

APPRECIATING EXCELLENCE – SUSTAINING POSITIVE CHANGE

In the fifty years or so since W. Edwards Deming took what was then considered a very radical and different approach to implementing a system of continuous improvement there have been many changes in quality methods and systems. What Deming and others advocated was a new approach to leadership, in that to sustain quality improvements in the workplace, leaders must engage the people who did the work, as given the tools employees knew what was needed to be done. At that time, that was considered somewhat radical, as the conventional leadership style was top down- command and control and quality was not seen as a strategic organizational issue. Today employee engagement is the mantra for how progressive leaders focus on organizational performance. Also people have come to expect quality from products purchased and services provided.

Deming's work on quality systems eventually led to the development of the many national Excellence Frameworks that are in place today in the USA, in Canada, Europe, Australia and many other countries. There is much evidence on the positive organizational results that come from a sustained focus on using the criteria in Excellence Framework as an ongoing way to assess organizational performance. However there is also another reality, in that we live in a rapidly changing world, where leaders in the private sector, public sector and non-profit sector face tremendous pressure on the capacity of the organization to deliver quality products and services, on the timeliness of change to get quick results and on reducing costs to gain competitive advantage. New quality techniques have been developed such as LEAN and Six Sigma, much in response to gaining quick results due to competitive and systemic pressures.

When I left the corporate world a few years ago, I decided to research current thinking about quality, organizational change and leadership and to consider what is next in this evolution of organizational performance. I wanted to focus on how to have meaningful engagement of people within the organization to bring about change not just for today but to achieve their desired future. My research led me to become very interested in a strengths based approach to change, known as Appreciative Inquiry, which has as the core principle in order to achieve transformational change a focus on organizational strengths by engaging employees at all levels of the organization in a process to achieve the desired future.

Sounds simple, but the traditional way that leaders work on improvement and as taught in most business schools is to focus on what is wrong and fix that, rather than focusing on what is working as a way to build organizational capacity. Organizations have become very proficient at finding what is wrong and in developing very sophisticated problem solving techniques and tools. A strengths based focus to improvement is 180 degrees different from traditional problem solving. What I now advocate for leaders to achieve sustained organizational performance is to incorporate on going self-assessment using the Excellence Framework criteria and to then use a strengths based process as a way to focus on change and build organizational capacity.

For those not familiar with this strengths based process, here is a brief primer on Appreciative Inquiry and how this process is a natural fit with an Excellence Framework.

Appreciative Inquiry was developed by David Cooperrider and a number of academic colleagues from Case Western Reserve University. In 1980, when he was a graduate student at Case Western, he had to do an organizational diagnosis project. He found a project at the world renowned Cleveland Clinic. Based on his initial work, he realized that there was much more meaningful information gained from

focusing on what was working rather than what was not working. Over time, by collaborating with colleagues he developed a process based on the positive material that had been generated. From conducting these appreciative interviews with patients, doctors, nurses, suppliers and administrators, he was able to reflect back to the doctors and the board of directors a picture of Cleveland Clinic's unique qualities and special strengths. By inquiring into the successes rather than the problems of the organization, he discovered distinctive attributes that management could build upon to improve performance and develop new strategies.

Now you may wonder what quality and appreciative inquiry have in common. There are two quotes from Deming's work that align well with the basic principles of Appreciative Inquiry. Deming said:

"It is important that an aim never be defined in terms of activities or methods. It must always relate to how life is better for everyone. The aim of the system must be clear to everyone in the system. "He further stated: "If you do not know how to ask the right question, you discover nothing." The real value of using an Excellence Framework is that the criteria form the basis for inquiry. That is what Deming advocated, in that by using a self-assessment process and by involving employees, the organization could focus on building a better future. The assessment process in an Excellence Framework engages people at all levels in the organization by asking the right questions.

Appreciative Inquiry is also about asking the right questions as a way to engage the "whole system" in thinking about and acting on the desired future. Once that desired future is articulated then the challenge is to implement. This is where quality criteria in Excellence Frameworks can interact with Appreciative Inquiry, as the criteria prove a reference and a measure for implementing the desired future of the organization. The difference is that by focusing on strengths the organizational capacity for sustainable change is much higher.

In a traditional approach to change, the focus is on solving problems rather than on appreciating what is working and finding ways to enhance that which is working to diminish that which is not. A friend of mine said that this overconcentration on fixing problems is like trying to improve a highway by patching potholes. You see this all the time on our roads, crews dispatched to throw tarmac in a pot hole only to have that same pothole back again in the spring when the weather changes. By focusing on strengths, the organization moves to thinking about limitless possibilities through sustainable whole system improvement.

This positive change methodology is very supportive of continuous quality improvement and of organizations as human systems. This is a way for organizational leaders to capture the human spirit in their organization. Excellence Frameworks provide the structure to build a better future by focusing on the fusion power of both methodologies. The fundamental premise of Appreciative Inquiry is that human systems move in the direction of what is being focused on either operationally or strategically. If the focus is "problem solving" then that is the direction the organization takes. Excellence Frameworks provide the reference points and the compass for people to allocate resources to items that will make a difference in performance.

There is growing evidence from organizations that have used an Appreciative Inquiry process for developing a better future. Organizations are reporting that there is a surge of energy, a fusion affect that comes when employees are engaged in actions that lead to transformational change for the good. With an Appreciative Inquiry approach to change, organizations engage their best assets, their people, in discovering the positive core that gives meaning and energy to the organization. When that happens,

people become positively engaged in designing a better future and implementing a change process to move from strategy to action. Focusing on strengths and finding ways to do more with those strengths, diminishes problems such that improvements from a positive change process can leapfrog over traditional problem solving methods.

Appreciative Inquiry has a four step process that builds on the positive core of the organization by having an appreciative positively worded topic that is the focus of the inquiry. This is a critical point as the topic forms the basis to of a whole systems strengths based change as identified by employees in a four step process.¹

First step: Discovery engages participants in finding and understanding what gives life and meaning to the organization. This step explores the themes of the organizational stories and includes consensus-building about the strengths of the organization. Discovery is often done in an open-meeting format with anywhere from small work teams up to large numbers participant in an interviewing process.

Second step: Dream is about future imaging of the organization. Information from the Discovery phase is used to engage employees in thinking about future possibilities rather than limitations. For instance, the question at this step might be "It is now 2018 and the organization has become exactly what you want it to be. What do you see that is different and how do you know that it is different?" This step usually ends up with the group drafting aspiration statements that summarize the organization's vision, purpose and strategic intent.



The third step: Design is based on the aspiration statement where the group moves to more specific organizational issues in terms of how the organization will look and agree upon its driving "concepts" and "principles"

The fourth step: Delivery gets at the sustainability of the work outcome from the earlier stages and how to bring actions that impact advance the future image of the organization. This can mean specific actions and plans or a more open free flow of items, based on the particular focus of the organization.

When a strengths based focus is integrated with the use of an Excellence Framework the added

value of the Framework comes from the consistent use of the criteria which provides the validation point, from where the organization is right now to where the organization wants to be.

The criteria in the Organization Excellence Framework (www.organizationalexcellencespecialists.ca) do capture the whole system in that there is a focus on the internal environment and the external environment. The OES Framework has a strong focus on leadership and looking at system wide issues that can build sustained organizational performance. Regular use of the OES Framework does indicate

¹ Information on Appreciative Inquiry at Case Western Reserve University can be found at the following website co-ordinate: <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/>

what needs to be improved, however there is added value in knowing what is working well right now and to leverage that knowledge to build improvement opportunities in all parts of the management model. That includes focusing on the external environment such as stakeholders, partners and suppliers.

Organizations that have a focus on quality already have the basis for moving forward with Appreciative Inquiry. That is why, in this challenging time, a strengths based focus using an Excellence Framework makes perfect sense in a rapidly changing world. The issue for many organizations is who has their hand on the helm in this sea of storms. This is not a time to go for cover, but a time for quality leadership. Leaders, who want to create infinite possibilities, focus on strengths to build capacity around the positive core and to stimulate change rather than figure out how to manage and contain change. We need to focus on engaging talent at all levels in the organization as the collective intelligence of all employees is needed for sustained success.

Article written by Dan Corbett.

dcorbett6@cogeco.ca

Dan Corbett is an Advisor to Organizational Excellence Specialists. He has extensive experience in organizational change and human capital strategies that enable organizations to align resource capacity to achieve excellence. He has served as President & CEO in the public and non-profit sectors and senior executive roles in the private sector.