

Questioning how to make change stick? Focus on the power of the positive

Working life is full of questions, but most of us don't realise the impact our questions are having on the success or otherwise of our organisations. Most government departments are full of people who want to do a good job, but who feel hamstrung by never ending rounds of restructuring, ever-increasing paperwork and the effects of deficit thinking. They feel increasingly hammered and depleted by the never-ending question *"What's wrong around here and why isn't it being fixed?"*

If you want to see the impact of our normal focus of questioning on the way people think in your organisation, try this simple test:

- Ask three people *"What needs to be fixed around here?"*
- Ask three other people *"What's working around here?"*

Pay particular attention both to the focus of their conversation and to what happens in their spoken and body language.

Most often when you ask someone *"What needs to be fixed around here?"* the answer is immediate, detailed and often blame oriented – *"If only they would do something..."*. In comparison, when someone answers the question *"What's working around here?"* the language is positive and uplifting – energy comes into the conversation.

Traditional change management theory focuses on an organisation as if it were a machine – if you want to get a faster racing bike, you change the tires, the handlebars, the seat and so on. But organisations made up of humans have shown themselves to be far more like an ecology or a biological structure – if you take the leg off a frog, it notices! And it is very sensitive to the slightest change in environment – one change creates others in different parts of the system.

Psychologists working with high performance athletes have shown us time and again that those athletes focusing on their failures tend to fail, while those focusing on their strengths – even imagined ones – do far better. How can we use this at work?

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a methodology that focuses on 'what's working around here' with the idea that the most lasting change comes when people work together to examine what makes their organisation work at its best, and use what they find to build a solid vision of the road to the future. These moments of success have within them the roadmap of how to create more success. When we focus on them, we unleash the energy and the commitment to change. Involving all parts of a system builds a robust and rich answer to how to move into the future that takes everyone on the journey.

"Okay, that sounds interesting", you might be thinking, *"but how does it work?"* Here are three examples from my work in New Zealand. All of them have to do with creating change, but in very different ways.

Merger

Mid-way through 2004 I was invited to lead the people integration workstream for Telecom in a major merger of two telecommunications companies – Telecom Advanced Solutions and Gen-i. In merging these businesses, it was envisaged that the new organisation would quickly become an IT/telecommunications leader in the industry. It was to be a merger of equals, but how could we bring people together quickly to unleash the energy of the new combined business while holding on to all the talent in both businesses and all the customers? AI was the answer.

An Advisory Team was created pulling its members from both businesses to lead the initiative. This team decided that our focus would be on three key elements they believed would underpin the new organisation's success – irresistible leadership, passionate people and raving fans.



We engaged one third of the total organisation in one-on-one interviews around these topics. Immediately people became energised and excited about the future because they were meeting people from the other business and awakening to the possibilities the merger offered. Their stories shared the incredible expertise and passion inherent in the organisations and showed us exactly what to build on.

At a three day Summit of 200+ people we collectively created the internal vision for the new organisation, introduced the new logo, created the strapline and built an action plan for the way forward. Sixteen innovation teams came back into the business to work on various aspects of how people would work together. The energy and excitement were palpable as thousands of hits were made on the interactive blog that was running during the event.

Schooled for success

Schools throughout New Zealand are required to file a charter and strategic goals with the Ministry of Education. For many schools, this is yet another paperwork requirement and often a 'fill in the blank' exercise. Four primary schools in the Southland region contacted me to work with them in rethinking their charters using Appreciative Inquiry.

The largest school I worked with had 60 staff and the smallest seven. Together we explored the 'positive core' of their work – what made them uniquely successful in primary education. We talked about primary schools moving into the heart of the community and what would happen if we engaged the community in an inquiry about educating our children and the importance of education for life.

We came up with an inquiry topic that excited the teachers about engaging in a wider inquiry: *Community for Inspired Learning*. This topic came out of our 'what if' questions. We asked ourselves "What would happen if teachers are inspired to keep learning and parents are inspired to keep learning? What will happen to our children?"

Changing the Environment

Last year I worked with a regional council on a culture change process. This regional council is like all the others, a complex and highly diverse organisation. It was formed through the merger of different catchment boards and other organisations and was still acting like a conglomeration of small parts. A staff survey indicated that while staff were highly committed to their jobs and their sections, they lacked the overall view of what the organisation was involved in. Leadership, communication and vision all ranked poorly.

AI was chosen as a way to encourage people to collaborate and work across silos. In our Advisory Team meeting, the group selected to represent a cross section of the organisation reflected its diverse nature, with people from the scientific side, consents, records, admin and out in the field. They chose the three topics we decided to focus on – Vibrant village, passionately focused people and inspirational leadership.

We know what a vibrant village looks like – most rural communities in New Zealand function like this, but what if that were so across such a diverse organisation? The regional council already had passionate people, but mostly they are focused on their own work – what if they were focused on the big picture? And what if there were inspirational leadership inside the organisation that led to the organisation being able to be an inspirational leader in the environmental field?

Forum sessions gathered up to 50 people per session to interview each other about these topics and about 'what's working around here?' Often, this was the first time people have spoken in depth with their colleagues from other parts of the business. While they grappled with a very different mode of thinking, the energy created by looking at positive possibilities was tangible. This original process



culminated with a large group summit of 135 people attending for three days and all 400 coming together for the last half day of action planning. Changes have happened throughout the organization and follow up processes are envisioned for next year.

The power of the positive

Appreciative Inquiry works because it creates a climate that sustains synergy and collaboration. In my experience, it works wherever there are people who need to work well together, whether in smaller teams or across an entire organisation. Once the focus goes onto the positive and the conversation is maintained, change begins – it is both a process and an outcome.

For far too long we have leached the energy and passion out of our organisations and governmental structures by having change applied to them. What would happen if we switched away from deficit thinking and into the power of the possible? What would happen if we engaged everyone in creating and sustaining change? The answers are within our systems – all we need to do is look for them in a positive light and use what we find to energise a different future.

AI is the cooperative search for the best in people, their organisations and the world around them. It involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to heighten positive potential. AI was first developed by Cooperrider and Srivasta at Case Western Reserve University in 1987. Since then it has used all over the world in contexts as different as major corporations, governmental bodies, cities and the United Nations. Thousands of practitioners around the world log their work at the Appreciative Inquiry Commons on <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu>.

Appreciative Inquiry challenges us with a different view of the world and asks us to take a different approach to the way we see change. What would happen if we did?

Watch this space. During July and August 2007, we began interviewing young people about their dreams for the future and what they most value about this country. Right now, we're talking about how we expand the concept to include all New Zealanders. Let's talk about working from our strengths!

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