

Traditional Problem Solving versus Appreciative Inquiry

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Traditional problem solving, root cause analysis, searches for and analyzes the causes of a problem and makes a diagnosis. Finding fault and placing blame becomes important to the process, devastating those who have been found lacking. The best result it ever achieves is that things become as good as they once were. It restores the organization to its previous level.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) on the other hand, focuses on successes of the past and present and invites a vision of what could be. AI assumes something is working in every organization. AI does a root cause analysis on success to create even more success, often with unexpected innovation. Employees are focused on the future they are creating, not trying to dodge the blame being flung around.

To compare the two approaches, think back to the Apollo 13 flight. Remember those haunting words, "Houston, we have a problem"? There had been an explosion and the oxygen, water, fuel and electrical systems were shot. The three astronauts were being overcome by carbon monoxide that was reaching dangerously high levels in the air they were breathing. In Mission Control there was pandemonium. Everybody was running around, trying to figure out what went wrong. Because that was how they were trained.



All of the technicians were pointing at each other and arguing about caused the explosion. The Flight Director, Gene Kranz, held up both hands and said, "Hold it, gentlemen, hold it, I don't care about what went wrong. I need to know what is still working on that space craft. I need to know what is still working."

That is the heart of the Appreciative Inquiry. The astronauts were thousands of miles from earth and their safe return depended on the systems that were still working, not what went wrong. What went wrong really didn't matter at that moment. Traditional problem solving, however, would have kept going after the cause of the explosion.

The appreciative approach, 'what do they have that is working up there', led them to create a filtering system including one of Jim Lovell's socks, which would scrub the carbon monoxide out of the air they had to recycle. What went wrong didn't matter, what was working did. Do you see the distinction there? If Gene Kranz has taken any other approach, there would have been a very different ending.



Traditional problem solving works with technical and usually medical problems. Once the organization, the people, become involved in the process the complexities become too great with too many variables for problem solving.

Appreciative Inquiry doesn't ignore or turn a blind eye to limitations nor does it substitute mindless happy talk and rosy optimism for objective realism. It accepts these realities for what they are. But Ai intentionally shifts the focus of the inquiry and thus the focus of the organization to those positive realities that are the sources of life, creativity and innovation. Think about the conversation you would have with a chief of police if you asked about creating a safe community instead of crime.

Ai produces results. GTE Telephone Operations trained 67,000 employees in Ai as it struggled with deregulation in the highly competitive telecommunications industry. Tom White, GTE President, attributed over 10,000 innovations to Ai. One out of every seven employees contributed an innovation after they were trained. Two years into the process GTE received the ASTD award for Best Culture Change Initiative. Today they are Verizon. Catalyst recognized Avon Mexico as the Best Place to Work in the country when it changed its focus from sexual harassment training to effective cross gender working relationships. Nutrimental Foods, reported a 300% increase in sales after an Ai Summit. Hunter-Douglas Window Fashions achieved a 15% bottom line improvement and created a new strategic direction and culture using Ai.

Images of the future are powerful. We move in the direction of what we can imagine. The more compelling an organization's image of the future, the more positive the outcome. When Lord Marshall became the head of British Airlines, the airline was in strife, with both employees and customers dissatisfied. With eyes wide open, he declared, "We are the world's favorite airline". When employees protested that was not true, he responded, "That may be so, but your job is to make it true." His image guided employees as they created their successful future together.

Appreciative Inquiry is one of the most successful organizational development strategies in the world today is because it creates powerful and compelling visions of the future. Using Ai, people fix problems by study, discussion, learning from and building on what's working, rather than focusing on what is wrong.

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