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Appreciative Inquiry

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Participatory action research (PAR) is commonly used by consultants or facilitators when they inquire, intervene, and evaluate community-based organizations and community systems. However, a variety of important concerns exist when implementing PAR, such as how to involve multiple stakeholders in meaningful ways, how to take into account potential consequences to a whole community or organizational system, and how to develop genuine empowerment among participants. An additional concern, which will be this chapter's primary focus, is how to avoid the negative trappings of problem-based inquiry approaches.

In this chapter, appreciative inquiry (AI) is introduced as a *change* methodology that aims to create change through a focus on elevating strengths and helping to produce sustainable community-based organizations and communities (Boyd & Bright, 2007; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Ludema, Whitney, Mohr, & Griffin, 2003). Most often, PAR methodologies start with an attempt to solve community or organizational problems. By contrast, AI begins with the premise that organizations and communities have strengths that can be leveraged to reshape their image and function. The current chapter first presents the steps typically involved in the AI process. It then contrasts AI's opportunity-based orientation with the more traditional problem-based approach. It concludes with a case study illustrating AI's application in an organization concerned with injured workers' rights.

INTRODUCTION TO PROBLEM-BASED COMMUNITY/ ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT METHODOLOGIES

Problem-based PAR is rooted in the practices of Kurt Lewin, who developed the original conception of action research as a three-stage process for planned change (Lewin, 1951). The three stages consisted of *unfreezing* (reducing those forces maintaining resistance to change), *moving* (intervening with a change effort), and *refreezing* (stabilizing the change into a new state of equilibrium). Over time, Lewin's model was modified into what is commonly termed "traditional action research," which tends to be associated with the following basic steps (adapted from Boyd & Bright, 2007; Cummings & Worley, 2015; see also French & Bell, 1994; Schein, 1988):

Problem identification: This stage usually begins when an executive in an organization, or someone with power and influence, senses that the organization or system has one or more problems that might be solved with the help of a professional facilitator or organizational development and change (ODC) practitioner.

Consultation with a behavioral science expert: During the initial contact, the ODC practitioner and the client carefully assess each other. During this sharing stage, the

client and consultant seek to establish an open and collaborative atmosphere.

Data gathering and preliminary diagnosis: This step involves gathering appropriate information and analyzing it to determine the underlying causes of organizational problems. Typically, interviews, process observation, questionnaires, and organizational performance data are collected.

Feedback to a key client or group: The feedback step, in which organizational members are given information by the ODC practitioner, helps them determine the strengths and weaknesses of the organization or department under study.

Joint diagnosis of the problem: At this point, members discuss the feedback and explore with the ODC practitioner whether they want to work on identified problems. A close relationship exists among data gathering, feedback, and diagnosis because the consultant summarizes the basic data from the client members and presents the data to them for validation and further diagnosis.

Joint action planning: Next, the ODC practitioner and client members jointly agree on further action implementation.

Action: This stage involves the actual change effort. It may include installing new methods and procedures, reorganizing structures and work designs, and reinforcing new behaviors.

Data gathering after action: Because action research is a cyclical process, data are collected after the action to measure and determine the effects of the action and to feed the results back to the organization. This, in turn, may lead to rediagnosis and new action.

One can see in these steps a focus on identifying and resolving problems. Notice the use of the terms "diagnosis" and "problem identification." This language assumes that something is wrong with the system, that the organization or community is ill and needs to heal. A consultant or facilitator who uses PAR would then take on the role of a physician who uses his or her positional role and skills to heal the system's ailments. In traditional PAR, data collection can generate skepticism and feelings of fear, concern, and venting. These reactions may increase if the process is controlled by a small group of people near the hierarchical top of the system. The leaders of the change event, including the facilitator, can then be in a role where they have to advocate and defend recommended changes to others. Understandably, this can increase anxiety and potential resistance to change.

OPPORTUNITY-BASED COMMUNITY/ ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT METHODOLOGIES

AI represents an opportunity-based PAR process as an alternative to a problem-based approach (Cooperrider & Avital, 2004; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003; Ludema et al., 2003; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). Consider the following assumptions of an AI process:

All organizations or communities are *centers of human connection* that can serve to magnify the best possibilities of the human condition.

Communities and organizations are *living organisms* filled with energy and potential.

All *questions are interventions*, and the focus of those questions, whether problem based or appreciative based, has serious implications for the tone and outcome of a planned change process.

The *entire system* needs to be involved in the change process.

Actual change is most likely when participants feel *trust and membership* and perceive that they are *psychologically safe*.

AI is different from problem-based PAR in a number of ways. First, AI includes an assumption of genuine questioning, as opposed to "diagnosis," as a critical first step in beginning a planned change process. AI also tends to enhance relationships between stakeholders during the inquiry, thereby aiding in reducing hierarchical boundaries between layers in a system.

In contrast to a traditional PAR approach, AI focuses on redefining problems as opportunities. For example, consider the problem of childhood

obesity. Health is suppressed in this problem statement, and so are the associated images and language of positive health visions. A shift toward positive inquiry changes the focus of where the change process is directed because a different set of normative expectations are present at the onset of the process.

Although AI methods can vary, practitioners commonly use the 4-D cycle of discover, dream, design, and destiny (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001; Cooperrider et al, 2003; Ludema et al., 2003; Whitney, Cooperrider, Trosten-Bloom, & Kaplin, 2002). To demonstrate how AI works, a case analysis of a community-based organization is presented next.

CASE STUDY

Background of the Case

The author was involved as a consultant to a nonprofit organization whose mission was to promote and fight for the rights of injured workers. The organization is situated in a northeastern state of the United States, and at the time of the consultation had more than 2,000 members and was organized in 11 active regional statewide chapters. The organization also maintained a headquarters in a central location of the state that was operated by an executive director. Oversight of the executive director and the organization was maintained by a geographically dispersed group of board members.

The author entered the organization by invitation of the executive director, and, after a few preliminary meetings, a contract was established between the parties to create a steering committee that would manage the change process. The AI approach was selected as a general method to infuse change for two reasons: (a) The executive director wanted to try something new due to the fact that previous problem-based strategies had not worked in the past, and (b) the author wanted to test the efficacy of an opportunity-based change method in the field. For the purpose of evaluating the efficacy of the AI approach to change, qualitative and quantitative outcome measures were collected at the individual, change process, organizational, and community levels. Individual and AI process measures were collected via open-ended questionnaires of all stakeholders at the end of each AI stage. Organizational and community measures were collected via interviews with steering committee members and survey feedback from organization members immediately following the first consultation and at 6, 12, and 18 months post consultation.

The Case Begins

The following letter was sent to all members of the organization in order to create a steering committee for the change process:

> Hello. I am writing this letter to invite you to participate in an organizational development process that is currently being considered by our organization. During the past month, I have had a couple of preliminary meetings with a consulting team to discuss how we *can add to the great successes that we have already achieved*. As such, I would like you to consider participating in a steering committee that will be formed including board members, state directors, chapter leadership, members at large, and consulting team members . . . . As a final note, even if you are not able to participate in the steering committee work, you will likely have an opportunity at some time later to participate in the organizational development process. Take care and hope to hear from you soon.
>
> Sincerely,
> Executive Director

Notice that the AI approach was embedded in the call for action by highlighting a focus on past successes to serve as a guide for change. In addition, notice that the letter represents an attempt to create inclusiveness for all members of the organization. These statements were intentionally created for the purpose of setting a positive tone and direction of the change process. Future communications contained similar positive-oriented and inclusive statements. A few weeks later, a steering committee met at a neutral conference site for a half-day meeting. The steering committee was comprised of members from the entire organizational system and the external ecological system around the organization. The committee included the executive director, the author, three board members, eight chapter members, and state and local union officials. The steering committee designed a full-day session (referred to as an AI summit) in which participants would work through the 4-D cycle.

Discover

The underlying assumption of the discover phase is that people should create positive images of an ideal state about what the organization or community "should be." The primary goal is to create an awareness of images, stories, and capacities that are most likely to inspire future design of the organization or community. A well-executed opening activity uses questions to generate an atmosphere of energy, focus, and anticipation for positive possibilities in the future of the system.

In the case of the AI summit, approximately 50 organization and community members met for the full-day session. The day began with a warm-up period in which attendees introduced themselves and noted at least one positive thing that the organization had done for them or for injured workers. The warm-up served to orient the group to each other and was designed to identify and enhance the organization's "positive energy."

Immediately following the warm-up, attendees were randomly assigned to breakout groups and were charged with answering the following question: "What has the organization done in the past that made it successful?" The breakout session lasted approximately 45 minutes, and much dialogue and energy was present surrounding the stories of past organizational successes. Examples of successes included the following: (a) The organization helped to modify the latest version of the state workers compensation act. (b) The organization helped injured workers get access to important workers compensation information. (c) The organization increased awareness of the plight of injured workers. (d) The organization increased access to affordable and qualified attorney representation. The participants also reported that they noticed traits in others or in the community for the first time, as they became aware of previously unnoticed strengths (see Table 6.1 for additional individual and change process outcomes).

Dream

The dream phase moves the process from considering current system strengths to a focus on how current successes can be leveraged. In this phase, the focus is on practically discussing "what could be." Participants might work in groups to create artwork, poetry, or a skit to depict an ideal future, where the highest dreams, passions, and aspirations become clearly apparent. Participants might also summarize and prioritize key themes or ideas for action. In sum, the dream phase draws on the best of the past and present in a way that maximizes the capability for expansive thinking about a potential future.

In the present instance, a storytelling method was used in breakout groups to explore dreams for the organization's future. Facilitators invited participants to share personal stories of organizational successes. During the storytelling sessions, members brainstormed and recorded emergent themes from their stories on poster sheets. Emergent ideas were posted on the walls of the meeting hall, and a group moderator conducted content analysis, in real time, by organizing the themes of the conversation and creating a priority list of major positive successes. It was interesting to observe that the organization had created significant value to the participants' lives and the lives of injured workers, and there was a clear sense that the organization was an important and needed entity.

Next, in order to refine dreams of the future, the facilitator asked the breakout groups to answer the following question: "If you could look into the future 5 years from now, what are the successes that the organization has achieved?" Each member of a breakout team told his or her version of a futuristic story, and group members generated key themes from the content of these future visions. A moderator helped to summarize these key ideas for the future across all of the groups. Examples of dream statements included: (a) The state workers compensation act is repealed, and a new "worker-friendly" version is in place. (b) Injured workers are empowered by the organization to get access to the information and resources they need. (c) We are connected in a virtual communication network. (d) We have ample monetary resources to fund our mission. Notice that these ideas were stated in the present tense as a means to focus the mind on the possibility of an actualized reality.

Design

The design phase shifts the conversation from reflection to action. The major task is to identify specific actions that will move the organization or community closer to its envisioned future. In the AI summit, the facilitator asked breakout groups to design three specific actions that could meet

TABLE 6.1: A SAMPLE OF INDIVIDUAL, CHANGE PROCESS, ORGANIZATION, AND COMMUNITY OUTCOMES

Individual	"I'm feeling good about this organization"
	"I can see that lots of things are happening across the state"
	"My energy level is high today"
	"I learned how I can help make a difference with this organization"
	"I am excited to go back to my chapter and share with them what has happened here"
	"I have more faith in this organization than ever"
	"I think the sessions have shown me that people in this organization really care"
Change process	"This meeting has been the best thing that ever happened to this organization"
	"I especially like how we began the workshop with the good stuff about our work. I think it created a lot of energy for change"
	"The sessions showed us that we can take control of our organization, and get things done"
	"Being positive works! Two years ago, we held a conference for this organization, but most of the time was spent complaining about the politicians and laws. This time we could see that we are making a difference"
	"I would like to try this method with other organizations that I work with"
Organization	Central office disbanded and the organization structure changed from hierarchical to a virtual-systems orientation.
	Board of directors reconfigured to create majority control via the members
	New bylaws were created
	Eleven chapters reorganized into five regional chapters
	New web portal established
	New web portal connected the chapters, and members, together.
	"The New Web-Portal has significantly increased information flows between leadership and rank-and-file members"
	"We communicate in real time now"
	Average number of legislator contacts increased by 30% last year
	Average number of formal petitions to legislators increased by 33% last year
	Average number of rallies and protests increased by 20.5% last year
	Membership increased by 18% in the last year
	Revenues increased by 28% last year
Community	Number of community-based publications increased by 40% last year
	Number of community-based advertisements increased by 50% last year
	A State-Level Workers Compensation Advisory Council was established last year to accept public commentary
	A State Commission was established in this year for the purpose of initiating workers' compensation legislation reform
	The organization-supported bills introduced in the House or Senate has increased by 20% last year
	The organization-supported bills that became law increased by 15% last year

the major dreams of their group. After each group designed action plans, a few members of the steering committee moderated a session in which representatives from each group shared their action plans. These plans were then merged to create a single action plan. The collective action plan called for a new organizational structure change that would reduce the number of regional sites, interconnect the regional sites via an integrated computer network, and eliminate the executive director position. In addition, the plan suggested that a new board of directors should be created that better represented a cross-section of stakeholders to the organization. It was especially interesting that the AI Summit seemed to facilitate a moment in time where members realized they were in control of the organization's destiny (see Table 6.1 for additional individual and change process outcomes).

Destiny

The destiny phase is a transition from planning to action. In the case of the AI summit, the final 90 minutes included designing and assigning tasks for specific action plans to become a reality. Task assignments included, (a) designing a team to review and recommend changes to the bylaws of the organization, (b) creating a team to design a new election process to the board of directors, (c) having a team design a website for the organization so that members could stay connected, (d) creating a team to design the exit strategy of the executive director, and (e) creating a team to consider regional mergers and restructuring of the number of regional sites. At 6, 12, and 18 months after the AI summit, steering committee members monitored the change process. At each time segment, interviews were conducted with steering committee members, and survey feedback data were collected from organization members. Data showed significant increases in the ability to conduct legislative lobbying efforts, better communication between the regional sites, easier access to information through the web portal, and an increased sense of organizational control by the members. In addition, members thought that their mission was being achieved with greater effectiveness, fundraising was easier and amounts were increasing, and organization members felt a greater sense of community with each other (see Table 6.1 for additional organizational and community outcomes).

In conclusion, the 4-D cycle and the AI summit provided an opportunity for people to participate in a series of guided conversations that produced action steps and a new future. Moreover, stakeholders created a better network of relationships, stronger awareness of organizational strengths and resources, and greater leadership action among members throughout the system.

CONCLUSION

AI has the potential to assist change in community-based settings and is an approach that respects ecological analysis, diversity, prevention, and empowerment, which are factors that community-based organizers and organizational leaders commonly believe are important. First, AI is consistent with ecological analysis because it considers all members of the system who are internal and external to the boundaries of the entity of interest. Once a complete ecological stakeholder analysis is completed, the AI process helps to generate a consultative environment that has the potential to create real and lasting change because system-wide questions and issues have a chance to be fully considered.

Second, AI allows for stakeholder involvement that embraces diversity and individual differences. By its inherent nature, AI tends to create interventions that increase the power of diversity as an ongoing resource within organizations. AI approaches tend to help participants discover similarities with others, and participants often claim that they have a better respect for others when they are engaged in a positive-oriented change experience with multiple diverse stakeholders.

AI also promotes a preventive focus in community settings. AI is opposed to problem-based reactive change methods and instead attempts to capitalize on existing system strengths that can lead to a positive future. AI seeks to prevent a system from developing future problems by envisioning and implementing changes at the present time that could prevent future negative situations from occurring to the organization or community. In relation to the change process itself, AI helps prevent and reduce negative cognitions in individuals that could thwart the system's ability to reach desired outcomes and social changes.

AI also promotes an assumption of empowerment. AI requires a participative and empowering environment for all stakeholders where multiple positive voices are heard. When individuals and groups participate in problem-based change events, they can unconsciously develop states of "learned helplessness" that reduce their ability to envision a greater future (Seligman, 1992). AI can help ameliorate negative psychological states by preventing disempowering cognitions and instead create a sense of "learned optimism" for participants (Seligman, 1991).

In conclusion, this chapter highlights how opportunity-based approaches can help us rethink the latent assumptions that exist in traditional PAR methodologies. AI is an opportunity-based method that can help community professionals who are interested in facilitating organizational and social change. In addition, it is consistent with several

underlying assumptions that community-based professionals believe are important.

AUTHOR NOTE

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