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Inspiring and Connecting People

Appreciative Conversations

© Sue James & Chris Bennett

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Ben is the CEO of a medium sized manufacturing company. He's called a meeting of his senior management team to talk about organisational performance.

He starts by saying: "Our figures are good – sales are up, those production errors we discussed in our last meeting have been fixed, our new and improved ordering system is in place, and things should be going well. But our staff turnover is still horrendous – it's costing us a fortune in recruitment and retraining. Sick leave is at an all time high and affecting our overall efficiency. What's going on?"

His managers tell him staff members are complaining about all the changes – the new ordering system is taking time to learn, the sales team is grumbling about the new sales targets that have been set for them, and the maintenance crews aren't happy about the amount of overtime needed to fix the machines that were holding up production.

And the biggest problem?

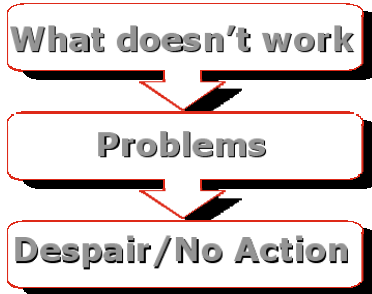
Most staff members just don't see themselves as part of a team and they're not working well together. Administration staff are blaming all the problems on the sales team, the sales team are unhappy with the production team's delivery times, and the production team say sales people aren't being careful enough with their on-site measurements and specifications.

Hearing this litany of complaints and problems, Ben says. "I'll give them another pep talk on teamwork in next month's staff meeting." Inwardly, he sighs. He did exactly that at the previous staff meeting, and it's apparently not had much effect.

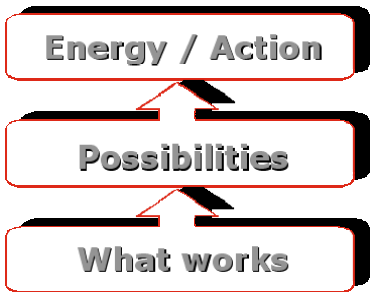
Sound familiar? In our work with clients across both business and nonprofit sectors, the above scenario is not uncommon. While other indicators of organisational performance may be showing good results, the performance of staff and teams leaves much to be desired.

For any organisation to perform at its best, its people need to feel motivated, energized and inspired. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is one framework that we use with our clients as a means to do just that – and to enhance performance of individuals, teams and the organisation as a whole.

Instead of focusing on problems, deficits and needs – the traditional problem solving approach – AI focuses on what is best about the current situation, looking for assets, potential and possibilities.



The problem-solving approach certainly has its place and can be a very helpful strategy. However when people focus only on problems, they may find themselves responding to crisis after crisis. Responses can be fragmented, as we are constantly "putting out fires" or implementing one isolated strategy after another. This approach sometimes can also lead to the "blame-game" and further fragmentation of responses – as is the case in the above scenario.



Instead of looking at what is not working, if we ask questions and encourage stories that highlight and explore "what works", the answers can point the way to greater success and growth. By focusing on what's right rather than what's wrong, Appreciative Inquiry generates enthusiasm and energy. It can help us find the confidence and commitment we need to achieve our best performance.

Even when not attempting a “full Appreciative Inquiry”, it is possible to utilise the principles and practice of AI in a wide variety of situations. In other words, we can *take an appreciative approach* even when we are not *conducting an Appreciative Inquiry*.

For example, imagine that instead of giving a pep talk to the next staff meeting, Ben asks each staff member to find a partner – someone from another section of the company – with whom to talk about teamwork. Each pair is given a sheet containing the following guidelines for their conversation:

For our company to perform at its best, good teamwork is essential. We want to learn about how our staff experience teamwork at its best, and how we can support good teamwork across our whole company.

Please think of a time when you experienced teamwork at its best. A time when people worked really well together, and when you felt the most energised, supported and effective in accomplishing your work.

Tell the story of that time. What were you doing? What was it about you that helped the team be so successful? What made this experience such a good one? Who else was involved? What was it about this person or group that helped the team work so well?

*What are the **main things supporting good teamwork** in our company at this time? What do you want more of?*

Imagine for a moment it's now 3 years into the future – 2009. Your job with this company has become everything you hoped for! Describe what is happening now that you are able to function at your very best. What has been accomplished during the transformation process? What things have been put in place? What is different from the past? What is the same only better? How is this change impacting positively on others around you?

If you could change or transform teamwork in our company in any way:

- *What three things would or could you do to make things better?*
- *What single small change could be made that would have the biggest impact right now?*
- *What bold change could be made that would have a big impact?*

After these paired interviews, ensuing discussion can identify key themes and gather the suggestions staff have made. Teams may be asked to work together implementing those suggestions about which they feel most passionate.

Instead of having his staff passively listen to a “pep talk”, Ben has opened a space for them to be involved, passionate and engaged in helping to improve performance and teamwork across the company.

There are of course other issues involved in making such a process successful. For example Ben’s own leadership style, the way his staff perceive his role and the degree to which they trust him etc. However such issues are beyond the scope of this article. What we are wishing to emphasise here, is how asking different questions – *appreciative questions* – can change conversations within an organisation and encourage different results to improve performance.

As David Cooperrider, the founder of AI, says:

The questions we ask determine what we find. What we find determines how we talk. How we talk determines how we imagine together. How we imagine together determines what we achieve.

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