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Creating Appreciative Learning Cultures: From Problems to Possibilities

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David Cooperrider, the originator of a relatively new approach to organizational or institutional change called Appreciative Inquiry, tells the story of a conversation he had with the father of modern management, Peter Drucker, before his recent death. He asked Drucker, then 93, to distill the essence of what he knew about leadership. Drucker told Cooperrider, "The task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths, making our weaknesses irrelevant."

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a way of helping organizations discover their strengths so they can create an alignment of those strengths, making their weaknesses and problems irrelevant. Since the mid-1980s, thousands of organizations in more than 100 countries – corporations, businesses, nonprofits, churches, educational and governmental organizations – have used this strengths-based approach to organizational or institutional change and development.

During the past several years, more than 500 community college leaders – CEOs, presidents, administrators, support staff, and students – have learned how to use AI as a process for continuously focusing their institutions on learning from strengths and successes, rather than trying to correct weaknesses and failures or solve problems. These leaders are beginning to move their colleges from *problem-based* cultures to *possibility-based* cultures. Some early outcomes of this shift were reported in a 2004 League publication, *Appreciative Inquiry in the Community College: Early Stories of Success*. In a forthcoming publication, the author will report dozens of additional stories of outcomes and results.

Appreciative Inquiry

What is Appreciative Inquiry? In 2005, two highly regarded and long-time AI practitioners, Frank Barrett and Ron Fry, both of whom were associated with Cooperrider during the birth of AI at Case Western Reserve University in the mid-1980s, defined AI in *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Approach to Building Cooperative Capacity*.

AI is a powerful, strengths-based, and collaborative approach to facilitating organizational change and growth that is rapid, sustainable, and transformative.... Through AI, we enable any and every stakeholder or member to learn and understand what is good, necessary, and life- giving, making it possible for the entire system to grow and perform at its very best. Armed with that information, people are compelled to attend to the whole, to cooperate, and thus infect the system with increased cooperative capacity (Barrett & Fry, pp. 101-

102).

Ten years earlier, in a landmark article published in *Organizational Dynamics*, "Creating Appreciative Learning Cultures," Barrett said, The art of appreciation is the art of discovering and valuing those factors that give life to the organization, of identifying what is best in the current organization. Such gestures are contagious; they create what Senge calls 'generative conversations,' as members' inquiries expand from valuing the best of 'what is' to envisioning 'what might be.' While problem solving emphasizes a dispassionate and unbiased separation between observer and observed, appreciation is a passionate, absorbing endeavor. Appreciation involves the investment of emotional and cognitive energy to create a positive image of a desired future (Volume 24, Issue 2, p. 40).

In the community college, leaders trained to facilitate AI have instituted a wide variety of appreciative processes on their campuses and, through those processes, have begun to collaboratively create positive images of the future that lead to positive actions. Ongoing experiments with appreciative processes include strategic planning and learning, accreditation self-studies, teaching and learning, conflict resolution, program review, student success initiatives, and teambuilding. Over time, when the community college has fully integrated an appreciative approach to change, it will become what Barrett calls an "appreciative learning culture," a culture that fosters and develops competencies as an appreciative learning system.

Appreciative Learning Cultures

According to Barrett, "Appreciative learning cultures accentuate the successes of the past, evoke images of possible futures, and create a spirit of restless, ongoing inquiry that empowers members to new levels of activity. These cultures develop specific competencies—the resources necessary to support the survival and flourishing of a system" (p. 36).

Barrett defined the four competencies of an appreciative learning culture as affirmative, expansive, generative, and collaborative:

- *Affirmative competence.* The organization draws on the human capacity to appreciate positive possibilities by selectively focusing on current and past strengths, successes, and potentials.
- *Expansive competence.* The organization challenges habits and conventional practices, provoking members to experiment in the margins, makes expansive promises that challenge them to stretch in new directions, and evokes a set of higher values and ideals that inspire them to passionate engagement.
- *Generative competence.* The organization constructs integrative systems that allow members to see the consequences of their actions, to recognize that they are making a meaningful contribution, and to experience a sense of progress.
- *Collaborative competence.* The organization creates forums in which members engage in ongoing dialogue and exchange diverse perspectives. (p. 40)

Making the Shift From Problems to Possibilities

The community college president has a pivotal role in leading the institution

toward becoming an appreciative learning culture. In interviews with three community college presidents who know how to facilitate AI, the leaders described their experiences in moving their institutions toward becoming appreciative learning cultures. Paul Hill, interim president at the Sylvania Campus of Portland Community College (OR); Zachary Hodges, campus president at Houston Community College's Northwest Campus (TX); and Victoria Muñoz Richart, superintendent of the district and president of MiraCosta College (CA), provided insights into their appreciative mindsets and approaches.

Paul Hill and Appreciative Questions. Hill asks appreciative questions intentionally triggering “an avalanche of creativity” on the Sylvania Campus. Savvy community college leaders have learned to ask people on campus to come to them with solutions, not problems. However, Hill takes it one step further. When an individual or a group surfaces a problem, Hill intentionally flips the dialogue into an exploration of what the person or group wants more of, what is desired.

He then asks what he calls an appreciative question, one that “triggers an avalanche of creativity” related to the topic. The appreciative question calls forth the person's own best-practice story relating to the topic. For instance, if someone were dealing with a difficult working relationship, the question might be as simple and straightforward as, “Tell me a story about your best experience, or success, in a relationship that worked exceptionally well. What did you do? What did they do?” The questions generate possibilities, rather than problems.

As Hill says, an appreciative question “allows people to tell their stories, share their successes.” It “triggers an avalanche of creativity based on an exciting and affirming history of past successes.” He believes that “the well-placed appreciative question can dramatically change the dialogue, moving away from energy draining, negative griping to energizing and exciting stories and conversations. It can generate exceptional creativity that is grounded on a foundation of real successes.”

Zachary Hodges and the Context of Understanding and Acceptance. Hodges believes that sustained change only occurs within a context of understanding and acceptance. Hodges is clear about his philosophy: “I believe good leaders are ‘evolved,’ not born. I say that as a community college president of 10 years who has grown personally as well as professionally.” Hodges notes that he “found Appreciative Inquiry when [he] was ready for it.” Although he described himself as “a secure leader who trusted ‘the process’ and ‘the people’” and who “had learned that dialogue always improves the product,” he related a brief story about creating the college's statement of values:

When I [first] became president, I decided what the values of our college would be and posted them on the wall in my conference room. Faculty and staff, being nice people by nature, nodded in approval and went on with their business. During my ninth year as president, I used AI principles to carry on a dialogue within our college about what was important and how we saw ourselves.... Our final product was decided collectively.... Today, I have those principles on the wall in my conference room and publicized throughout the college. They are *our* principles and read: “Learning, Serving, Excelling, Northwest College: A Proud Community.” This is who we are. This is what we aspire to.

Believing that college presidents “have the opportunity to create the college

culture over time," Hodges chose AI as the approach, having learned that "leaders come and go but sustained change only occurs within a context of understanding and acceptance."

Victoria Muñoz Richart and Embracing Chaos. Richart believes that leaders must relish chaos as a creative force and trust, as the new sciences prove, that order will emerge from the chaos. A self-described believer in "distributive leadership," she explains that "collaborative college teams succeed in planning, developing, and establishing flourishing, long-lasting programs and services." With a focus on group learning, she believes, "together we can reliably develop skills and abilities greater than the self. The power of multiple minds of diverse and cross-functional backgrounds coming together results in higher levels of accomplishment and learning for all involved and, therefore, promotes 'learning and collaboration' versus 'protect and attack' in all dealings of an institution."

Ensuring that all team members, including students, are "well informed and possess the necessary skills for meaningful participation" is a role of the leader. Richart explains this as a primary reason a leader "must have a strong commitment to professional growth for all employees and members of the community, along with leadership training for students." She emphasizes the importance of centering this training on inquiry into "how we can duplicate our successes and grow."

Advocating "collaborative transformation," Richart believes leaders are responsible for organizational change but that such change "can occur only in an atmosphere where everyone is encouraged to participate in the process of transformation and growth through a proactive...team approach [resulting in] a natural bond between all involved."

She sees AI as a way to "engage in [the college's] visioning process and not endanger its culture," and cautions that "in complex organizations, this process of discovery can be perceived to be impossible, usually due to a multitude of what appear to be divergent pressures. It can feel as if chaos has taken over." She points out, however, that leaders should "enjoy" the feeling of chaos "because from chaos, beauty and order emerge." According to Richart, chaos is a creative force in the process, as "strategic appreciative inquiry yields the order that emerges from the self-organizing environment of multiple minds."

Creating an Alignment of Strengths

Like these three presidents, a growing number of community college leaders are helping the people in their institutions create and enact positive visions of the future that are in strong alignment with their strengths because they are built on people's real experiences of their past and present successes. Concurrently, through the use of Appreciative Inquiry, they are creating appreciative learning cultures, ones in which community colleges can best serve both students and the community of people who serve those students.

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