
APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Welcome to the second lecture in the series on Building Partnerships with Key Stakeholders. You are now ready to go out and start the community engagement conversation with a series of stakeholder interviews.

The interview has three parts: Where have we been, where are we now and where are we going?

Many times these interviews get bogged down into negative feelings such as, why clean it up if others will just mess it up again? Or why work on this problem when there are other more pressing problems? Or why even try, surely we can't make a difference in such a huge problem? To keep from getting bogged down in these conversations, we're going to apply another twist.

In this lecture, we'll have a look at Appreciative Inquiry – a revolutionary way of engaging your partners in developing positive, proactive organizations and programs.

Quoting one of the developers, David Cooperrider, **Appreciative Inquiry is the** cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves the systematic discovery of what gives an organization or a system 'life' when it is being the most effective and capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. **Appreciative Inquiry** involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen an organization or a system's capacity to heighten positive potential. It mobilizes inquiry through crafting an 'unconditional positive question' often involving hundreds or sometimes thousands of people.

So maybe you will only interview 10 to 50 people. You will be interviewing your stakeholders with questions leaning towards the glass half full rather than the glass half empty. And this may seem to be a small shift, but research shows that it yields incredible results. Because it shifts us from a culture of limitations and negatives towards a culture of endless possibilities!

I want you to interview your stakeholders looking for their stories of successful cleanups, of times when they were able to create a beautiful waterway or when they were able to inspire others to take care of their waterways and neighborhoods. Ask them to describe what it felt like to be part of something so positive and proactive. Maybe it wasn't about cleaning up the territory, maybe it was another situation where individually or as a group they made a difference. Where they went beyond their abilities to go the extra mile and serve with passion. You want to know their stories and then to ask for their visions of the future.

Try it out for yourself. The old way of inquiry/interviewing begins with creating a list of problems in the community that lead to trash entering the waterbodies and the ocean. What are the causes and the breakdowns in the community that lead you to live with trash everywhere? Just off the top of your head, write down five ideas. Maybe it's poor law enforcement? Perhaps it's too much single use plastic or the fast food industry is pumping out too many Styrofoam drink cups? How do you feel now? How do you think you'd feel after a few days of this kind of talk with stakeholders?

Now try out appreciative inquiry. Make a quick list of the ways that you and others have succeeded in making a difference in keeping trash out of the ocean? How did you make a difference in working together as a

group? Maybe you have regular beach or park cleanup activities? Did you teach a classroom of kids about the value and joy of the waterbody? Maybe you took the grandkids out boating and picked up trash along the way? Or you talked a local restaurant into using paper takeout containers? How did these actions make you feel? How do you think you would feel after a few days of this kind of conversation with your stakeholders?

Appreciative Inquiry Questions for a Clean Ocean

The principles and practice of AI tend to encourage collaboration, rather than competition. Here are some questions to get you started with your stakeholder interviews, these were adapted from an article by David Cooperrider.

Where have we been?

What do individuals in your organization and the community really want to do? What is their purpose? Does it connect with your organizational mission? (Do they want clean neighborhoods and parks? Do they want safe places for their children to play? Do they want a healthy waterbody for fishing and boating? Your stakeholders come from all walks of life. You want to know how they see trash so that you can begin to see how you can work together.)

What do your stakeholders value about themselves, the people they work with and their organizations and community?

What is your organization fundamentally for – your mission and purpose? What difference would it make to anyone if the organization ceased to operate?

What special skills, knowledge, product or service does your organization offer that will add value to customers, the community, the environment and the ocean?

What is the niche or distinctive feature about your territory? What is the niche or distinctive feature about how you keep your territory clean? How might you grow a diverse range of funding and volunteer streams while maintaining this distinctiveness or focus?

Where are we now?

What is needed or desired right now, or might be needed or desired in the future, by the ocean and by those funders, sponsors and volunteers your organization seeks to serve? What is the potential market opportunity? (Yes it is strange to speak of market opportunities in a social benefit or nonprofit organization. But we do need income and volunteer streams.)

Where are we going?

What are the two to three most likely future scenarios that would have a big impact on the central work of your organization and of your programs? What influence might we have on shaping your own future?

What has your vision been and how do you want to shape your emerging vision going forward? Has your vision been clouded by anger and despair? Can you imagine a vision of hope and joy?

In speaking about funding and sponsors, what sort of value do you want to create – and why? What is it for? How much would be enough? How will you know that you have used it wisely?

Do you want to increase property values by having a clean community? Do you want to make people feel safer by having a clean community? Will more tourists come to your community? Will people take better care of your community?

Conclusion

These are more questions than you need and you may find other questions to explore. Also in the beginning this interview style and conversation may feel too simplistic and it might be easy to slip back into the negative talk of traditional strategizing. But stick with it as the research results are far better with Appreciative Inquiry – and at the end of the day, you and your stakeholders will have a lot more positive energy.

So now you have the temperament of a servant leader and the community engagement interview style of a positive, collaborative leader. Before you hit the field to interview your partners, your stakeholders, let's take one more lecture. This next lecture breaks your stakeholders down into categories and gives you a system to manage all the people and information that you are collecting.

Let's get started!

References

David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry <http://www.champlain.edu/appreciativeinquiry>