ASCENDING FORWARD FROM A FOUNDATION OF POSITIVE DIALOGUE:
Inclusive Decision Making with Appreciative Inquiry

Mollie Peuler*

INTRODUCTION

Change creation and decision making in any given community is often grounded in an exploration of what is wrong or not working. Forward movement is oriented around 'fixing' the problem—but does this approach actually lead to dynamic, lasting change? The Appreciative Inquiry (AI) theoretical framework allows change agents to initiate and manage their academic community's growth and evolution by asking generative questions.[1] Through the thoughtful use of AI, these generative questions focus change agents' attention on past and present successes and strengths as the foundation to then build upon.[2] Such focus encourages them to dream and design an ideal future based on inclusive organizational dialogue without the baggage of problem-oriented negativity. Put differently, AI shows users a clear path toward a brighter future of success rather than getting mired down in dealing with an unending backlog of problems and complaints.

This paper will describe the Case Study of how a library task force, composed of faculty and staff, applied the AI framework when charged with examining "communication problems" within a 4-year academic library. In academic libraries "communication" is perennially identified as being inadequate. But that oft-lodged complaint of "communication is bad" is so vague as to be virtually meaningless. Thus, the first challenge for this task force was to identify what employees mean by the complaint. Without this knowledge, the library cannot effectively address the core issues. This paper will share how a small group used the AI framework to guide interviews of every team in the library to not only draw out specific issues but, critically, to discover what was already working to serve as the starting point for structural improvements and growth. This paper will describe the task force's process for exploring change through positive dialogue, including defining the topic of inquiry and developing interview questions based on past survey data to encourage inclusive dialogue from all library employees, regardless of job title or rank.

*Mollie Peuler, Appalachian State University, eLearning Librarian

BACKGROUND

The Belk Library and Information Commons Library Council is one of several internal library committees comprising ten seats, five of which are held by faculty and five by staff. It was formed in 2018 with the goal to provide a voice for all internal library constituents, facilitate and actively participate in discussions between library personnel and administration, and serve as a forum.[3] The Council also communicates all library issues and concerns to all library employees.[4]

In 2020 the Library Council was tasked by administration, with exploring communication challenges within the library. The administrative charge stated that the "Library Council will form a communication task force to investigate the meaning of communication challenges in the Appalachian State libraries."[5] As an answer to this call, The Library Council created a subcommittee entitled the Communication Task Force (CTF) that was composed of five members of the Library Council, both faculty and staff. The CTF would meet separately from Library Council but periodically confer with and provide updates to the Library Council as well.

The CTF began by looking for an effective way to move forward with this inquiry into communication challenges within the library. It seemed to the CTF that the default is often to look at what is wrong and to address just the identified problems. With this in mind, the CTF wanted to consider an alternative approach. One idea that rose to the top was Appreciative Inquiry framework.

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

The beginnings of AI trace back to 1979 with David Cooperrider, an intern and doctoral student at Case Western Reserve University and the Cleveland Medical Clinic (Bushe).[6] Cooperrider was working on a project to study physician leadership, which involved interviewing physician leadership on problems within the organization. He noticed that the population he was interviewing was more interested in talking about the pieces of their work they were excited about. To that end, rather than focus on the problems, Cooperrider was encouraged by his supervisors to continue to shift his focus onto the vitality and successes of the work (Bushe).[7]

Cooperrider's work evolved into a more succinct process known now as the Appreciative Inquiry framework: the process of grounding in positive thought and eventually attempting to realize that that idealized solution creates a system of rapid prototyping and iterative thought.[8] AI invites the practitioner to consider what would happen if instead of asking what is wrong, we ask what is right and currently working, and then building from there. This AI framework consists of a 4D process that begins with an affirmative topic, with four essential phases, defined by Cooperrider and Whitney:[9]

- Discovery: Mobilizing the whole system by engaging all stakeholders in the articulation of strengths and best practices. Identifying "the best of what has been and what is."
- Dream: Creating a clear results-oriented vision in relation to discovered potential and in relation to questions of higher purpose, such as, "what is the world calling us to become?"
- Design: Creating possibility propositions of the ideal organization, articulating an organization design that people feel is capable of drawing upon and magnifying the positive core to realize the newly expressed dream.
- Destiny: Strengthening the affirmative capability of the whole system, enabling it to build hope and sustain momentum for ongoing positive change and high performance.

The foundation of these four steps is the affirmative topic choice. The affirmative topic is selected at the beginning of the 4D process and drives the rest of the work moving forward. The topic will inspire the questions selected in step one and continue to frame the work moving forward.[10]

This 4D process was adopted by the Belk Library communication task force, adapted for our/their own circumstances.

STEP ONE: DEFINE

The CTF worked to 'Define' their affirmative topic that would define and direct the work moving forward.[11] The affirmative topic created is: How do we become a place where all employees feel informed?

STEP TWO: DISCOVERY

The Discovery step of AI is the technique of creating positively-framed questions and interviewing a population. The goal is to ask a population to consider past successes and positive experiences, and build upon these in the future steps. This step allows all individuals to speak from their perspective in an authentic way.[12] While there are a number of ways to perform this step, they all involve open dialogue. A few different variables to consider are whether or not to interview a selection of a population or the entire population and whether or not the interviews can take place online or in person.[13]

The CTF spent considerable time researching AI resources and best practices documentation to adapt and develop positively-framed questions for the Discovery interviews. The primary document that served the CTF in developing the questions is "What is Appreciative Inquiry," a document that provided ideas for question creation as well as best practices for conducting the interviews.[14] The five questions that were created are as follows:

1. Innovation and discovery require collaboration. One must be able to connect across departments, job titles, and specialties. Tell a story and share your insights about a project or time when you have been a part of a collaborative effort across teams that resulted in an outstanding accomplishment. What allowed this to happen?
2. Recall an ideal communicator. How did they interact well with you and your co-workers?
3. Keeping communication in mind, what is the core factor that gives life and vitality to your job—the one thing without which it just wouldn't be the same?
4. Recall a work environment that had effective communication. What did that look like?
5. Is there anything else you would like us to know about?

Prior to conducting the formal AI interviews, the CTF performed a practice interview with the whole Library Council to determine if any changes were needed and to practice the interview process. This practice session was a crucial step in that it allowed a window into the process from both interviewer and interviewee perspective. A crucial piece that stood out to the CTF is how challenging it is to shift from talking about what's wrong to talking about challenges from a more positive perspective. Given that challenge, the CTF intentionally provided AI context to the teams prior to the interviews by sharing language, crafted by CTF, by email. A script was also created for the CTF members to use for the interviews. This script included the questions that would be asked during the interviews as well as an introductory statement about Appreciative Inquiry Framework.

While this work was grounded in AI and change through positive dialogue, it was important to the CTF that the library employees know that this was not an attempt to dismiss any past negative experiences. To that end, the CTF also included language in the interview script and introductory emails that spoke to this awareness:

> We acknowledge and understand that sharing negative examples may be what is comfortable and natural. We respect all past and present negative experiences and feelings and understand the need to validate those. In this conversation, we would like to move forward using positive dialogue.

The CTF conducted the interviews in person with all teams within the library. Larger teams were broken up into two sessions. Two members of the communications task force conducted each interview, one person to ask questions and one person to take notes. Anyone in a manager role was asked not to attend the session; a separate session was held for administration and managers. While the questions are phrased to garner positive responses, the CTF were attempting to create as neutral of an interview environment as possible. A digital version of the interview questions was also sent out to the entire library so that individuals with scheduling conflicts, as well as those who prefer digital communication, could participate by submitting responses by email.

STEP THREE: DREAM

The Dream step of Appreciative Inquiry is the process of examining the information gathered from the previous step, Discovery, and imagining a potential positive future for the library.[15] The CTF's goal was to critically exam-

ine the large amount of qualitative information gathered from the interviews and identify patterns. To achieve this goal, the team decided to use a qualitative data coding method to review the interview notes. Rather than have the entire CTF perform this task, a few members of the CTF volunteered for this piece of work.

These select CTF members created an interactive code sheet using Google Sheets. Each member worked independently to read the notes, record their own observations, and code the text for themes using the spreadsheets. At the end of coding all of the session notes, each individual was left with a list of adjectives and phrases that made up the codebook. From here, we each examined our codes that we created and applied in the coding process and identified repetitions and patterns.

Once each person completed their individual coding and identified themes, the team collaborated to develop shared themes from the individual coding work. A list of major themes were developed for each question along with broad themes that were present regardless of the question asked.

FIGURE 1
Dream Themes
Broad Themes • Clear/shared vision and/or goal • Agency and autonomy, respect for expertise and work • Gratitude from leadership and communities served • Strong/supportive/mindful leadership • The opportunity for and support of cross-team collaboration • Support for new ideas, innovation, and diverse perspectives • Space for learning and trying new things with the understanding that there may be failures or works in progress. • Employees are viewed as full people, not just employees • Positive and productive team environment • Individual team camaraderie; including trust, purposeful communication, and awareness of coworkers' work styles • Responsive, transparent, and direct communication • Leadership and library workers use diverse communication methods
Collaboration (Question 1) • Positive working relationships amongst leadership, i.e.,they get along with one another • Active cross team collaboration that are task-oriented with purposeful work assignments
Ideal Communicator (Question 2) • Seeks a diversity of perspectives/seeks input from library workers • Professional and consistent with clear expectations • Provides as needed support/feedback
Effective Communication Work Environment (Question 3) • Decisions are considered the best interest of the library and employees • Prepared to communicate purposefully with processes in place to garner feedback and make decisions (established process/plan/project management) • Honesty • Space/proximity/visibility--importance of being physically near co-workers and supervisors and important for supervisors and admin to be visible
Core Factor (Question 4) • Social relationships with coworkers/colleagues • Students • Patrons

STEP FOUR: DESIGN

The Design step of Appreciative Inquiry is a synthesis of the best of what is and the best of what could be from the previous steps, Dream and Discovery, to determine what should be.[16] For this step, the whole CTF reformed to strategically and critically examine the collective themes and translate them into recommendations for what should be to answer our topic generated in step 1: How do we become a place where all employees feel informed?. These recommendations would represent what should exist in an atmosphere of ideal communication practices, arising out of the responses of all library employees.

Fundamentally, the aim of the CTF was to make recommendations that would legitimately lead to a state where the collective library employee body would feel fully informed. The CTF spent time reviewing and discussing the themes to develop the following categories of recommendations:

FIGURE 2
Destiny Recommendations
Leadership • Leaders are skilled or supported in developing positive management style and theory. • Leaders develop and implement awareness of the skills and weaknesses of supervisees and the challenges of each position. • Regular "walkabouts" from upper admin and coordinators to all teams/locations. Informal Q&A sessions about what each team is doing. • Leadership (middle management and higher admin) provides consistent, focused, transparent, and direct communication. • Opportunities for management, and other interested parties, to participate in leadership and communication training.
Planning • Develop and communicate a clearly established strategic plan and set of goals for the library and potentially for teams and individuals. • Consistent feedback and systems/initiatives are developed to acknowledge and/or reward expertise and work output.
General Communication • A variety of communication methods are utilized for communicating updates as well as seeking input. These could include email, Google Hangouts, doorway conversations, team and/or departmental newsletters. • Development of organizational communication/meeting norms and interpersonal communication expectations. • Consistent processes, procedures, norms, etc. are developed and maintained. • Consistent processes, procedures, norms, etc., are followed in meetings to promote consensus and decision making. • Leadership seeks feedback and input from a range of employees regardless of position type/team.
Team collaboration and development • Provide opportunities and established funds for team development and socialization.   o Shared experiences foster camaraderie: facilitate events that promote and create those shared experiences. • Leadership develops and/or supports initiatives that provide purposeful cross-team collaboration opportunities. • Varied, but consistent social opportunities for both team and cross-team socialization.

STEP FIVE DESTINY

The Destiny step of Appreciative Inquiry is the final step wherein stakeholders execute the recommendations of the previous step, Design. This step of the process is ongoing and involves changing the organization over time based on the recommendations agreed upon.[17]

At this point, the CTF made the decision to pass the work of implementing the team's recommendations on to different groups and individuals within the library. This work could no longer be sustained by a singular small group and the Library Council wanted ownership of the work to be shared and built upon by a diverse group of voices within the library. A separate group was created from Library Council to lead this charge with one original member of the CTF. They would work with administrators and other library groups to prioritize the recommendations and move forward.

FINAL STEPS

The CTF closed out this work the way it began: by speaking with and sharing out to the entire library. A final report of the process and findings was shared with all library employees. There had been a goal to share the report in-person in a more laid-back environment, but at this point most library work was taking place online due to COVID-19. Consequently, the CTF provided two online opportunities to report the work and to ask for any additional feedback on the recommendations. The online sessions explained the process of applying AI framework to the communication challenges and the recommendations that were created. Given the sheer number of recommendations that were created, they would need to be prioritized. The CTF would also need to determine which recommendations were already accomplished. With this in mind the CTF created a Google poll that was sent out to the entire library and asked that they prioritize which of the recommendations mattered most to them. Once the information was gathered, the CFT shared the library's preferred preferences with the groups that would carry the AI work forward.

NOTES

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