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Theme 8: Research & Extension services Knowledge transfer & exchange

SUSTAINING POSITIVE PRACTICE CHANGE

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This is an applied paper.

SUSTAINING POSITIVE PRACTICE CHANGE

Abstract

Whether it is for policy, strategy, developing resilience or extension there is a need to engage effectively with the farmers we work with, and often the communities that support them. The purpose of this paper is to outline and discuss an approach that puts farmers at the positive centre of the process, and begins with what is working well and generates new ideas from this positivity. The engagement uses a process known as Appreciative Inquiry which is both a philosophical approach and a practical tool. It approaches challenges from a positive mindset, building on what is working well, rather than a deficit approach of starting where something is broken. It draws out ideas as a proactive inquiry rather than a presentation of existing findings. This proactive engagement of farmers helps bring forward the diverse complexities and interrelationships that all need to align for successful extension or any other interaction to take place. An example is given of an on-farm Appreciative Inquiry workshop. The approach works best in a group where the participants can leverage off each other's ideas and energy, and works most effectively for complex issues where the solution may not be obvious or easy.

Keywords: Extension, Policy, Strategy, Engagement, Appreciative Inquiry, Change

Introduction

Today's challenges and tomorrow's opportunities have increasing levels of complexity and may benefit from additional methods of engagement in addition to current practice. Our training as consultants and extension agents is to solve our client's problems. Often we are called in to solve an immediate 'pain point', which we do effectively by triaging the situation and developing options and solutions. For a simple problem this is effective and positive and sustains much of our business. However, many challenges today are more

complex and the solutions not as apparent, and often can be partly solved, but may need further research, wider engagement, or changes beyond farm level to be truly successful.

We now need to collaborate more as farmers and communities. We need to develop new capacities and solve challenges that are bigger than a single farm business. We need to design for greater resilience around climate variability, changing consumer preference and building sustainable and profitable communities and businesses.

One approach is to build on the existing strengths already in place on farm, as a basis to extend new technologies and systems by inquiring into that systems' existing strengths, possibilities and success, as the platform to add new knowledge. Appreciative Inquiry was developed in the late 1980's, and used widely globally and in many different disciplines. This paper briefly describes Appreciative Inquiry and gives a practical farm based application of extension engagement and design output using this approach.

Description

At its essence Appreciative Inquiry aims to generate new ways of thinking and adoption based on starting with past or current positive experience, rather than a deficit approach of starting with what is not currently working well. Importantly it does not ignore what is not going well, but rather approaches that with the knowledge that we have got things right in the past. Even if the new challenge is complex and unknown, in our minds, in the right frame, we know we can develop solutions and systems that work.
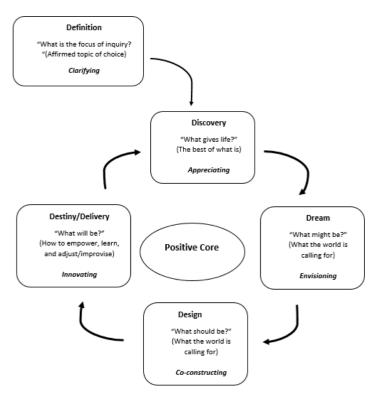
Definition

"Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative search for the best in people, their organisations, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives a system 'life' when it is most effective and capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen 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." (Cooperrider & Whitney, n.d.)

The 5D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry

While the principles represent the underlying philosophy of AI work, the 5-D cycle offers a generative yet practical, process model for approaching change at all levels within a system, from one-on-one coaching, to team building, to system-wide change.

The 5D Cycle of AI

1. **Define – What is the topic of inquiry?** – It is important to define the overall focus of the inquiry (what the system wants more of). Definition is used to clarify the area of work to be considered. In spite of being the starting point of the cycle, it's a recent addition – the 5Ds were originally the 4Ds, including discover, dream, design and destiny. Definition defines the project's purpose, content, and what needs to be achieved. In this phase, the guiding question is, "What generative topic do we want to focus on together?"

2. **Discover – Appreciating the best of 'what is'** – Discovery is based on a dialogue, as a way of finding 'what works'. It rediscovers and remembers the organization or community's successes, strengths and periods of excellence.

3. **Dream – Imagining 'what could be'** – Imagining uses past achievements and successes identified in the discovery phase to imagine new possibilities and envisage a preferred future. It allows people to identify their dreams for a

community or organization; having discovered 'what is best'. They have the chance to project it into their wishes, hopes and aspirations for the future

4. **Design – Determining 'what should be'** – Design brings together the stories from discovery with the imagination and creativity from dream. We call it bringing the 'best of what is' together with 'what might be', to create 'what should be – the ideal'.

5. **Deliver/Destiny – Creating 'what will be'** – The fifth stage in the 5Ds process identifies how the design is delivered, and how it's embedded into groups, communities and organizations. In early Appreciative Inquiry development, it was called 'delivery', based on more traditional organizational development practice. The term 'destiny' is more prevalent now.

(Cooperrider, 2018)

The stages have a natural flow to them starting with strengths and ending up as actions, and of course can be named differently to suit your audience, or even not named at all, but just used as part of a natural flow of a workshop or meeting.

There is a rich source of reference material on Appreciative Inquiry available and I have only touched here on a very brief definition and outline. What is more important I think is to see how it can be applied in our engagement with farmers.

Appreciative Inquiry in action - Example of a live workshop outline and discussion

Designing an extension programme for creating positive technology change

Participants: 20 people in total comprising rural professional farmers, both on farm and off farm based.

Workshop duration: 3.5 hours including breaks

Location: A local community hall near the bulk of the farmers participating

Introductory Statement (Defining the affirmative topic)

Mention "we are changing to new technology" and, in most cases, it provokes feelings of concern, resistance, and anxiety. Technology change has high points and low points. For now, let's focus on the high points of a previous technology change experience.

Think of a time when you experienced a technology change and it was a positive experience. It may not have started that way, but it ended up being positive for you. Discovering what worked in the past reminds us all that we can change successfully. Building on that can help you position yourself to look on technology change in a new and expansive way in the future. Identifying what works, imagine what you can do personally on the next technology change you are involved in. How can you help plan a project for a team to undertake, and recommend supportive ideas for those leading the team?

Think – Pair – Share (Discovery / Strengths)

> Try and pair up with someone you haven't met or haven't spent much time with. Spend a few minutes on your own to cast your mind back, gather your thoughts and ideas on the following.

> Thinking back on a new piece of technology you were involved with or implemented, there will have been high and low points. Let's focus on the high points, when it all worked out in the end.

> - Tell your story
> - Describe what was happening
> - Who was involved?
> - What were you doing?

> Without being humble, what were some of the specific things about you that made the new technology implementation positive?

> > What are some of the things you did, thought, and felt? What are you proud of?

Now share your story with your partner over the next few minutes. For your partner while you are listening, jot down just a few words that would enable you to share one high point from your partner's story. After 5 minutes or when they finish, swap over and listen to your partner's story and record one high point from their story.

Common themes

In small groups of 4-8, share one high point of your partner's story

Facilitators record these points on a flip chart – one per person

X

Y

Z

…

As a group quickly identify the common themes coming through, that are great examples of the strengths and successes of making that new technology successful.

The outcome at this point was that everyone had thought of an example of a technology that had gone well for them. In some cases it was non farm related - "I'm stoked I worked out how to programme my sky decoder" and for others more farm focused." We figured out how to link our weigh scale data to download automatically." The point here is big or small we have now got people thinking of a positive example, and importantly the part they played and the steps they went through to get there.

The group is also helping distill what are the common success factors.

Where could new technology take us? (The opportunities or the dream part)

Let's build on these positive change stories and themes you have developed. Imagine for a moment that you went for a short break for a week in Australia and for some reason you couldn't get back for five years, but that things (magically)

carried on without you on the farm. Five years on you are back home, and relieved that we still have the Bledisloe cup. Looking out your kitchen window onto the farm what would you like to see has happened? What new technology is in place on the farm and being used successfully?

Working in your small groups, and with one of you scribing just get all your ideas up on the flip chart.

At this point we had ideas ranging from incremental improvements to current practice, to future looking technologies from automatic drones monitoring the farm, real time DNA analysis and even a Heads up Display on the kitchen window feeding real time information back on the farm.

Break for a cuppa

The design part

We have four groups. As a group select one of your technologies and write it on a new flipchart page. Pin that on the wall and for the next five minutes make a list of what would need to be in place on the farm or available to the farm to make that work. For example

1. For this to work we'd need to have better training so everyone used the tool the same way.
2. For this to work we'd need
   a. Policies
   b. Procedures
   c. Communication strategies
   d. Engagement
   e. etc

Right, you've made a great list there, move around clockwise as a group to the next flipchart, review their technology, put a tick next to the 'for this to work…' statements you agree with, any queries write them next to the statement.

Repeat for the next flipchart, you've got three minutes…..

Repeat for the next chart, you've got two minutes….

At this point there will be a list of things that need to be in place, some far-fetched, but, farmers also being practical people they will be mostly things that are doable with the right combination policy, procedures, capital and people.

What actions could there be? (Delivery)

Ok, time is up. Just stay standing where you are. Looking at what you have completed that you'd like to see, and what needs to happen to make it successful.

What is one thing, maybe one small thing that you could do tomorrow, or in the next week to make that happen. The technology may not be available yet, but what is something you could start building capacity for or awareness of that would make it successful?

Write it on one of these Post it notes with your name on it and stick it here on these flip charts.

Wrap up

The session finishes with a debrief. What worked well? When did they feel the most energy as an individual? What didn't work so well and could be tweaked? What would be good to add for next time?

Typically most people feel most energised at the start, and even for people in the same team or who know each other well, they will hear a story that they haven't heard before. The energy stays quite high during the future visioning and stays reasonably high when you get down to what might be the practical steps required and actions to be taken.

Participants to date, find it such a fresh approach that they don't suggest too many changes. Often they'll say "I learnt more today than any of the last discussion groups I've been to recently." In fact you have told them nothing new, you have just given them the format and structure to bring forward their own knowledge and designs.

Conclusion

Appreciative Inquiry is a well-developed tool and methodology. It has been adapted and used widely around the world. While not widely used in agriculture in New Zealand at least, it has the potential to address some of the more complex issues we face as we look at satisfying our consumers' wants and needs, and sustaining our land, water and atmosphere, and businesses.

Perhaps the biggest challenge to using this methodology is ourselves. We find it easier to apply our traditional thinking, training and approaches. To do something different appears too hard. However, there is far more to consider in future profitable farm systems than optimising the factors of production, and production growth alone will not build the sustainable and profitable farm systems that our clients need, and depend on us to help them develop.

Appreciative Inquiry is not the total answer, nor the only means to develop solutions. However, it has proven to be a useful addition to the tool box for developing effective engagement strategies and design for successful extension, strategies, policy and developing people. In the author's experience it has been welcomed by farmers as an approach that allows them to be part of designing and actioning change. Without that engagement of farmers, no extension strategy or policy is going to be truly successful.

References

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