The Long Term Impact of Appreciative Inquiry at Colleges and Universities

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Appreciative Coaching for a New College Leader

Steps for New Behaviors, Approaches and Whole System Outcomes

Appreciative Inquiry helps develop effective university leaders. In this article, we discuss how appreciative coaching assisted a new college leader to change his fundamental perceptions and attitudes in order to create promising organizational opportunities. Coach and leader collaborated further using AI to build on such individual-level successes to develop and implement an appreciative strategic planning process for faculty and staff. The article closes with ‘lessons learned’.

Appreciative coaching: A decision for positive change

The University of Cincinnati, a public research university located in southern Ohio with a student population of 42,000, is the largest employer in the city of Cincinnati. The College of Allied Health Sciences educates over 2,000 of those students, and employs more than 100 faculty and staff. In 2011 the college was undergoing several leadership transitions. Dean Elizabeth King saw these changes as an opportunity to uncover and advance the strengths of her leaders.

Dean King had experienced the positive nature of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in previous strategy work and team engagements with Elaine Suess, a certified leadership and talent management coach and certified AI practitioner. Dean King felt that an appreciative approach would be a powerful force for coaching new leaders in the college, and would also help her as she waded through complex organizational challenges. She engaged Elaine to partner with the college through these leadership changes.

This article highlights the coaching approach Elaine used with Dr. James Clark, a new leader in a new college.

Appreciative coaching: Elaine’s approach

My approach to coaching brings together a collection of experiences and training in corporate business, strengths, certification in AI, and a focus on individual and team performance for improved organizational impact. The combination of focus on strengths and intentional appreciation differs somewhat from traditional coaching. I start with a deep search for what is best about the person, listening to their language
and introducing an appreciative stance. This approach cultivates a more effective leader, with improved communication, conflict management, self and team management and more.

The following appreciative coaching steps were powerful in enabling this leader to tap into his positive core, to discover the best future possibilities and to design innovative action plans for change:

- **Create awareness of opportunities for change:** A person can begin coaching thinking they want to focus on specific things, and organically, during the course of our engagement, other opportunities arise. I encouraged and fostered this exploration.

- **Focus on strengths:** I used both VIA Character Strengths and Gallup’s Strengths Based Leadership to help uncover and unlock strengths and, also, to shine a light on the strengths of teams.

- **Develop positive mindsets and shifting perspectives:** Through awareness building I invited him to be intentional in shifting his thinking toward the positive, to move him effectively forward.

- **Create habits that lead to peak performance:** I introduced practices such as mindfulness and meditation, exercise, gratitude and scanning for what went right at the end of each day to lay the foundations for sustained, improved, effective performance.

- **Learn the appreciative language:** Growing insight into the language a person uses ties into how they think and act. A fresh look at that language and practice of new communication patterns allows a shift to a more effective way of communicating.

- **Ask more. Tell less:** We are a world of “fixers” and “tellers”. Demonstrating and practicing the power of inquiry for daily use allowed him to lead with more impact and improve self and team outcomes.

I appreciated working with inspired leaders such as Dean Elizabeth King and Dr. Jim Clark, who each had a desire to grow as a leader and as a person. Dean King recognized that the power of the positive and inquiry could inspire and deliver remarkable outcomes. I am grateful for the opportunity to co-create positive changes at University of Cincinnati.

My coaching engagement with Dr. Clark, who was in a new position at the university, spanned the course of a year. He was already an intelligent, shining light. Over the course of the appreciative coaching engagement, I saw him change and develop in significant ways. His strategic strengths and authentic interest in growing as a leader helped propel him forward toward transformations that created important impacts on him, his team, the university, and beyond.
A story of successful appreciative coaching and strategy work: Jim’s experience

I joined the team at the College of Allied Health Sciences in 2011 after many years working in leadership positions in the health industry. Shortly after I arrived, Dean King offered me the opportunity to engage with a coach – Elaine Suess. I was new to the university, in a new college, in a new position, in a new city. Dean King recognized that coaching would help to accelerate my success as a leader. Neither Dean King nor I knew at the time that this coaching experience would be transformational both for me and my team.

Elaine introduced me to AI as a tool I could use immediately in my daily interactions with my team. Our coaching sessions were affirming and also quite demanding in encouraging me to closely analyze how I was thinking, what words I was using, how I was communicating with my team, and how I was making decisions on a daily basis. The appreciative approach put a spotlight on me and also helped me realize I needed to re-conceptualize my “staff” as my “team”, as without them I could not be an effective leader. This consideration for “team” was less about being kind or sympathetic and more about being curious and proactively engaging with them by “asking more” and “telling less”.

Coaching also helped me become more intentional in enacting these new approaches. Our weekly sessions created a climate of accountability, as there were opportunities to try new approaches and refine them through discussions with my coach. The discussion of weekly “wins” for my team and me was a concrete way to see that this appreciative thinking, based in strengths recognition and inquiry, was shifting the way I saw myself and my team. I was very aware that while coaching was for “me” as a person, it was also an important investment for the institution.

I looked forward to the coaching sessions, as they enabled me to discover clear and effective ways forward, and to become the “best” leader I could be. My team began to respond more positively to me as I used appreciative approaches which enhanced my interactions with them on a daily basis. The practice of scanning the day to look for what went well eventually became a habit that occurred throughout the day. I was continuously looking for and recognizing what was going right, to create even more wins.

From individual impact to the whole

Through this experience with appreciative coaching I shifted my way of measuring successful outcomes and started to think differently about strategic planning. Most of my clinical work and research focused on psychopathology and how things go wrong for children and families. Similarly, my previous strategic planning experiences spent much more time focusing on organizational weaknesses and threats. I now wanted to develop some new, positive approaches to “looking” that allowed me to spot opportunities and possibilities for the college.

As I developed new habits, it helped me to think about strategic planning as a way to enhance what was working well and to inspire faculty to envision an exciting future. It
was no longer about diagnosing and more about designing, building on strengths, and discovering core virtues, values and sources of deep consensus within our team.

During this time my coach and I worked together to shift from a focus on my individual behavior to the organizational level – a rather challenging task! Elaine encouraged me that this “new” approach of hosting AI sessions for planning could positively shift and focus us in ways other strategic processes had not. While my team was skeptical at first, the use of AI helped unleash our team’s positivity and creativity as we co-created our future. It brought forward a greater level of engagement from many on the team. Embedding AI principles in the execution of our plan helped the whole team stay positive and increased our effectiveness.

Coaching was important after the inquiry as well. Elaine helped me process the AI session outcomes to consider the most important findings and conclusions that eventually resulted in an AI-inspired strategic plan. I was able to use the plan my team and I had created for both short- and long-term planning. I also used the plan with my superiors and with outside experts who came from other universities to review our programs and give recommendations for quality improvement and new program development.

The way forward
I keep the document, which we named The Way Forward, on my desk and I reflect on it daily. It helps me stay positive and focused on opportunities and the “big picture”. The lessons of coaching and developing our strategic plan remind me to constantly be aware of, and mitigate, the natural pull into negativity that arises with daily concerns and questions about the possibility for real organization change. This means practicing the AI philosophy daily alongside implementing the strategic plan.

Keeping AI alive
Since 2011, the College of Allied Health Sciences has continued to weave AI throughout its processes and approaches, uncovering employee strengths and stories. AI as an underpinning of coaching provided an optimal fit that reflects the ambitious goals and strong challenges facing the college. The investment into the changes brought about by the strengths-based approach and appreciative coaching in the College of Allied Health Sciences continue to positively impact the staff, faculty, department chairs, directors and the dean.