Building on Success:

Transforming Organizations Through an Appreciative Inquiry

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Appreciative Inquiry, developed by David Cooperrider and colleagues at Case Western Reserve University and The Taos Institute, is an organizational transformation tool that focuses on learning from success. Instead of focusing on deficits and problems, the Appreciative Inquiry focuses on discovering what works well, why it works well, and how success can be extended throughout the organization. It is both the vision, and the process for developing this vision, that create the energy to drive change throughout the organization. In 1998, the City of Hampton, Virginia, already nationally recognized as an innovative government, initiated an Appreciative Inquiry process to re-energize its workforce in bringing about their desired vision for the 21st century.[1] The Appreciative Inquiry process was successfully modified to meet the needs of the city government.

The past decade has seen dramatic efforts toward change by public sector organizations at all levels of government. The need to "work better and cost less" has driven organizational change efforts, and introduced numerous strategies and techniques designed to improve the quality of service delivery and make governments more efficient and effective. Many public sector employees have now been exposed to one or more approaches to organizational transformation, such as: quality circles; Total Quality Management or Total Quality Leadership; re-engineering and reinvention; High Performance Organization philosophies; strategic planning; and self-directed work teams. Employees are asked to think differently about what they do and how they do it, and to see a range of possibilities instead of the one right answer.

Organizational change in public sector organizations can be difficult to accomplish. It is not uncommon for employees to resist change, even when the change is desired to help the organization accomplish its mission. John Kenneth Galbraith, commenting on human nature, once observed that, "Faced with the choice between changing one's mind and proving that there is no need to do so, almost everybody gets busy on the proof."[2] Most approaches to organizational change are similar in one respect — they attempt to enable employees to think differently about processes that are habitual and comfortable. Frequently, organizational change approaches are

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premised on the belief that something is wrong and needs to be fixed, and may even lead to a focus on blame. According to David Cooperrider, one of the developers of the Appreciative Inquiry philosophy, organizations become "trapped by the language of deficit."[3] Traditional approaches to problem solving are, by definition, a way of seeing the world as a glass half empty. The Appreciative Inquiry is an alternative process to bring about organizational change by looking at the glass as half full. Essentially, Appreciative Inquiry varies from other approaches to organizational change in that it builds on what works well.[4]

A Closer Look at Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry is an approach that is uniquely suited to organizations that seek to be collaborative, inclusive, and genuinely caring for both the people within the organization and those they serve. For those engaged in public service, finding ways to express these values has never been more important. Using an Appreciative Inquiry approach, organizations can discover, understand, and learn from success, while creating new images for the future. The approach provides an opportunity to celebrate what is done well, as organizations strive to move closer to their vision of the future. The focus is on success, rather than failure. Thomas White, President of GTE, asks, "In the long run, what is more likely to be useful: Demoralizing a successful workforce by concentrating on their failures or helping them over their last few hurdles by building a bridge with their successes?"[5]

Appreciative Inquiry is premised on three basic assumptions. The first critical assumption is that organizations are responsive to positive thought and positive knowledge. Simply put, like sunflowers that will always turn to face the sun, an organization will turn toward a positive image of itself. It is this positive image that gives the energy the organization needs. A second key assumption is that it is both the image of the future, and the process for creating that image that create the energy to drive change throughout the organization.[6] By engaging employees in a dialogue about what works well based on their own experiences, employees notice that there is a lot that works reasonably well already. Change is possible, because it feels better to start from a point where you are pretty good already and would like to be better. Lastly, Appreciative Inquiry is based on a belief in the power of affirmations; if we can envision what we want, there is a better chance of it happening.[7]

Through a series of steps, people in organizations can explore what works well; why it works well; and how that success can be extended across the entire organization. This is not just a "feel good" exercise, although participants do tend to feel good about what they're doing, as they work through the Appreciative Inquiry process. The steps in the Appreciative Inquiry process are:

- Collect Data from Interviews. This is a discovery process to learn about the best of "what is." The discovery process shifts the balance of organizational attention from what isn't working well to what is working, and to what may possibly work in the future.

- **Determine Common Themes**. The themes or topics are stated in an affirmative fashion, and should involve areas of inquiry that are important to the organization.

- **Articulate Provocative Propositions.** Sometimes called the "dream phase," it encourages the participants to think about "what could be" by challenging them to think outside the traditional boundaries of what has been done in the past. Participants develop provocative propositional statements that articulate the positive possibilities envisioned for the organization.

- **Validate the Propositions**. This step begins the design phase. Whereas the discovery and dream phases encourage participants to think about possibilities, the design phase uses the provocative propositions to focus the participants on creating action around the possibilities.

- **Support Analysis**. This step involves forward thinking about what organizational resources are in place and which ones need to be developed.

- **Develop Action Agenda**. Determining what "will be" is an important element of the design phase. Organizational commitments are established, and application plans are developed to realize the provocative propositions.

- **Implement the Action Agenda.** This is the delivery phase and focuses on action planning and on personal and organizational commitments to change.

- **Evaluate the Implementation.** The key to determining whether the Appreciative Inquiry has been an effective process to stimulate organizational change is to conduct an evaluation of outcomes.[8]

The City of Hampton's Experience with Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry is a process which takes shape differently in different organizations, and in different contexts. The process may take as little as a week or two to complete, or as long as several months. The Appreciative Inquiry process began for the City of Hampton when the Employee Council,[9] with the support of the Human Resources department and the City Manager, sent several employees to an Appreciative Inquiry training session sponsored by the Virginia Institute of Government in Charlottesville, Virginia. Building on that learning experience, the City of Hampton designed an employee-centered approach to Appreciative Inquiry, with employees facilitating workshops, taking notes, handling all necessary logistics, and developing the final report to the City Manager. The Employee Council successfully took on this leadership challenge. They conducted ten Appreciative Inquiry workshops, which included a total of 246 city employees who volunteered to participate in the one-and-one-half-day workshops. The overwhelming majority of the workshop participants reported being very satisfied with their experience. As one of the participants observed, "It is easy to be negative — being positive makes you want to work."

The workshops were planned as an opportunity to celebrate the successes that the city employees had achieved over the past decade, and to use those successes to generate new ideas that would serve as a springboard to the 21st century. The desired outcomes were:

- an appreciation of what employees value, and what they do well;

- a vision for the City of Hampton as an excellent place to work; and

- an agenda for action for the Employee Council, which supports the city's strategic plan.

The City of Hampton's unique approach to Appreciative Inquiry used workshops and a group approach, rather than the individual interview approach typical of the traditional model. Each workshop brought together twenty to thirty employees, from all levels and city departments, to engage in the one-and-one-half-day workshops. After the initial introductions and icebreaker, the facilitators presented a brief twenty-minute overview of Appreciative Inquiry theory and process. The workshop participants were then divided into small work groups of six members. The participants were assigned to small groups that were intentionally diverse. The participants moved between the small work groups and the larger group for the remainder of the workshop. The major tasks in the workshop were to collect data, develop common themes, create provocative propositions, identify supports, and begin to build an action agenda. Each of the tasks are discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Collecting the data. For the first task, the small work groups broke into pairs, and the participants interviewed each other using a standardized set of questions. The interviews began by asking about positive experiences, such as work experiences that made them feel proud. The next set of questions involved identifying values that were most important to the participants, and values that were important to the city. A third question asked: If someone was taking a helicopter ride over the City of Hampton, what would they notice that gives life and vitality to the city? The last question asked: If you could wave a magic wand and change three things about the city government, what would they be?" The questions were deliberately general and very open, allowing participants to focus on the City of Hampton as a place to work and a place to live. Workshop organizers expected a wide range of issues and ideas to emerge, and their expectations were met.

Developing Provocative Propositions. At the completion of the interviews, the small groups met to share what they learned from them. Based on the data from the interviews, the participants generated a list of common themes. From the common themes, the groups were asked to develop provocative propositions, essentially vision statements, that captured the best of their experiences. The question was: "If these positive experiences existed all the time, what would the organization be like?" The statements were in the active voice. Generally shorter, focused propositions worked better for the remainder of the Appreciative Inquiry process. Participants found it useful to have a few examples posted on a flip chart to demonstrate what the general format should look like.

Validate the Propositions: The provocative propositions from each of the work groups were posted around the room, with one proposition per flip chart, and all the participants were given the opportunity to organizational value of every proposition as well as assess the extent to which the proposition existed at the time in the organization. Two scales were drawn beneath each of the propositions, ranging from "a very great extent" to "little or no extent." Participants were asked to register their views about the extent to which each proposition represented an important value, and the extent to which the proposition currently existed by placing stick-em dots on each of the scales. This validation process, done as a large group exercise, created a relatively anonymous way for participants to voice their views and discuss results.

The participants rated most of the propositions as being important values "to a very great extent." While there was more variation in their views about the extent to which each of the propositions currently existed, many of the propositions were seen as existing from a "moderate" to a "great extent." Organizations are not monoliths, and people's experiences and perceptions vary, depending upon where in the organization they work. Variations in perceptions were expected. What was crucial was the realization of how much agreement there was about the wide array of positive images participants had of their organization; the extent to which they shared similar images and desires for their organization; and the extent to which many of their propositions already existed. Participants were not starting from ground zero; there was appreciation about how much they currently did, and how much of it they did well.

Support Analysis. Returning to their small work groups, participants were asked to select a few of the propositions that most interested them. Their task was to identify the organizational supports and resources currently in place that contributed to success. They then identified the supports that needed to be put into place in order to make these propositions exist to "a very great extent" across the organization. This is where the Appreciative Inquiry process begins to look more like a problem-solving process. Even here, however, "barriers" to success were avoided to keep the process as positive as possible.

Developing the Action Agenda. Based on the support analysis, the participants were then asked to suggest some items to be considered for the action agenda. The actions are intended to help move the city from where it is currently, to where it would like to be in terms of the provocative propositions. Participants were asked what it would take to move the "dots" to the most positive side of the scale. They provided their ideas, based on whatever information they had at the time. This was the last task of the workshop, and some felt that there was not enough time to fully develop their ideas. A closing exercise and workshop evaluations were conducted to end each workshop.

Moving Toward Implementation. The initial design assumed that the action agenda items could be easily gleaned from the data collected during the workshops, and a report would be written which would then announce the action agenda. All of the flip charts were transcribed with the help of graduate students from Old Dominion University's MPA program. These transcriptions served as the primary data for the report.

Workshop facilitators had not anticipated the amount of information that would be generated — 175 provocative propositions were created — so the design was modified. A report was written which categorized the provocative propositions into eight major themes;[10] some of the support and action agenda suggestions were also included, so that the participants could get a sense of the range of ideas and issues that had emerged from all of the workshops. This report has been sent to all workshop participants.

With so many great ideas generated in the workshops, it became clear that priorities would have to be established, in order to develop an achievable action agenda. Participants from the ten Appreciative Inquiry workshops will be invited to select and attend one of the day-long, agenda- setting meetings, which will each focus on one of the eight themes that emerged from the workshops. At each of the agenda-setting meetings, all of the suggestions that emerged for the specific theme from all of the workshops will be presented. In addition, members of the city working on that particular theme will be present at the meetings to provide information and answer questions. It is expected that participants will engage in focused discussions at these meetings that will result in a list of the most important items for the action agenda. These items will be conveyed to existing teams; or new teams, for action. The workshop participants will be invited to join the city-wide action agenda teams.

Lessons Learned

The Appreciative Inquiry process worked well for the City of Hampton. Many ideas were generated. The participants were overwhelmingly positive in their evaluation of the workshops and over two-thirds reported that they would be willing to work on implementation teams that result from this process. Some comments from participants capture their reaction to the Appreciative Inquiry process:

> *"Great workshop! A wealth of information came as a result of the various city employees getting together and sharing their ideas on how we can better our community as a whole through city involvement."*

> *"Being focused on the positive, and what works, brings about positive solutions and suggestions more quickly and with less pain."*

> *"I am committed to becoming a 'reformed pessimist' from this process."*

> *"I am honored to have been given the opportunity to have participated in this workshop.... I feel more a part of the city for having attended."*

> *"We all have a strong passion to make Hampton the most livable city, and the workshop gives us the opportunity to recognize this, because we come in as separate employees, departments or whatever the individual mind- set may be, but we leave as one unit."*

An active employee council, capable of taking the lead in organizing and conducting the workshops, was essential. It mattered that this was an employee-centered process, and that the employees were in workshop leadership positions. Top management support was also essential. The City Manager played a key role, more than just making it possible for the employees to engage in this process, he demonstrated commitment by giving the welcoming remarks at each of the workshops. A shortened version of the process was presented to the department heads so that they would have firsthand experience with the process. They supported the Appreciative Inquiry process by enabling their employees to participate.

Every attempt was made to make the workshops a positive experience. The setting was important. Most of the workshops were held in a quiet park facility. Break out space was also important. The workshops need to be paced, so that all of the steps are covered. Given the enthusiasm of most of the participants, it is easy to lose sight of how challenging these workshops were. The participants should be acknowledged for their hard work and contributions.

For many participants, the workshops were an opportunity to share with others aspects of their work that made them feel proud. The benefits included: Providing employees with the opportunity to meet others from across the city; to learn to use some new tools; to have an opportunity to share their views and knowledge; and to feel a part of the change.

There is something magical that happened at the workshops. Perhaps the magic came from the participants being able to express pride in the city and the work that they do. Perhaps it came from the energy that was created when the participants looked around a room filled with flip charts documenting how much was already working well. It is this magic that gives the Appreciative Inquiry its power as an approach to organizational change and development.

The greatest challenge is in the final steps —moving from the vision to implementation. This requires committed leadership from the top of the organization, and sustained and supported energy from those who volunteered to work on the implementation teams. They will need time and resources to do the work of leading these changes, and their efforts will need to be recognized, rewarded, and publically celebrated. Ideally, more Appreciative Inquiry workshops will be held, to engage more employees in this ongoing process of valuing what they do, as well as moving forward toward their vision of the future.

Notes

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[2] J K. Galbraith, quoted in W. Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* (NY: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company 1991).

3 S Srivastva and D.L. Cooperrider, *Appreciative Management and Leadership: The Power of Positive Thought and Action in Organizations* (San Francisco, CA.: Jossey-Bass, 1990).

4 GR. Bushe, "Advances in Appreciative Inquiry as an Organizational Development Intervention," *Organizational Development Journal* 3(1995), 14-22.; Srivastva and Cooperrider, 1990.

5 J Lord, "The Quote Center," www.appreciative-inquiry.org/AI-Quotes.htm, 1998.

6 Srivastva and Cooperrider, 1990

7 S A. Hammond, *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry* (Plano, TX.: Kodiak Consulting, 1996).

8 D Whitney and C. Schau, "Appreciative Inquiry: An Innovative Process for Organization Change," *Employment Relations Today* 2(1998): 11-21; D. Whitney and D.L. Cooperrider, "The Appreciative Inquiry Summit: Overview and Applications," *Employment Relations Today* 3(1998): 17-28.

9 The City of Hampton Employee Council is comprised of front-line employees from various departments who are appointed to the Council by the City Manager One important purpose of the Employee Council is to provide feedback to the City Manager and staff on matters related to employee concerns.

10 The eight interconnected themes developed from the provocative propositions were: customer delight; healthy families and children; healthy neighborhoods; healthy businesses and region; healthy race relations and cultural diversity; strong schools; healthy environment; and strong workforce

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