strengths Together, focused on the Discovery and Dream stages of the AI process. The questions used in the session are in Box 1.

Box 1 - Individual Leadership Growth - Discovering the Best of What Is

Distinctive Strengths and Special Qualities

Today organizations must change, transform and grow — constantly. But vibrant organizations in the midst of change also know how to preserve the "positive core" of their special qualities and enduring strengths.

1. Thinking back over your University memories, what have been the real "high points" for you as a member of this organization — memorable times when you felt best about the University -- times perhaps when you felt most inspired, challenged, engaged, or connected; times you were most proud about being part of this organization?

2. Best Team Experience

Please tell me a story about the best team you have experienced in the Department or elsewhere.

It might help to think about:

What made it so exciting, productive, and great? Who was involved? What was happening? What was your contribution? What did you learn about teams from that experience?

3. Individual Strengths

Teams are made up of individuals who are each valued for what they contribute to the group.

a. Without being humble, what do you value most about yourself (perhaps thinking about your core traits)? What do you bring to the table that might be considered unique or different from people that you work with? Or what qualities would those closest to you mention?

b. Think about your leadership strengths. What leadership strengths are you most proud of and what are you focusing your growth on?

4. Leadership that Encourages Excellence

Think about a time when a leader inspired you and the rest of the team to do your best work. What qualities and approaches did the leader exhibit that made the team successful and able to achieve excellence?

Discovery of What's Possible – the Management Team Making a Significant Difference

5. Imagine: The management group is now performing exceptionally well and truly achieving excellence.

Your group's best work is so noticeable that not only are you front page news in the Daily Bulletin, but the (national paper) is doing a story on your management excellence and its contribution to the living and learning experience of university students. Tell us what they've written about your team and what's included in your unique formula for a great MANAGEMENT team – a group that is known to be exceptional and innovative and collegial.

Design and Delivery

Results from this initial session included the development of a key action list and an implementation plan which included practical items to stop, start and continue doing as the senior team began exploring their newly created shared vision of the division's future. The group identified three pillars of focus for management excellence: (1) Building the culture; (2) Cultivating individual talent; and (3) Building relationships.

Under these pillars, they designed a delivery plan that included activities that would allow them to better understand each other's individual strengths and the business units' priorities. Using the pillars as their guides, they selected key leadership actions to focus on during the first year of their work, specifically: recruitment and placement of people into key roles; consistency in communication; and promotion of the division.

Comments on the process included: (1) Continue sitting around the table and listening to the others on our team; (2) Finding out their take on things was great! (3) It allowed us to come up with our own answers; (4) Continue smaller group activity (storytelling in pairs and triads) and then having these ideas shared with larger group for more ideas; (5) Very thought provoking, identifying great teams and strengths, interaction and involvement; (6) Continue (design activity) that resulted in our 3 areas of focus.

As a result of these explorations, the need for shifts in portfolios and personnel became apparent. These potentially contentious decisions were eased because of the level of information sharing, expectation clarity, transparency and consistent engagement of the senior leadership group. This atmosphere made it possible for participants to engage in candid, courageous conversations about personal alignment with organizational values. Those who felt that their values were no longer in alignment with the organization were able to take the appropriate action to remedy the situation. Because these actions were taken voluntarily, the changes were less painful than they may otherwise have been.

The buy-in and trust established in the individual strengths-focused assessment process and the collaborative management workshop experience created momentum to expedite these role transitions.

The positive impacts of Phase 1 had a cascading effect for further transformational change within the division's individual business units and created a desire and willingness to use the AI process to affect leadership decisions and expand the growth of teams and individuals. The initial process prepared the leadership team members well for the impending changes. It incorporated their thoughts and expectations, which reduced resistance and gave flight to early adopters of the change.

Phase 2: Building Momentum and Expanding the Levels of Change

The momentum-building effect of the process became evident within a few months of the completion of the Phase 1 sessions. One of the leaders, known to be an early adopter, applied the process to the development of her team. And a new member of the senior leadership group who had not been part of the initial process but had heard the stories about its power opted to adopt the strategy, despite being personally unfamiliar with the process. As a result of these actions, there were now three groups within the division (the senior leadership team and two of four business units) talking about design of key visions and values, methods of enhancing communication, identifying individual and leadership strengths and generally viewing strengths as a means of affecting change. The use of strengths-focused language and methodology began to extend to interactions within units and between units. With this momentum firmly established, the next step was to hold another four-stage AI session, this time shifting the focus toward team development. The questions used in this inquiry are in Box 2.

Box 2 - Team Growth Through Relationships

   Discovering: Best of What Is In Teams

   Helping People Be Their Best – Communication Is Key

Our current strengths and our future success reside in our people. We know that to grow and improve as a department, we must continue to nurture and develop our employees' best qualities and the way we communicate with each other can help or hinder their development and willingness to grow.

   1. Please think about a time when you personally felt that how and what was being communicated was working really well and helped the situation improve significantly. Tell me about that time.

Think about what contributed to that sense that it was "good communication". For example:

   - What were you doing, saying or writing at the time?
   - Who else was involved and what were they doing?
   - What was the environment like?

Individual Strengths

Teams are made up of individuals who are valued for what they each contribute to the group.

   1. Without being humble, what do you value most about yourself and your core traits? Or what qualities would those closest to you mention?
   2. Think of a 'high point' working with someone who was very different from you. What did they offer to the situation that made it successful? What made it a high point for you?

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3. Think about team leadership that worked really well for you. What qualities or approaches did the leader exhibit that made the team successful?

Dream: What's Possible – The Team Making a Significant Difference
    4. Imagine: The group is now performing exceptionally well as a team.

Your group's best work is so noticeable that you are front page news and The Daily Bulletin is doing a story on your incredible team achievements. Tell us what they've written about the team and what's included in your unique formula for great teamwork – exceptional and productive.

Design: What We Can Do
    5. Of all the strengths and important values that we've mentioned before, what are the key ones that must exist as we move forward towards becoming the best?

    6. What do we (as a group and individually) need to do, learn, add and change to this list to help make it happen?

The results included a listing of behaviours to stop, start and continue that support the needs of the team; a detailed listing and timeline for more effective communication and an image of future shared service delivery that identified the business unit's roles in achieving the overall mandate of the division.

Comments on the sessions included: (1) Great to work with the flow of the group, continue to learn a great deal about people; (2) Continue to get everyone in the same room to discuss our future direction; (3) Finding common ground and communication with team is great; (4) Everyone had their say when they wanted to; (5) Involving all participants without 'calling out' certain people; (6) Continue learning what is important to my co-workers and learning how to improve our team.

The strengths and usefulness of the process for diverse groups of staff participants (gender, age, culture, education, and experience) magnified its effectiveness. Its impact was direct and immediate – people were able to observe their individual roles in affecting change. The effect was increased trust in the direction set by the unit leader and increased positive perception of each member's ability to shape the culture of the workplace. The success of AI at the business unit level opened exploration and discussion of further opportunities to use the strengths-based methodology to remedy other areas of weakness.

However, one such attempt to expand the use of the process was not successful and the learning from that session is noteworthy. Approximately one year into the project, there was an initiative to engage the broader management team in an overall divisional strategy development session. The participant list included the original senior leaders, and also their supervisory managers, most of whom had

had limited engagement in the process to date. The results of this session included a perception that not all participants contributed, frustration within the group and a list of potential actionable items that seemed daunting.

The inquiry did not result in a collective, unified follow-up as had been the experience with each of the other gatherings. In review of this session, it was determined that goals were not clear enough (more focused and targeted questions required) and participant readiness was not optimal (leaders were new to the concept of shared leadership and lacked trust in the legitimacy of their role as shapers of the divisional process). However the goodwill, hopefulness, prior successes and the relationship established with practitioner inspired continued acceptance of the value of the process and resulted in a sustained willingness to carry forward with future use of AI.

Phase 3: Tolerance for Change

The AI process is invitational, as opposed to control-based. It contains multiple opportunities to engage – be it in the depth or type of story shared in the discovery process, in the timing of the adoption of new practices or in further exploration of next- stage change initiatives.

In this case, the process allowed the early-adoptive leaders to move forward rapidly with re-organizational initiatives, including the introduction of learning from the strength- based perspective. According to their assessment results, these leaders tended to be highly decisive, risk takers and rapid processors of new information.

The consistency, ease of use, and shared successes inherent in the AI process also benefit the late-change adopters. In this study, those business unit leaders who were identified as more skeptical and risk-averse reported the ability to engage cautiously, yet progressively in the re-organizational initiatives. The AI approach allowed participant readiness to dictate the timing of the process. The shaping of the key questions in the Discovery Stage significantly affects the focus and depth of the learning, which drives the level of risk and potential change (incremental or transformational). Our process consistently included the business unit leaders in the design of the inquiry questions and directly related to their identified goals. This direct involvement of the more cautious, risk-hesitant leader in the shaping of the inquiry created a greater sense of control over the outcomes and thus increased ease and buy-in for the overall process over time.

Within two years of the initial inquiry, all four business units had engaged in the strengths-based methodology to increase the teamwork, individual perfor-mance and effectiveness of their areas.

One of the early-adopter units opted to leverage the momentum of their initial change success and use the AI process to transition to a second phase of their transformation. Box 3 shows the focus of their inquiry.

Box 3 - Shared Leadership: Reviewing and Building on Our Strengths

Last year, our team did some preliminary work on identifying and shaping a departmental plan to more effectively use our individual strengths in our delivery of services to the division. We developed a vision of what it could look like if we were really successful in this. This year we are investing in some time to reflect on our progress and begin to build on what we've learned about what we are currently doing well and what we need to adjust to achieve greater effectiveness.

Pre-Session Questions

From your perspective, what has worked well in the following areas? You may want to consider the image we created last year of our vision of achieving great success as you think about your responses.

– Business Results: What have we achieved in your area, and overall, this year? (What factors contributed to that achievement?)

– Team work: When has communication and working with others worked really well for you this year? Think of a time or particular event when this worked very well – what contributed to that (what did you and the others do to make it so successful?)

– From your perspective, what do you see that could change to make work even better or more productive?


The results of this session included minor modification to the business unit's key values; a new image that encapsulated the key role the group and individual staff members needed to play to enable more effective divisional functioning that incorporated the philosophy and values created in their previous AI session; a list of successes at the individual and team levels based on the previous action plan, and a list of opportunities to further leverage based on the effectiveness of the past year's activities that now included their roles as leaders in innovating and leading change internally and in other interactions outside of the division.

Comments on the session included: (1) Continue talking to people and creating as team; (2) Open forum for everyone is very useful; (3) Continue having different departments talk; (4) Continue letting everyone speak; (5) Continue group discussions. (I didn't talk much, but definitely learned what was important to my other team members).

This Discovery session reviewed prior Dream, Design and Delivery plans and deepened and further refined both the cultural and action practices of the business units. The process and products of dream image revisions solidified the initial members' engagement in and commitment to the change process and created an invitational opening for new team members to add their contributions, giving them a sense of ownership over the resulting collaborative visions of the future.

This use of AI allowed for individual and team development reflection as well as an opportunity to engage more staff in the broader organizational redesign. As indicated previously, the focus of the question is an opportunity to set a visional tone – what are we paying attention to? (In this case, the answer was achieving business results and enhancing individual and team performance plans.)

Fig. 1: Growth Framework
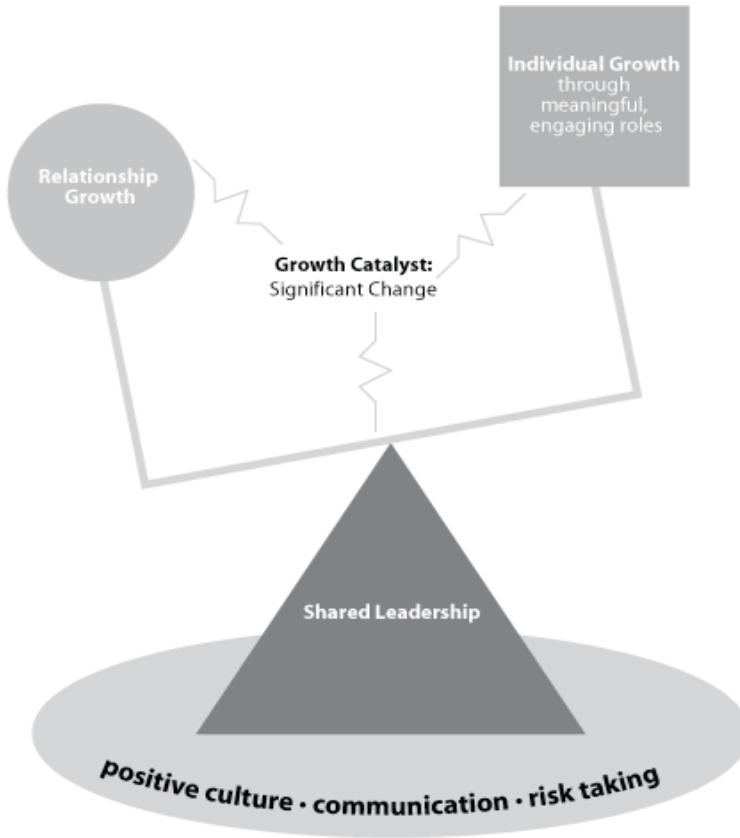
Growth Framework: Ledership & Organization Change Model

Growth Framework: Leading Through Relationships
An organization is a complex network of interconnections that exist in delicate balance with another. The Growth Framework model focuses on the critical elements needed to ensure a sustainable, vibrant organization. It emphasizes that any significant change in a business can be used as the catalyst to realign and grow the productivity of the company.

In AI, persuasion happens internally and with support of others to help all do better through the lens of maximizing strength. It creates goodwill, increased listening and a desire to understand, and balances the inevitable tension between accountability and innovation in the design and delivery of transformative change initiatives. The AI discussions, as well as the pre-session preparatory question methodology, created time for people to think and then to think together.

The organization's responsiveness and inclusiveness built a high level of trust in and support for the significant changes that were taking place. The shared and practical listing of items to stop, start and continue created an accountability framework that assisted the teams and individuals as they moved toward new ways of working.

The AI process enables everyone in the organization to become aware of the strengths that both individuals and the collective bring to the system, enhancing the support of the evolutionary process. As a means of supporting a positive, strengths-based culture, this organization has continued to identify and acknowledge its successes as they've proceeded through their change plans. The AI process supported their underlying culture of increasingly open communication, trusting relationships and encouragement of innovation, and thus, risk taking. AI surfaces the understanding of what people desire and what they are willing to offer and thus creates a system that is fluid and open to change.

The Growth Framework hinges on *individual growth* as a key element. People's willingness to share and expand their talents causes exponential development in organizational systems. AI fosters active engagement and commitment at the individual level. This case showed clear evidence that using AI to help individuals identify strengths and opportunities — as opposed to problems and weaknesses — makes people more willing to increase their personal involvement and to take risks to be innovative and collaborative. As indicated in the post-session comments, individuals expressed enthusiasm, optimism and a willingness to continue their involvement as a result of the deliberate, strengths-focused strategy. This method continues to be useful as the organization continues to expand into uncharted waters. (2003)

Relationships create and define the organization and are a basis for organizational development. Therefore it is important to value the power of personal connection. Conditions and elements that support sustainable, positive growth "will all be done in the spirit of reinvigorating the soul of the institution, not destroying it" (Hesselbein, 2002, p.xiv). A key element in the AI process is the work of storytelling, small group discussion, and inclusive dialogues on what all participants value and carry forward as essential elements that create a culture and build relationships that they perceive as intrinsic to their willingness to engage. These elements create a platform on which to build contagious passion.

Recognizing individual talents and building strong relationships form the basis for *shared leadership*, a fundamental element in fostering commitment and passion within an organization. By sharing responsibility, the organization stands to enhance its capacity to deal with identified and hidden challenges that are inevitable with any significant change to an organization. The leaders become the checks and balances group for monitoring the impacts of change; they establish the direction of the growth and create momentum.

Using AI, the leaders of this organization shared their vision by communicating openly and consistently, using common language and key values developed in the sessions to express their passion and commitment to their change efforts. Having clarity about what the staff and organization value creates the opportunity to continue to shrink the boundaries that inhibit growth. (Boundaries may include access to information, resource allocation, authority to make decisions, and geographic limitations.) Reflecting on issues such as what the individuals and subunit groups value within the organization enables the group to feel comfortable enough to challenge and confront the status quo.

Leaders have been critical to this upfront work. This particular leadership group paid attention to what gets noticed and how the current patterns match with the collective vision for the future (as identified in the numerous AI sessions). Their willingness to be courageous, open and willing to challenge the existing university systems has been key to the implementation of their changes. While this boundary-challenging behaviour is risky and potentially unsettling, it has expanded the opportunities for cross-fertilization and synergies in activities and relationships that wouldn't have surfaced without this pushing back against existing and safe systems. The transformation of the division using AI is an opportunity to broaden the base of leadership and give opportunities to review and extend existing boundaries to increase internal support.

It is important to recognize that disequilibrium is a by-product of growth and is worthy of thoughtful consideration. The state of chaos created by introducing change and using methodologies that run against our problem-based thinking constructs is unsettling and is an opportunity to capture people's attention, create openings for increased human interaction, announce shifts in culture and direction, and review core organizational values and visions. However, disequilibrium is not without challenges. It is important to acknowledge that engaging participants is work. It requires considerable effort to communicate, incorporate, modify, clarify, motivate and engage the staff communities in moving beyond the status quo where they were comfortable and familiar with the expectations of the system. The AI approach – when applied thoughtfully, with clear goals and supported by leaders who are truly open to the possibilities that exist when you invite others into the dialogue – can lead to long-lasting change beyond expectations.

Appreciative Inquiry supports organizational transformational and sustainable change. It allows people and relationships to stretch, to notice and capitalize on the strengths in their relationships, individuals and business systems by collectively learning from tangible, meaningful stories. It creates opportunities to build a sustainable, fertile system that not only serves its participants but also adds value to those who come in contact with them.

Conclusions

"Social systems evolve toward the most positive images they hold of themselves" (Cooperrider, 1990). This perception of strength and possibility creates organizational resilience and openness to risk taking and further change. Much is possible because resilience is the element that allows for continuation and expansion of change despite the inevitable setbacks. The practitioner's Growth Framework builds on this resilience to support sustained change. It uses interconnected circles as a representation of a living, evolving system, an organizational ecology. An organization is a complex network of interconnections and relationships that exist in delicate balance. The model focuses on the elements that are critical to ensuring a strong, sustainable and resilient community. Organizations can develop strength in individual employees and in work teams by using a catalyst (a critical organizational change) to shift and improve performance as one key component of sustaining the business.

The second major component of the model is that the leaders need to be cognizant that the underlying culture of the organization affects current and future performance of these teams and individuals. The leaders have a powerful opportunity when they are aware of their ability to create a positive strengths-based organizational culture by examining the critical elements: communication (what gets communicated, when and by whom?); and risk taking (what happens to those who take risks will affect whether future risks will be taken).

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