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Relational Practices in Appreciative Inquiry

By Diana Whitney

Appreciative Inquiry practitioners work with the relational patterns of communication among members (and stakeholders) of the organization. People individually and collectively get into grooves: they develop ways of relating and communicating with each other that quickly become the accepted organizational culture. Many organizations, unfortunately, find their groove in deficit habits of communication that adversely impact performance. Some of the more familiar deficit-based patterns of communication in organizations today include: criticism of ideas and people as a motivational strategy; blaming and exacting punishment from a few for system-wide mistakes; focus on why something won't work rather than taking the risk to experiment and explore novel opportunities; and performance evaluations based upon the assumption that people learn best and improve when aware of their weaknesses and failures. I could go on and on listing the many ways that organizations in all sectors of life, in the US and around the world, have become victims to negative, deficit-based relational habits of communication.

The purpose of our work is always to help a specific client change their organization's patterns of communication or deficit-based organizational narratives, thereby improving performance and wellbeing. Viewing communication patterns as habitual practices – narratives and norms that have developed over time – offers a clear and viable avenue for organization change. These habitual patterns of communication and social interaction, co-created by people interacting overtime, often with good intentions, as they seek to achieve their goals can be observed, assessed for their usefulness and be re-configured. New, more life-affirming patterns, habits and cultural norms can be co-created. This is where Appreciative Inquiry (AI) comes in.

AI is similar in many ways to other processes for large-scale transformation in that it is highly inclusive; yet it is distinguished in one essential way – it is fully affirmative. AI practitioners not only change the configuration of who is included in conversations, they significantly and strategically work with clients to change the topics of conversations within the organization. AI shifts the conversations within and about the organization from what might be considered negative topics to future-focused affirmative topics. In this way AI shifts an organization's discourse away from deficit-based narrative patterns toward value-based conversations that support the co-creation of a desired future. For example, a client whose employee satisfaction survey showed low morale and extensive organizational chatter about how little the company does for employees chose to engage over 500 employees in an Appreciative Inquiry process to create a new and meaningful company-wide career development program. Participation in the AI process and ultimately the new career development program shifted the topic of organizational dialogue from the all too familiar complaint about "what they are not doing for me" to a more empowered "here is where I am going with my career and this is how the company will help me".

This "flip" in the topic of organization communication, as Amanda Trosten-Bloom and I call in it our book *Appreciative Leadership* occurs when AI practitioners ask their clients the simple and infinitely important question, "What do you want more of in your organization?" This inevitably results in a shift from the problem to a viable future-oriented topic for Appreciative Inquiry. For example, constant talk about lack of

coordination among medical professionals reveals the desire for inter-professional collaboration. For clients who are immersed in deficit narratives and norms, it can be a grand “ah ha” when they realize that they have been studying, assessing and learning about precisely what they don’t want more of in their organization: turnover, wasteful spending or silos. With this awareness and AI they shift their organizational narratives to what they want more of in their teams, departments and organizations. For example, from turnover to employee retention; from wasteful spending to productive cost containment; or from conflict to customer-satisfying collaboration. The flip, from what is not working well, to what is wanted, is perhaps the most explicit way that AI helps members of an organization transform what they consider negative narratives and norms into life-affirming and productive organizational communication and performance.

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