

When objectives are useless: the role of appreciative inquiry

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I was always under the impression that setting objectives (subsequent to discovering them), played a crucial role in the success of the strategic planning process. Once we had the objective, we could then plan to meet it. However, if there was a black mark against our name as planners, it would be this: implementation.

Although we are required to just provide the map, if people and organisations seldom reach the destination, then surely the mapmaker has some responsibility? Or, in my case - curiosity. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) offers an intriguing potential remedy.

AI was initially developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva as an organisational development model based on the assumption that 'organisations change in the direction they inquire'. So, organisations which investigate problems will keep finding them, whereas an organisation that focuses on what is best in itself, will discover more of what is good (and hopefully profitable).

Appreciative Inquiry incorporates a four-part cycle. Although parts two to four are currently practiced by strategists in some form or another, it is the first step that is unique:

1. Discover: The best of what is... Instead of identifying the gaps in the current situation, AI focuses on what currently works well within the organisation. So, instead of the usual SWOT, we sacrifice the 'weaknesses' and 'threats' with 'aspirations' and 'results' (SOAR). Proponents of AI have found that just asking people what works well for them, can reveal what gives life and meaning to the organisation as a whole.

2. Dream: What could be.

3. Design: What should be.

4. Destiny: Empowering, learning and adjusting.

Although point four above could easily be replaced by the word 'implementation', what makes the process potentially so much more powerful is that it operates from a position of strength at the outset. And, as we are quite aware, that's when we perform best, whether as individuals or coalesced into organisations. Nobody got famous on a weakness.

References

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