

Improving Organizational Performance Using Collaborative Change Processes

Collaborative processes to organizational change have become increasingly popular in the last few years because many leaders have learned that the style of management known as “command and control” no longer works. Leaders are learning that they need to get real buy-in on strategy from their people. They need to find new ways to align and engage large numbers of people around a common, effective focus within shorter time frames. While there are many factors involved in successful system change, some of the key ones include: purpose, shared strategy, leadership and an engaging people in a critical mass to accelerate change.

How many of you have heard or said the following within your organizations: “Oh no – not another strategic planning session!! Why aren’t people engaged? Where is the strategic plan? We tried to link performance to business strategy – why is it not working? Why do we always have challenges implementing change?” Do any of these questions sound familiar? Sadly, these comments are all too familiar.

This intent of this article is to share briefly with you some information on two collaborative change processes known as Open Space Technology and Appreciative Inquiry. Furthermore, we will share some client applications with you to highlight the benefits of collaborative change processes to improving organizational performance.

Open Space Is A Structured Way To Engage People

Open Space Technology was invented by Harrison Owen in 1985. Drawing on his roots as an anthropologist Harrison carefully crafted a facilitated process for self-organizing discussion topics as the basis for engaging people in dealing with issues they care about and are willing to take responsibility for. A versatile and highly engaging tool, Open Space provides a structure in which people can and do make what they need or want to happen – happen! If you are looking for a way to bring together a diverse group of people to tackle a larger common issue or challenge then Open Space is a great way to release the energy, ideas, commitment and sense of community that they will need in order to move forward. The purpose of open space is to enable high levels of group interaction and productivity providing a basis for enhanced organizational function over time. During open space sessions, people discover the capacity to operate as self-managed work teams with high levels of personal responsibility and leadership.

Groups of from 15 to 1,000 have used Open Space to assess end user needs, build a shared vision, plan new initiatives, resolve conflicts, generate breakthroughs, build communities and implement change

Appreciative Inquiry as Strengths Based Approach

AI is a powerful vehicle for setting in motion a wave of positive organizational change. It is based on a very simple premise: that organizations grow in the direction of what they repeatedly ask questions about and focus their attention on. The practice of AI is grounded in an intense exploration of unconditional positive questions that can uncover an organization’s best practices and innovations, as well as the conditions that allow it to thrive AND the translation of these findings into the daily processes and practices of the organizations work.

How Does AI Work?

Instead of focusing on *problems and changing people*, AI invites people to engage in a collaborative discovery of what makes their organization effective. This dialogue stirs up energy excitement and insights. Organization members then weave that new knowledge into the firm’s formal and informal systems, such as the way they develop and implement business strategy, measure progress or organize themselves to accomplish tasks (roles and responsibilities). In this way, positive change begins simultaneously with inquiry, allowing true learning to take place. Existing problems are replaced with innovation and excitement as conversations increasingly shift towards uncovering the organization’s positive core.

Application	Some Details...
Organizational Renewal Process for a Health Coalition	Using AI, participants came to understand each other, the competition and the community for the first time as a coherent, energized, focused and aligned whole. They created strategic plans that they all owned and they amended management structures and decision-making practices to support their goals.
Development of a Community of Practice for Board Presidents	Using open space technology allowed the participants to design their own agenda; choose topics of interest to them and their organizations and collaborate together to develop solutions by engaging a community of practitioners to tap on the wisdom within the room.
Turning a nearly defunct elder abuse network around to become highly engaged and sustainable	By using a combination of appreciative inquiry and open space, a network that had developed 2 previous strategic plans and was unable to move forward with them built and redefined relationships and developed a strategic plan which engaged the whole network and thus was successfully implemented because buy in and engagement were present from the start!
Building Community and teams for the staff of a High School	Imagine a staff of a 170 individuals, faced with silos and a challenging student population and poor morale. Now, after using AI, imagine a staff that have built relationships and developed teams, by engaging in dialogues around their passion for teaching and for recognizing not the problems with the school and its environment, but rather the successes and how they can build the schools’ vision by capitalizing on its strengths!
Developing an effective strategy post merger for senior leadership team.	Open Space Technology was used amongst the senior leadership team of a telecommunications company (which had 5 subcultures due to a number of recent mergers) to help them develop a strategic plan around the merger including a focus on people leadership, culture and values (all of the traditional areas in which mergers fail to address).

What’s so different or unique about these approaches? We and our clients have learned that no single person can know the answers that will lead to organizational success. The best answers or solutions come when all of the people speak and thus develop their wisdom about what they need to do together. When an organization is able to combine its multiple voices, it discovers THE solution and ensures that its people will be united around a lasting system-wide commitment. The magic within is unleashed and organizational performance positively impacted.

Interested in learning more?

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