Appreciating the Best of Our Past to Navigate the Future

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For years, libraries have used problem-solving as a method for implementing change, following the standard approach developed in the field of business and industrial management in the early twentieth century. With problem-solving, those seeking to make changes look for the problem, identify its cause, determine the steps necessary to correct the problem, create a plan to achieve the desired goals, implement the plan, and then evaluate to see if it fixed the problem. Such an approach does work and many organizations using problem-solving have had excellent results. But some researchers believe that problem-solving can lead to establishing a negative culture.[1] The use of problem-solving in a human organization focuses on the weaknesses of a situation and can result in divisiveness, finger-pointing, the creation of scapegoats, and ill feelings. Many persons involved in such efforts become defensive and resistant. Much of the management literature dealing with change addresses those people resistant to change and how to deal with that resistance.

As the twentieth century progressed, the pendulum of management literature and research began to move away from the deficit or negative thinking as represented by problem-solving to an emphasis on positive thinking. Core to that position is the importance of positive imagery. Research studies in the middle of the twentieth century began to show that how we think of something can in many ways determine its outcome.

As one example of the power of image, the 1950's studies of the placebo effect[2] have become commonly accepted. Those studies showed that many people will show improvement both in physical and emotional symptoms simply by their belief that they have received an effective treatment. The odds of a placebo having a positive effect in the treatment of illnesses became even greater when the person administering the treatment also believed in its power. The idea became popularized by Norman Cousins in his book *Anatomy of an Illness* about the power of positive thinking and its effect on his life-threatening disease.[3] As he posited, a person could imagine themselves getting well.

Coaches have long used the power of positive imagery to improve athletic performance. Encouraging a golfer to imagine hitting the ball down the center

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of the fairway has proven much more effective than telling someone not to hit the ball in the rough. Conversely, parents know that telling their children not to do something usually guarantees disobedience. These everyday examples underscore the power of positive thinking.

Another landmark group of studies also emphasized the power of image, in particular, the image others have of us. In the Pygmalion studies[4] of the late1960s, researchers told classroom teachers that certain students had high test scores which indicated they would do very well in the classroom, while other students in the class did not score well. The researchers found that the teachers varied their interactions with the students, based on that perception, with the high-scoring students doing much better than the low-scoring ones. In truth, the students received their designation as high- or low-scoring on a random basis that had nothing to do with their actual scores. The studies showed that the teachers' perceptions of the students had more to do with the students' success than their IQ, their home life, or any other factor. The researchers became so concerned at the results that they discontinued the studies before the conclusion of the experiment for fear of long-term harm to the students.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has built on the principle of positive thinking or positive imagery by finding those things that an organization does well and using them as the basis for effecting positive change. The technique, developed by David Cooperrider of Case Western Reserve University in the late 1980s, has become popular in the commercial sector with such enthusiastic participants as Roadway[5], GTE Telecommunications,[6] British Airways, and McDonald's attesting to its success. Government agencies using AI include NASA, the U. S. Navy, and the cities of Chicago[7] and Dubuque, Iowa.[8] In the non-profit sector, hospitals, prisons, religious organizations,[9] schools,[10] and a university[11] have successfully used Appreciative Inquiry to re-energize their organizations. Examples of its successful use have appeared in Canada, England, Australia, Mexico, India, Romania, and the United States.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a logical outgrowth of five basic principles found in sociological theory.[12]

1. Constructionist Principle
   a) What we believe about an organization will determine the destiny and outcome of any attempt to change it. Constructionists believe that the "seeds of change are implicit in the first questions asked."

2. Principle of Simultaneity
   a) "Inquiry and change are not truly separate moments; they can and should be simultaneous." Contrary to the long-held notion that an observer or interviewer can be a neutral participant, the principle of simultaneity recognizes that the presence of an observer or a questioner has an effect on the outcome. In particular, the questions they ask can direct the outcome.

3. Poetic Principle
   a) The past, present, and future of an organization can serve as an endless source of "learning, inspiration, or interpretation," much as a work of poetry or literature. While people can examine any topic related to human experience, the choices made, whether between a positive or negative experience or between a creative or restrictive situation, has an impact on the outcome.

4. Anticipatory Principle
   a) Any organization has a shared idea or image of its future that guides it in its current behavior and actions. Those collective imaginations and conversations about the future serve as very important resources for effecting constructive change.

5. Positive Principle
   a) Positive images lead to positive change. Just as plants grow toward sunlight in the heliotropic effect, people grow toward the positive when given positive images to envision and positive questions to discuss.

Appreciative Inquiry starts with its most important element, the selection of a topic for discussion. Consistent with the five principles, the choice must be an affirmative one that reflects what members of an organization want to see in their organization. Topics can range from quality, customer satisfaction, communication, leadership, education, morale, recruitment of new employees, quality of work life, employee retention, and so on. The topic must be stated in the affirmative, be something the organization wants, should make people want to know more about it, and encourage discussion about the organization's future.

Appreciative Inquiry sessions follow a four-step cycle known as the 4-D cycle. The first step of the Appreciative Inquiry cycle involves *discovery*. What makes up the best of the topic under discussion?

At the center of the discovery is the appreciative interview. The appreciative interview is a dialogue in which the participants discuss several questions aimed at finding the best things about their organization:

1. Describe the best times you have had in your organization. Recall a time when you felt most energized, most involved or most excited. What made it such a rewarding experience? Who was involved? Describe it in detail.

2. What do you value most about yourself, your work, and your organization?

3. What core factors give life to your organization, without which the organization would cease to exist?

4. Imagine you've walked into your organization ten years from now. Everything is as you always dreamed it would be. What do you see? What is happening? How have things changed?

5. What three wishes do you have to enhance the health and vitality of your organization?

These questions can be rephrased to accommodate different organizations or situations. For example, in an organization seeking to develop its leaders, the questions could ask participants to describe those leaders who have most inspired and impressed them and determine the qualities that made them so. In a discussion aimed at improving gender relations, instead of asking why an organization has poor male/female relationships, the participants look for examples of good male/female relationships and discover what makes them work so well. Likewise, an effort to improve race relations looks for examples of situations where persons of different races work well together.

The appreciative interview becomes an opportunity for people to share their stories of successes and accomplishments. But more importantly, people can determine the factors that contributed to those successes. These serve as the basis for continuing the successes.

After identifying the best moments in step one, it becomes a logical next step to think of new possibilities. In the second step, participants *dream* by describing their vision of what might be. This starts the process of creating a positive image of a new future.

Third, participants *design* a new organization where the exceptional and peak moments become part of the everyday. Developing a provocative proposition or statement of intent that comes from the successes of the past lets an organization see that their dream can come alive.

Finally, the organization uses the momentum of the design to move to its *destiny*. With the entire organization sharing a common vision of what the future can hold, members become inspired to find new and innovative ways to reach their future.

To see how Appreciative Inquiry might assist libraries in effecting change, one small example might serve as an illustration. A department head in a Midwestern university library faced the task of joining two historically separate departments, Acquisitions and Cataloging. While the two departments had agreed to a single name, Technical Services, the department head knew that just changing the name did not create a merged department. She wanted to get past any former territorial issues that might have existed and have the staff work well together as a single unit. The usual approach of problem-solving did not seem appropriate and the library had just had a very negative experience of a consultant's failed attempt at change that had wreaked havoc with staff morale. Appreciative Inquiry suggested an approach that would allow the two departments to focus on their similarities both in tasks and purposes rather than on their differences and perhaps use those similarities to move forward.

In most case studies, Appreciative Inquiry becomes a multi-day retreat involving all members of an organization. The Technical Services department could not discontinue its operations for that long and shut down since the rest of the library would remain open. Given the need for an abbreviated approach, the department head decided to adapt AI somewhat. The process ended up as a mini-retreat taking two half days and involved all members of the department except the student assistants.

To make sure the appreciative interviews succeeded the department head identified a number of staff to serve as the initial interviewer in each pair. Meeting with them the day before the first session, she reviewed the questions they would ask in the appreciative interview. She also suggested how to handle certain situations that might arise during the interview, such as a person who could not identify any positive experiences or who might only focus on their negative experiences.

At the first session, the department head provided a brief introduction to the concept of appreciative inquiry and explained her role as facilitator. The department broke into pairs assigned by the department head and

consisting of one member of the former Acquisitions Department and one member of the former Cataloging Department. The pairs began the appreciative interviews which made up the first phase of *discovery*. The department head moved from group to group, checking only to see if the conversations started and then if they continued. Each pair seemed very involved in their stories, actively listening to each other. After forty-five minutes, the groups reconvened and the department head asked for their initial impressions of the interviews. One staff member, known library-wide for her intense dislike of meetings, surprised everyone with her enthusiasm for the interview and suggested that the entire library would benefit by participating. Almost all other participants echoed her comments.

The department head then asked the group to describe the "life-giving forces," as defined by Appreciative Inquiry, that exemplified the stories they had heard or served as a common thread. What was it that if it didn't exist, would make the department totally different from what it was? While sharing their observations, the staff occasionally referenced stories from the appreciative interviews to illustrate their point. The staff's comments on what made their memorable experiences so positive included coworkers who cared about providing quality work, a sense of humor, flexibility, camaraderie, the opportunity to work with student assistants, teamwork and a family atmosphere, people willing to help in other areas and learn new things, technology and information resources within easy reach, and an atmosphere in which people felt comfortable approaching each other with questions. At the end of the discussion, the staff had identified themes common across their moments of greatest achievement and excitement.

After ranking the most important themes, the department broke into two groups to discuss the themes and what they really meant to each group. Again, the department head assigned people to the groups assuring an equal mixture of Acquisitions and Cataloging personnel. In this next more creative exercise in the dream phase, each group created an image of the department when all the themes would be at their best. The staff could express their dream image in word or picture, including song, poetry, dance, artwork, skit, or dialogue. The department head encouraged their creativity by giving each group a variety of items, including colored paper, markers, ribbon, scissors, tape, string, and other miscellaneous found objects.

When the two groups shared their dream images with each other, they found they had much in common, underscoring yet again the similarities between the two original departments in their dreams for the future. Each had created a three dimensional representation of their dream image laden with symbolic meaning that they shared to laughter and appreciation. Reflecting on the images, the department created a written statement that put their vision into words. The statement became a provocative proposition, as described in the Appreciative Inquiry process, bridging their best experiences of the past with what they could envision for the future. The first session ended there on a high note.

At the second session, the department reviewed their provocative proposition or dream statement to determine who, both inside and outside the department, would be affected by the realization of their dream. For its next step in the design phase, the department brainstormed about the formal organizational elements necessary to accomplish their dream, identifying budget, staff, procedures, communication, evaluation, technology, facilities, and decision-making processes, to name a few. Everyone then indicated the top three they felt most important to accomplish the dream they had imagined in the first session. Each member of the department chose one of the groups discussing the three elements. At the end of the discussions of what they felt necessary to make that element a reality, each group drafted a statement describing it. After sharing each statement, everyone wrote a comment about what they liked about it. These comments aided in revisions.

The final statements, representing the destiny phase of the Appreciative Inquiry process, became incorporated into the Technical Services Department's first set of goals and objectives as a new combined department. The three design elements of effective fiscal stewardship, communication, and procedures, identified as playing important roles in reaching the department's dream, became a large part of the goals and objectives with specific projects targeted for the year.

When evaluating the sessions to see if they achieved the main purpose of uniting the two departments, it becomes clear that Appreciative Inquiry proved the right choice. Using the traditional problem-solving approach may not have resulted in the same positive outcome. Attention would have focused on the differences between the two departments and

the weaknesses to fix instead of the strengths held in common. Rather than creating a single group with a common purpose, problem-solving might have created armed camps defending the status quo. Instead, the Appreciative Inquiry discussions allowed the staff of both departments to learn that their new colleagues shared many of the same values and underscored how everyone worked to accomplish many of the same goals. Participants spoke with enthusiasm about their work and what made it worthwhile. Sharing that enthusiasm through their stories of their successes created a very positive foundation for the new department.

Since the Appreciative Inquiry mini-retreat, the department has implemented a number of ideas, both large and small, that arose during the discussions, including flexible scheduling, the use of earphones for listening to music during work, outdoor department meetings when weather permits, presentations by staff on their areas of expertise, and the creation of a more private work area for staff use on projects. Other changes occurred with tasks moved from one former department to the other. Rather than seeing such changes as a threat to territory and launching defensive turf wars, as had previously happened in similar situations, the staff saw the changes as a logical step for the new department consistent with the values they had identified in the retreat.

Appreciative Inquiry also shows promise for its utilization after the end of retreats and even for daily use. While the case studies about Appreciative Inquiry most often reported on its successful use by organizations attempting to resolve specific concerns, the case studies also showed that the effects of Appreciative Inquiry did not end with the sessions. Researchers reported that AI changed the atmosphere of the workplace and that participants returned to work with a renewed enthusiasm. The Appreciative Inquiry workshops became a valued part of the history of the organization and in turn formed the basis of new success stories.[13] Some participants, both supervisors and line staff, also used the techniques of AI on the job with positive results. For example, as one of its basic practices, Appreciative Inquiry restates problems as positive questions for examination. To apply this technique on a daily basis, supervisors can handle staff complaints by rephrasing them into positive questions. Complaints about poor communication can become discussions of past examples of excellent communication, determining

what made them excellent, and then finding ways to incorporate those elements in the future. Still other articles have suggested the appropriateness of Appreciative Inquiry for use with personnel evaluation,[14] job interviews,[15] and professional development.[16] Using Appreciative Inquiry in these ways would begin to embed its principles and make it a part of the everyday workplace. The number of success stories would continue to increase.

Every library and every library employee has success stories. Each of us has had times when our work brought us special rewards, when we felt excited and invigorated. Now as many libraries face the challenges of declining or stable budgets, recruiting and retaining employees, and questions about the future existence of libraries, these stories can help deal with new challenges. Appreciative Inquiry offers a way to face the future with confidence, by building on our past successes.

Notes

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11.   Finegold, "Appreciative Inquiry and Public Dialogue: An Approach to Community Change," 240–42.

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13.   Miriam Smith. "Special Delivery," *Inside Business*, September 2002: 33–35.

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