

Introduction

At Head Light Communications we help our clients discover best practice from within the experiences of their own staff and use this as a basis for performance improvement initiatives. Those familiar with the term will recognise that our approach is closely aligned with that of Appreciative Inquiry. In this article we introduce Appreciative Inquiry and explain why it is at the heart of our approach to capturing and modelling best practice.

The drivers for our work tend to fall into these categories:

- In a mature market, with established performance benchmarks, you discover that parts of your business are under-performing against the norm.
- Your company has been successful but the market is moving on and beyond the capability of your people.
- Your company has merged with another and operational integration is essential.
- Your company has enjoyed rapid growth and it is becoming difficult to scale established systems working methods and processes.

In all of these cases we have found that there are people within the organisation whose performance and experiences can be used to create a model for others, and that by examining what is already working well, and the factors and conditions that underpin that success, we can then find ways of replicating those conditions and bringing about effective and sustained improvement and change.

What is Appreciative Inquiry?

The term Appreciative Inquiry was first coined by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva in 1987 to describe a new process of organisational change based on generating a collective image of a new and better future by exploring the best of what is and has been achieved. They believed that Action Research, the traditional approach to organisational change which focuses on investigating and solving problems, had been demonstrated to be limited and unsuccessful in innovating and implementing change.

This had also been our experience. By focussing on solving problems your attention is drawn to causes and taking remedial actions to prevent situations occurring, or recovering from them when they do. By switching focus to building on success we often discover approaches that trouble-shooting processes would fail to see, and which often completely bypass the problem. Another significant and noticeable effect is the dramatic increase in energy levels you get when you engage positively with people around what they are doing best and build on their experiences. Indeed, it would be hard to be part of such a process and not feel this way when we look at the definitions of 'Appreciate' and 'Inquiry':

Ap-pre'ci-ate, v.,

1. Valuing; the act of recognizing the best in people or the world around us; affirming past and present strengths, successes, and potentials; to perceive those things that give life (health, vitality, excellence) to living systems.
2. To increase in value, e.g. the economy has appreciated in value.

Synonyms: VALUING, PRIZING, ESTEEMING, and HONORING.

In-quire' (kwir),v.,

1. The act of exploration and discovery.
2. To ask questions; to be open to seeing new potentials and possibilities.

Synonyms: DISCOVERY, SEARCH, and SYSTEMATIC EXPLORATION, STUDY.

A third attribute of Appreciative Inquiry that we have noticed is that when the ideas for change and the processes for delivering them are generated from within, they tend to be easier to implement and more likely to be sustained. Being very inclusive, and involving the people who actually do the work creates advocates for the change in the field, a sense of ownership, and ongoing commitment to implement the changes and develop them on.

Core principles

Cooperrider and Srivastva defined Appreciative Inquiry around five core principles; Constructionist, Simultaneity, Poetic, Anticipatory and Positive. In terms of our work in bringing about performance improvement and change, we have found the most interesting to be the Positive principle; the shift is away from the negative orientation of regarding organisations as problems to be solved, with change interventions to be enforced, towards the belief that human systems move naturally towards positive, aspirational images, and that the more positive the image of the future, the longer-lasting will be the change.

This might sound a little 'New Age', but consider the following recognised phenomena supported by this Positive principle:

- the Placebo Effect - the improvement in symptoms by believing that effective treatment is being given
- the Pygmalion Studies - The Impact of another's image of us - teachers responding to students in line with their belief about ability
- positive thinking - recovery rate after heart surgery influenced by ratio of positive/negative thoughts
- the creation of positive images to achieve better sporting performance

We have enabled clients to achieve remarkable results by applying these principles in a range of different situations, notable examples being in Sales and Retail.

In sales we helped two organisations adapt to changes in products and services, driven by changing technologies and new entrants in the marketplace, and requiring a different sales model. We used Appreciative Inquiry techniques to capture examples of where significant sales had been made, specifically relating to the new products, into new markets or involving different decision makers. From these examples we were able to identify the significant factors and conditions that led to the sale and the key competences that were being demonstrated by the successful sales staff. This led to changes to be made to the sales process and sales information systems, formed the basis of a programme to assess and develop the new competences in the existing sales staff, and informed recruitment. Please see our Client Engagements page on our web site or contact us for more details.

In retail we used appreciative inquiry techniques with high performing store managers to identify a range of practical improvements to in-store stock management practices which, when implemented across all their UK stores resulted in a £10 million reduction in their annual stock-loss figure. In this case the use of Appreciative Inquiry techniques represented a

fundamental change in the way this type of problem had traditionally been approached, and was successful in breaking out of a recognised recurring pattern in which change initiatives failed to bring about lasting changes to behaviour. Please see our case study on Safeway Stores for more information and also our Retail Insight Paper that brings together these themes into a framework specifically for implementing improvement in retail.

Getting started

Appreciative Inquiry starts by looking for what is working; the best practice from within the experience of organisational members. This normally done through interviews, discussions and story-telling, with participants working in pairs or in small focus groups. It is critical to ask open questions that are positively framed and to encourage discourse. Participants are asked to think and tell stories about personal 'high point' experiences; times when they felt most engaged and creative, following questions explore what was happening at the time to make the experience possible and what was learned through the process that could be used as a guide for future practice. A useful technique for building an active image of an aspirational future state, which also helps capture innovative ideas or uncover unconscious blocks, is to ask participants to imagine themselves working in an ideal future state of the organisation, or to grant them three wishes to improve the organisation. The style of the discussion is conversational, and questions are asked with an expectation of learning something new and valuable.

Themes and ideas are identified from these stories both in group discussion and subsequent analysis. At Head Light Communications we then use a number of different techniques to investigate the themes that have emerged to further quantify the benefits and establish the conditions for successful implementation. For example we use current and future state process mapping as a technique to model the changes and identify other business processes that may be impacted. In the retail example cited earlier, process mapping allowed us to establish a number of consequential benefits in other parts of the business, building an even more compelling case for the change and allowing us to obtain support and involvement from other functions. It also revealed that some of the changes identified would be better resolved earlier in the value chain.