

Five Choices You Can Make to Influence Positive Change

By Dean Savoca

Increase sales, grow membership, plan strategically, and improve engagement: these are primary objectives of many of my client organizations who want to make positive changes. But in discussing these objective, many organizations tend to focus on the problem of what's *not* working. Instead, the approach I have found to be most successful is to focus on what *is* working.

When a computer breaks, we troubleshoot or use trial and error to fix it. A computer is a machine. This method of "fixing" works well. This method is not always as effective when dealing with human systems.

"The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them." Albert Einstein

This traditional, "fixing" approach to organizations worked when leaders were primarily managers of resources: payroll, schedules, budgets, maintaining equipment and supplies. In today's world of workgroups, collaborative projects drive productivity and leaders are more than just problem-solving managers. They are expected to develop relationships, set a shared direction and build employee engagement. In response to these broader expectations, a new model for organizational change has evolved: **Appreciative Inquiry (AI)**.

Appreciative Inquiry is a strength-based approach to organizational change that engages and energizes people as they focus on what they are doing right, and how they can build on past success to produce future success. So, what happens to the problems? Problems are recognized as a desire for something else. Problems are *dissolved* rather than *solved*. When we focus on the problems we get tired and often discover more problems. By focusing on what is appreciated, the organization discovers its strengths and clarifies the productive direction it wants to go.

"The task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths, making our weaknesses irrelevant." Peter Drucker

To discover the roots for this change approach, examine the roots of the words "Appreciative Inquiry." *Appreciate* means to value. It can also mean to increase in value - as with a house or financial investment. *Inquiry* means to explore or discover, to ask questions, to be open to new possibilities. The assumption underlying AI is simple: every human system has a core of strengths that is often hidden and underutilized. When the organizational strengths are discovered and utilized, it provides a sustainable source of positive energy that drives both personal and organizational change. AI is like a search engine, searching for the strengths and successes of a human system. When the strengths are linked to an agenda for change, rapid and sustainable positive change is possible.

Choose to study what IS working in your organization.

You can choose to study why sales have decreased or why your best people are leaving. You would understand the problem better, but not necessarily have a clue of how to change the human system. Ask instead, "Why do star sales people stay? And what do the stars do to produce results?" Then you can start getting ideas about what works and can focus on what will keep productive people.

Choose to ask “appreciative” questions.

Positive questions lead to positive change. The questions we ask can produce energy or drain it, increase productivity or reduce it, enhance self-confidence or deplete it. Consider this example I use with my kids after school. Instead of asking “How was your day?” I ask, “What was the best part of your day?” The first question is typically answered with a “fine”, the second question generates positive energy around the experience. The questions we ask are influential. They determine where we place our attention. Effective leaders ask questions that generate enthusiasm and action aligned with the future vision they want to create.

Choose to stimulate positive discussion and action.

What we talk about is what we focus on and what we focus on leads to action. Using time and energy to describe the bad relationships can be exhausting and demoralizing. Instead, describe past productive work relationships and identify the desirable relationship qualities. The change starts in the discussion itself and the energy builds towards positive action.

Choose to *BE* the change you want to see.

Identify the change you want to see and frame it in the positive. Here’s how it works. Saying “I want the employees to stop complaining and gossiping” becomes “I want a work environment where everyone feels appreciated and respected.” Leaders can start a meeting by complaining about gossiping and lack of trust, or can open a meeting with a story about trust in action, or ask a question that provides others with the opportunity to share a positive experience.

Choose to celebrate realizing your vision.

When actions are taken towards your vision, reinforce and build on the success by celebrating it and building on what is working, and the Appreciative Inquiry process continues.



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