

Appreciative Inquiry Goes to Afterschool

In the positive youth development field, we like to approach children and youth from an asset framework; using their strengths and abilities as the springboard for our work. We don't often, however, carry that approach into our work with staff. We are driven by the need for accountability -- to our funders, parents, and the children we serve -- into a deficit approach. Staff don't measure up to the standards, and our work with them is to "fix" what's wrong through training, professional development and other, more punitive approaches.



Carolie Hobson, Director of School Based Services at Family Dynamics, an out-of-school time program within SCO Family of Services in New York, realizes the importance of staff accountability, but also understands an asset-based approach to staff. She agreed to implement Appreciative Inquiry (AI) at her monthly directors' meetings.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an approach to organizations that is a "search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). It has been used in organizations in the United States as well as around the world. It involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to "apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential."

The following chart from the [*Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry*](#) manual developed by USAID, shows the difference between a problem-focused approach to organizations and the AI approach:

Problem Focused Approach to Development	Appreciative Approach to Development
Identification of problem	Appreciating and valuing the best of "what is"
Analysis of causes	Envisioning "what might be"
Analysis of possible solutions	Dialoguing "what should be"
Action planning to treat problem	Innovating "what will be"

The AI approach involves Five "Ds": Defining the focus of the overall inquiry, Discovering, Dreaming, and Designing. There is a final, additional "D," Deliver or Do.

Generating stories is a central feature in AI. As explained in the USAID manual, "Story telling is part of most cultures. People are usually comfortable with stories, and are able to provide rich answers to questions seeking information about success in their own lives, groups, and organizations and through stories, strengths, values, and resources emerge" (USAID, 2005, p.25).

The Process

At the monthly director meetings, an hour is set aside from regular business for AI. Site directors began by discovering the best of what they do at their sites and creating a focus for their subsequent inquiry. They generated their own stories for what was a life-sustaining experience they had had at their site, identified themes within the stories, and collectively determined that the focus for their inquiry which was:

How can we support staff in demonstrating & displaying their social and emotional skills: Assets, needs, vision, and goals?

The next step was to engage the staff at their programs in a series of AI interviews, using questions such as:

“Looking at your entire experience in the afterschool program, recall a time when you felt most alive, most involved, or most excited about your involvement. What made it an exciting experience? Who was involved? Describe the event in detail.

“What are the things you value deeply -- specifically, the things you value about yourself, your family, your work, and your organization?

“What do you think is the core life-giving factor or value of our organization?”

“If you had three wishes for the afterschool program what would they be, and why?”

They then analyzed the interview responses, and organized them into categories, using shapes to represent strengths, values, and wishes.

The next steps are to continue to collect information via IA interviews and observations, in a spiral that delves deeply into the topic question, and begin to dream and envision possibilities at each of their sites. They will be asked to then create strategies and design approaches that further institutionalize what is best and “life-giving” at their sites.

This approach, new to the OST field, has great potential for using an asset-based approach to working with managers and staff. It is aligned with a positive youth development philosophy, extended to an organizational and staff development framework. It involves, however, the commitment by organizational leadership: The commitment of time as well as the belief that staff bring strengths and competencies to their work which can be the springboard for program development.

For more information, contact shill@sco.org

