Appreciative Inquiry is an Alternative to Problem-Solving

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In past articles, I've described procedures for building leaders in your organization. I've pointed out that most people assume "leadership development" means working on overcoming your weaknesses.

However, several of my articles have emphasized an alternative, often superior, approach--that of enhancing existing strengths.

A parallel exists in the realm of organizational change. Traditional improvement techniques emphasize the problem-solving approach. The spotlight is on what is wrong or broken. Energies focus on the largest problem, diagnosing it, proposing alternative "fixes," and choosing a solution path that seems most likely to eliminate or minimize the undesired situation.

Appreciative inquiry looks for what has worked and is currently healthy. Descriptive statements are grounded in real experience, not speculation or theory. Participants recall memories of success and build on each other's energy, generating a new enthusiasm that is positive and synergistic.

A basic premise of this approach is that we become what we think about. If we focus on problems, we find problems. If we focus on what is working well, we discover more that is good, and we can build a future state where "the best" becomes routine experience.

The concept can be understood by looking at both words individually. "Appreciate" means to value, recognizing the characteristics that give vitality and health to living systems; to esteem or prize highly. "Inquire" means to explore and discover, asking questions that reveal new possibilities; to systematically search and pursue.

Appreciative inquiry involves asking positive questions that allow the people involved to transform past successes into constructive potential for the future. The process assumes that every organization is a mystery to be embraced, performing well at *something* that could be expanded and carried forward into the future.

Problem-solving approaches to organizational improvement are notorious for generating defensiveness. Through valuing the best of what is and envisioning what could be, appreciative inquiry tends to generate freedom--freedom to be heard, to dream, to contribute, to be positive, and to be supported, both as an individual and as a contributor to the success of the organization.

It may be helpful to offer some questions typical of an appreciative inquiry:
- Describe a high point in your experience, when you felt most effective and engaged, vibrant and alive. What made that situation possible?
- Without being modest, what do you value most about your work, your organization, and your participation in it?
- Imagine your organization five years from now, when everything is just as you imagine it could be. What is different? How have you contributed to this enhanced organization?
- Describe an incident when you or someone you know went the extra mile to deliver what the customer wanted, even before the need was expressed. What made that possible?

After describing what's working and healthy, then dreaming about what could be, most organizations feel compelled to design something new and necessary to move in that direction. Once created mentally, the transformation is virtually impossible to stop!

Unfortunately, most people have never experienced appreciative inquiry. David Cooperrider, a doctoral student in the 1980's, generated the concept. Much of the material for this article was taken from his book Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change. Cooperrider, now the Chair of the Department of Organizational Behavior at Case Western Reserve University, collaborated on the book with co-author Diana Whitney, President of the Corporation for Positive Change.

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Dennis Hooper is an Executive Coach in Atlanta, helping leaders build leaders and organizations of excellence. You can contact him at dhooper2@juno.com or 404-575-3050.