

Beyond Problem Solving--Appreciative Inquiry

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This article is for good problem solvers. You are so valuable! Nothing can frustrate movement in the direction of excellence like an unexpected problem. "Help! We need someone to fix this situation!"

Fixing problems is necessary to reestablish normalcy. We all like situations to be normal. When operations go as planned, we all feel more comfortable.

There are two drawbacks to problem solving, however. Establishing normalcy moves the organization back to the way it was. Establishing normalcy does nothing to move the organization in the direction of excellence. Making improvements requires establishing a new normal.

The second limitation with problem solving is that people who are good at problem solving see problems everywhere. Really! Isn't that true for you? Isn't your "to do" list loaded with problems that need your attention?

How do you eliminate the dilemma of having so many problems to solve? There are two answers. One is to create and follow repeatable, reliable processes. Many problems occur because there was either no procedure for handling the situation or the established procedure wasn't followed properly.

Generating and following reliable processes is a valuable skill, but is a topic for another article. This article goes beyond processes, addressing the second solution to always having problems to solve.

Because you are good at solving problems, could it be that you "see" problems everywhere you look? Maybe your self-image is partially defined by being a good problem solver. What if you could experience a change--a paradigm shift--in the way you "see" your responsibility?

I'm not suggesting you can ever arrive at a place where there are no problems. I am suggesting, however, that you might be able to "see" something different in situations you encounter.

Rather than looking for what's wrong in a given situation, what if you trained yourself to quickly and easily see the opportunities in that situation? This is not an easy conversion to make. It sure won't happen randomly. If you are intentional, however--if you recognize the value in what I'm about to share--you can significantly alter the way you "see" situations, changing what you do next.

I recently talked with Jackie Kelm, author of the 2005 book *Appreciative Living: The Principles of Appreciative Inquiry*. In that book are three easy steps to move you and your organization in the direction of genuine excellence. To become skilled in them, however, takes practice!

The first step is to appreciate what currently exists. You may think that's not possible, but no situation is totally negative. Imagine displaying the current situation on a television screen. All that is negative is shown on one side of the screen; all that is positive is displayed on the other side.

Describe the positive aspects of the situation. This may be difficult at first. Just keep creatively thinking, listing as many favorable perspectives as possible. If the situation were a gift, what benefits could it bring? The more ideas you generate, the easier it will be to find additional insights.

The purpose of this step is blatantly to make you feel better. It relieves tension, anxiety, and anger, and it makes the next two steps, where the power in this process lies, much easier to accomplish.

Step two is to imagine the ideal. Simply visualize what you would like to exist. Go beyond what you immediately think is possible. What would satisfy? Optimism, hope, and envisioned contentment embody this step. Visualize a future state that is better than has ever existed. Go on; you can do it!

Step three is to take one or more small steps in the direction you'd like to move. (Admittedly, one of those steps might be to solve the current problem.) Additional steps you might take will occur to you because you've envisioned something better than existed before.

If you are a good problem solver, you may scoff at this approach as being a Pollyanna, feel-good approach advocated by your Human Resources department. Feel that way if you wish, but just try it. You may feel clumsy at first, just like learning any new skill. You won't become good at this approach immediately. However, you may surprise yourself; it could deliver results faster than you expected!