Appreciative Inquiry and Leadership Transitions

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In times of accelerated change accompanied by leadership transitions, appreciative inquiry (AI) and sensemaking skills are necessary. AI is a philosophy, a model of change, and a set of tools and techniques that support discovery, dreaming, design, and creation of a vision that inspires people in an organization to move toward a collective destiny. Sensemaking involves sizing up a situation to create a framework for decision-making, creating a context for communication, linking with others, and focusing on what is and what could be. Sensemaking can be facilitated by applying appreciative leadership techniques. In this article, the story of the University of Utah College of Nursing's and the faculty's experience with an AI process illustrates the application of the AI leadership strategy to navigating organizational change and a leadership transition. (Index words: Leadership, Organization change, Strategic planning) ***J Prof Nurs 20:103-109, 2004. © 2004 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.***

CURRENTLY, THERE ARE OVER 55 vacant deanships across the country, with acting deans in leadership positions. The average tenure of a dean in a school of nursing is 6.3 years (L. Berlin, personal communication, June 2, 2003). Specific and complex challenges exist in organizations when there has been a history of stable leadership through time or whenever a new person steps into a deanship. Leadership transitions are challenging and disruptive. Even anticipated leadership changes create uncertainties and anxieties for every member of the organization. Higher education is beginning to experience leadership and administrative changes at a rate that mirrors accelerated change in corporate contexts. This article describes appreciative inquiry (AI) techniques that can assist both deans and faculties in navigating the change process inherent in leadership transitions.

The ultimate goal of a search for new leadership is to find the right person for the right context of and at the right time in an organization's developmental history. Dean searches can be costly, the margin for error or mismatch is narrow, and expectations for success are high. Successful transitions, such as those involving the introduction of a new dean, depend on leveraging the creativity and self-organizing capacity inherent in the organization. Managing creativity requires navigating the tension between problems and passions in the organization so that desired futures are created.

A new dean generally engages in an initial period of assessment or "sensemaking." This involves sizing up a situation to create a framework for decision-making. Sensemaking is a prerequisite for defining and creating preferred organizational futures. Sensemaking for a new dean is also an opportunity for creating a context for communication and engaging the imagination of others. It is a way to create, design, and transform structures and processes that make an envisioned future possible (Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1998).

AI leadership skills support the process of sensemaking. Srivastva, Fry, & Cooperrider (1999) describe an appreciative executive as "a scholar, colleague and sculptor of conversation that seeks to give new voice to the *mystery,* not mastery and *wonder,* not problems, of organizational life" (p. 33). This style of leadership involves appreciation, creativity, and awareness that there is a difference between problems to be solved and aspirations that need specification. AI is an approach to leadership and management that is simultaneously scientific and rational and metaphysical, normative, and pragmatic. It is a process that strives to couple interpretive knowledge with practical knowledge. This leadership technique is grounded in observations, collaborative dialogue, and experimentation to create the logic of a vision.

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AI has emerged in recent years as a generative science of administration that supports organizational change during a transitional period or any disruptive innovation. AI identifies the best of *what is* so that organizations can derive the ideals of *what might be*. It supports the consensus-building that enables people to create aspirations of *what should be* in light of the organization's experience of *what can be* (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). The following are some basic assumptions that provide the context for AI work (Hammond, 1998):

- In every organization, something works.
- Looking for what works well is more motivating and effective than looking for what does not work.
- What we focus on becomes our reality.
- The act of asking questions begins the change.
- Organizations move toward what they ask about or focus on.
- We have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future when we bring forward parts of the past.
- If we bring parts of the past forward, they should be what is best.
- The words we use to anticipate and describe reality, create it. (Hammond, 1998, p. 20-21)

Discovering and making explicit what works in an organization help people clarify dreams and aspirations, design meaningful futures, and chart a course of action toward a preferred destiny. AI provides ways and means to make assumptions and beliefs explicit. As a result, aspirations emerge. Cooperrider (2000) concludes this about the affirmative basis of organizing: "(1) organizations are the products of affirmative mind; (2) when beset with repetitive difficulties or problems, organizations need less fixing, less problem-solving, and more reaffirmation—or more precisely, more appreciation; (3) the primary executive vocation in a postbureaucratic era is to nourish the appreciative soil from which new and better guiding images grow on a collective and dynamic basis" (p. 31).

Schiller, Holland & Riley (2002) derived a profile of appreciative leadership from interviews with corporate and academic leaders. Results of their work support the fact that an appreciative leadership style is simultaneously a philosophy and a worldview supported by relational and catalytic values. Practices of these leaders included dialogue, coaching, enabling, encouraging, and challenging. Such practices influence people's awareness, day-to-day behaviors, and actions. An ap-

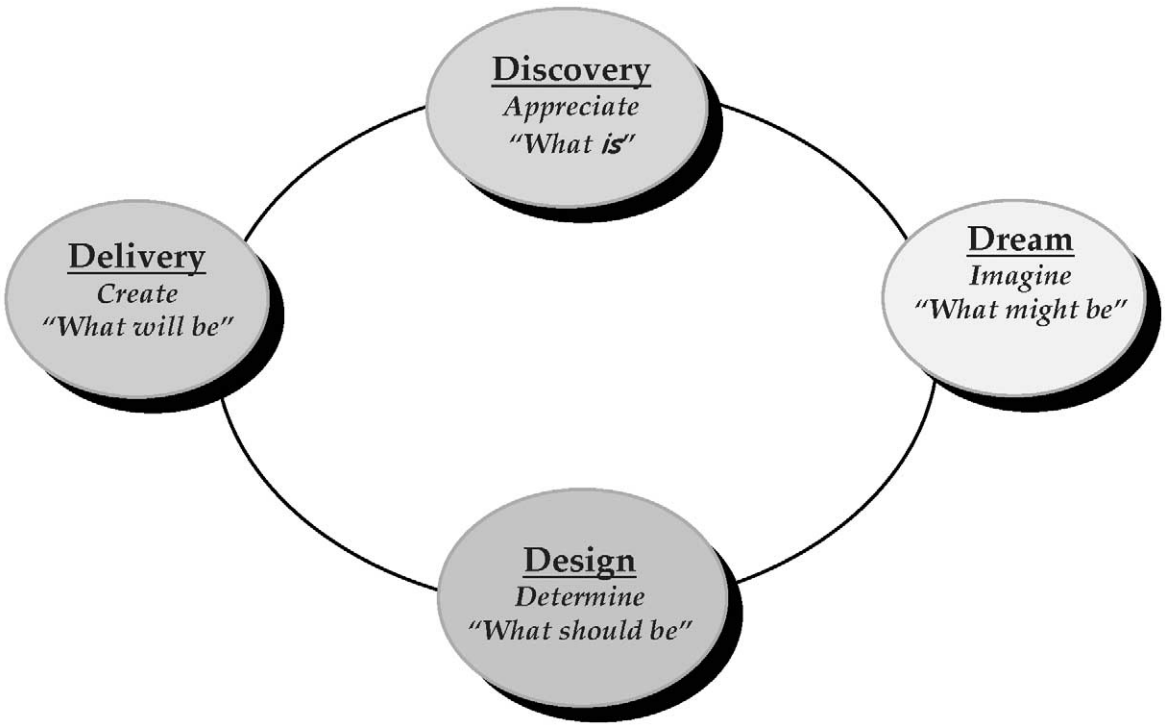

Figure 1. The four "D" cycle of appreciative inquiry.

preciative leadership style supports the development of mutual respect, trust, and openness that in turn inspire expansive shared visions that embrace all talents and strengths of people in the organization.

The Four "D" Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry

By applying the four "D" cycle of AI, leaders can make visible the aspirations and vision of the people in an organization (Figure 1). Rather than a focus on fears and deficits, AI uncovers the best of people's experiences. The four "D" AI cycle is made up of the following phases: (1) discover, (2) dream, (3) design, and (4) deliver (Whitney & Schau, 1998). In the discovery phase, the goal is to uncover and appreciate the best of what is and what works in an organization. Once the appreciative elements are uncovered, individuals and groups discern from memories, stories, data, and shared history what values, beliefs, and assumptions support a desired future.

Discovery answers the question *What is?* from an affirmative basis. This initial phase leads to clarification and preparation for focusing on the future. Dreams help frame and define the *What might be?* question. Once the desired future is defined, people work backwards from this end state and design steps and social architecture to achieve the dream. The design phase creates a context in which the group generates a plan to achieve the ideal and answers the question *What should be?*. Finally, the delivery phase is realized as people in the organization enact strategies and action plans that support commitments based on what people have learned about themselves in light of what they hope to create. Delivery is the answer to the *What will be?* question of an AI. An appreciative organization is one in which expectations and rewards are clearly articulated, realistic and clear goals are set, successes are celebrated, areas of growth are noted, and progress is praised.

The University of Utah Story

The principles of AI were used at the University of Utah College of Nursing to facilitate the transition to new leadership and engage the faculty in the cocreation of a strategic plan to guide future directions of the college. What follows is a description of the visioning process and of the products that emerged when the principles and practices of AI were applied in this setting. The story is framed through the lens of the four "D" cycle and the phases of AI that unfolded over the first academic year of a new dean's transition.

PHASE I: DISCOVER

During the discovery phase, the goal is to become open to *what is* and to engage in dialogue designed to assess the current state of the organization from an appreciative stance and frame of reference. During the first week of the new academic year, a 2-day, college-wide retreat was held with the heightened anticipation of meeting the new dean and kicking off another academic year. The dean took this opportunity to create the context and articulate her role and aspirations for the college. She described the dean's role as sustaining a shared vision, mobilizing resources, and creating a positive environment or community. She also shared the following list of personal core beliefs and values: communication/openness, collaboration/trust, integration, and inclusiveness.

The notion of AI was introduced as an approach to actualize these beliefs and values and also as a method to discover more about the college. AI was introduced as a way to "journey into the future, while carrying the best parts of the past." (Hammond, 1998, p. 21). An overview of the four-stage process of AI—discover, dream, design, and deliver—was provided. It was explained that each stage builds on the next and is directed toward creating a clear shared goal, a sense of trust, purpose, and affirmation, and the best path that fully engages all people in an organization.

During the fall retreat, the dean shared her early observations and first impressions with the faculty and staff to begin the discovery phase. She focused on the organizational strengths of the college and set the tone for appreciating a strong foundation on which to build a cocreated future. Discovered strengths included a strong history and tradition of excellence in nursing education, preeminent status as the state flagship institution, and an excellent reputation throughout the intermountain region. The strategic position of having the only state-supported master's and doctoral program in nursing and having the only master's program in gerontology were identified as unique assets.

As a way to focus and stimulate dialogue, strengths and assets were juxtaposed with emerging trends, challenges, and potential opportunities. These trends, challenges, and opportunities included:

- Shortages of both registered professional nurses and nursing faculty
- Increased innovations and use of educational technology
- Uncertain financing of academic health centers

- Integration and balancing of all missions within the organization
- Increasing collaboration in interdisciplinary education and research
- Shift from a focus on technology to a focus on information
- Developments in the area of human genetics
- Lifestyle, self-efficacy, and personal responsibility for health
- Increased longevity and concurrent chronicity of disease conditions.

By defining her personal values and first impressions, and by identifying challenges and opportunities, the dean established the context and extended the invitation to others to affirm and discover other strengths and challenges during the 2-day retreat.

PHASE II: DREAM

This phase of the appreciative inquiry process involves conversations about *what might be*. Such conversations are invitations to imagine. Several "visioning the future" activities were introduced to facilitate and initiate this phase of the AI process at the University of Utah. Dreaming together involved all members of the academic leadership team and all faculty and staff. These dreaming activities served several purposes. Specifically, they were designed to (1) facilitate the dean's orientation, (2) create a shared vision and identity, (3) chart the future direction or course, and (4) direct decision-making and resource allocation. Table 1 gives a brief description of these activities and the sequencing of events over the year.

Focus Groups

During the initial fall retreat, faculty and staff were randomly assigned to groups based on the color-coded caricatures attached to their nametags. Small groups of 8 to 10 people were formed, and each group was given a separate meeting space and a unique AI question to guide their discussion. The complete set of questions was as follows:

1. What are the 3 to 5 core values of the College of Nursing?
2. Relate the details of an incident when you felt you really made a difference.
3. What excites you most about the next few years at the College of Nursing?
4. What is the College of Nursing known for?
5. Describe one of the most deeply satisfying experiences you have had here at the College.
6. What would you like to see more of at the College of Nursing?
7. Describe a time when you felt especially appreciated and valued. What occurred?
8. What is a motto, slogan, or bumper sticker you would create to reflect your vision of the College of Nursing?

The groups self-selected a recorder/reporter in addition to a group-discussion facilitator. Their tasks were to include everyone in the round-robin discussion and synthesize the comments and conversations for sharing with the full group. After the small-group discussions, the groups shared brief reports and summaries of their conversations, stories, and ideas generated.

Mission-based SWOT Analysis

As part of the discovery phase, faculty and staff participated in a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis that revealed the college's strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities in the

TABLE 1. Visioning the future: timeline and activities

Phase I: Discover (fall retreat)
Day 1. Appreciative inquiry focus groups: During the initial retreat small groups of faculty and staff were created, and each responded to a different AI-based question
Day 2. Mission-focused SWOT: Analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in the areas of research, education, and practice
Phase II: Dream (Postretreat)
Listening tour: One-on-one visits with all faculty in their offices organized around their responses to 2 AI questions
Phase III: Design (spring semester)
Design teams: Three different groups or a "waves" of faculty and staff volunteers reviewed, framed, and summarized the materials gathered to date and shared a summary of plans with the entire faculty for reflection and feedback throughout the process
Review and oversight: Faculty and administrative reviews provided opportunities, coordination, and articulation among teams
Phase IV: Delivery (end of academic year)
Implementation: Final approval and adoption of new strategic plan and vision for the College of Nursing

areas of education, research, and practice. The following ground rules and guidelines were generated by the group to facilitate this activity:

- Be an attentive listener
- Avoid evaluation and criticism
- Focus on data and idea generation
- Create lists of comments and ideas
- Place other issues and ideas into a "treasure chest" for later consideration.

Recorder summarized the dialog on flip charts that were posted around the room. Three SWOT clusters were created—one for each mission of the college. Strengths and weaknesses focused on the existing internal and external assets and attributes of the college. The opportunities and threats related to each mission focused on the external environment and people's perceptions about unrealized potential or future issues.

Listening Tour

After the fall college-wide retreat, the dean initiated a listening tour. All faculty identified a time when the dean would come to their offices to get better acquainted and to hear their responses or thoughts on two listening-tour topics: (1) describe a professional accomplishment you are very proud of, and (2) what opportunities do you see for the college that you are most excited about and want to be a part of?

The staff gathered in small groups with the dean and shared their input and thoughts on these topics as well. The small-group structure provided opportunities for staff to learn about one another's passions and accomplishments in a way that they had never experienced, even though many members of the staff had worked together for years. The listening tour was very useful to the new dean. It served as a way to conduct an internal and external environmental assessment, and to personally connect with each member of the organization. The strengths identified within the faculty and staff were summarized and reflected back to the faculty at the general faculty meeting at the end of the first semester.

The AI process provided the structure for sensemaking and creating meaning in the organization. It also required leadership to set an example by engaging in reflection, reframing, and reinterpretation. Responsibility for posing and answering questions such as *What's going on and why?* or *Where are we going?* eventually became the shared responsibility of faculty and the academic leadership team.

PHASE III: DESIGN

Design teams were used to determine *what should be*. The activities in the design phase occurred throughout the fall semester and extended into spring. To facilitate an ongoing high-involvement process, design teams were formed with volunteers from faculty, students, and staff. The purposes of the design teams were to aggregate results of the discovery process and create mission-focused goals and plans that would define the future. Design teams sustained involvement and provided additional structure for this self-organizing change process.

The first-wave design team took the work of the whole group at the retreat and began to design mission-focused plans and identify goals. They generated a list of outcomes for the college to accomplish in the next few years. The second-wave design team was charged with aligning the unfolding work of the college with the University of Utah Health Sciences Center's goals, and to look for articulation opportunities across the missions of the college. They also framed strategies and potential action plans. A third-wave design team focused on evaluation and feedback. Next, reaction panels provided input, suggestions, editing, and additional responses to the draft documents that had been created. At each step in the design process, the work of the various groups was brought to the general faculty at their monthly meeting for an information update, feedback session, and discussion opportunity.

Faculty and Administrative Reviews

The process that unfolded over the first academic year was self-organizing in many respects and guided by the Academic Leadership Team. The members of this team, which included the dean, associate dean for research, associate dean for academic affairs, associate dean for clinical affairs, and assistant dean for finance and administration, worked together to create a group process whereby the methods of AI could be applied. They were responsible for establishing the context, defining the expectations, identifying team members, selecting the topics, and developing the guiding questions or goals. This oversight group began the discovery phase during the initial fall retreat, reflected on the stories of the

faculty and staff, and summarized and reported the results throughout the fall semester. During the spring semester, faculty teams dreamed about the possibilities and designed a future strategic plan based on the appreciative discovery of current strengths and the active design of plans and directions. The academic leadership team provided ongoing oversight, celebrated achievements, and provided resources as needed.

Affinity analysis was used by the Academic Leadership Team to help organize and summarize the natural groupings that were emerging. Affinity analysis is a group-clustering technique that facilitates understanding the essence of a data set and generating natural groupings and breakthrough categorizations. Affinity analysis was also used to eliminate duplication, redundancy, and wordiness in the plans and documents as they evolved (Bassard & Ritter, 1994). During the ongoing design and delivery phases of the AI process, program directors and coordinators joined the academic leadership team to oversee and coordinate each step in the visioning process. Data and ideas generated at each phase were also reviewed, summarized, and shared with the entire faculty at monthly general faculty meetings. These sharing opportunities helped to craft evaluation criteria and determine the best next steps.

PHASE IV: DELIVER

The final phase involves creating a vision, a set of tangible goals and outcomes, or *what will be*. At the end of the first academic year, the general faculty approved the final product of this process, the College of Nursing strategic plan for 2002-2005. The use of the AI process helped to create a sense of connectedness and shared vision. The strategic plan for the future includes a vision statement, mission statement, core values, and guiding principles for the organization. A set of action plans and objectives for each of the three missions of the college was also developed and endorsed as part of the overall plan and map for charting the future. The document and the process have proved to be powerful tools for bringing out the best in the organization and the people in it. This visionary document is used as an overall guide and compass for the college. It provides the structure and sets the direction for annual action plans, goal-setting, and evaluation. The annual goals are a unique set that are developed for each year and guide the activities of the college for that year. This college-wide plan also creates a framework for faculty alignment as each person moves toward professional advancement. This framework reinforces that all faculty, administrators, and staff exist within the college structure to work toward shared goals and achieve a collective vision. Individual performance and productivity goals become synergistic when aligned with these college-wide aspirations.

Conclusions

Activities based on the application of AI principles and self-directed organizational change strategies were used to craft a shared vision for the future of the University of Utah College of Nursing. This creative process included the four phases of discovery, dreaming, designing, and delivering a preferred future. The process requires a philosophical commitment and thoughtful attention to creating a context that invites experimentation. AI is a philosophy, a method, and a set of tools that can be very useful in supporting leadership transitions and establishing a way of being in the day-to-day work environment in a nursing school or any organization. AI helps structure the organizational change that is a prerequisite to effective leadership transitions. This process requires a leader to invest time and energy in creating a climate of trust, affirmation, and creativity.

New deans or leaders of any kind must first assess the organization and establish a context for communication. An AI framework guides this process by focusing on and appreciating *what is* and also *what could be*. Appreciative leadership skills can be critical at this stage, when people in the organization are seeking validation and appreciation. AI supports organizational discovery and can inspire people in the organization to move toward a collective destiny or a shared vision. More than ever before, faculty today need their academic leaders to hear about their best dreams and proudest accomplishments. By hearing and acknowledging these dreams and accomplishments, new leaders can raise the passion quotient and the intensity in the organization. People become mobilized and motivated to engage in constructive activity (Schiller et al, 2002, p. 151).

The AI process and accompanying leadership approaches are valuable tools for new deans or anyone in a leadership transition. The challenge for today's leaders is to facilitate organizational change that maintains positive energy and creativity while allowing the organization to define and create new directions.

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