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LINKING THEORY & PRACTICE

How Appreciative Inquiry Can Help Managers Gain Trust

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Energizing and enabling deep change in organizations are often necessary and always challenging. In “Creating a Healthy Workplace Culture Using an Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle,” Raymond Calabrese, Erik Cohen, and Dustin Miller of The Ohio State University offer interesting and valuable insights on the way that appreciative inquiry (AI) can be used to create healthy and productive workplaces. AI continues to expand as a theoretical research perspective and as a change methodology. It employs a highly collaborative and distinctly positive approach to discovering what is good and what works in an organization (rather than what isn’t/doesn’t). The goal is to replace negative-reinforcing loops with positive, optimistic ones that result in new values and positive actions leading to innovation and sustainable higher levels of organizational functioning.

Calabrese, Cohen, and Miller walk us through an in-depth, hands-on case study of AI’s successful application in a publicly funded organization. Actually an amalgamation of cooperating social and government agencies, the organization was considered a last resort for substance abusers and was coordinated by a manager and supervised by a court magistrate, both of whom had limited oversight of interagency personnel and had to rely on goodwill. At the onset, it was characterized by low staff morale and lack of cooperation. The authors detail the

AI process used and its favorable impacts on the agency. They report progressive positive changes in participants’ attitudes and behaviors throughout the AI 4-D Cycle. Six months after the project, the agency manager provided anecdotal evidence of sustainable improvements in the organization’s performance.

This article has much to offer to researchers, managers, and change consultants who are interested in strategies for creating healthy workplace cultures in both private and public organizations. It adds to previous AI fieldwork demonstrating the efficacy of these methods for increasing participant self-confidence, building group cohesion, and generating collective excitement among participants in what may be possible for them to accomplish in their work. One practical insight gained was the importance of giving positive, reinforcing feedback at the start of each new AI 4-D session, which is sometimes overlooked by some AI practitioners. Of special importance may be the enormous potential of AI noted by the authors in helping managers to establish a culture of trust and cooperation based on respect. Trust has long been identified as a key factor in the sustainability of collaborative groups, and developing it is especially challenging, given the permeable boundaries that increasingly characterize network-like modern organizational working arrangements such as those of the focal agency in this article.

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