

Appreciative Inquiry: Fostering Positive Culture



Boost resilience and collaboration

CME
CREDITS:
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How will this module help me use appreciative inquiry?

- 1 Five STEPS for building and maintaining a positive organizational culture
- 2 Answers to frequently asked questions about appreciative inquiry
- 3 Tools and resources to help your team effectively use appreciative inquiry

Increasing administrative responsibilities—due to regulatory pressures and evolving payment and care delivery models—reduce the amount of time physicians spend delivering direct patient care. Focusing only on what is wrong in an organization can lead to exclusive attention to problems and create a negative atmosphere, whereas taking the time to focus on the positives can help team members create a shared vision going forward.

Appreciative Inquiry: Fostering Positive Culture

Release Date: August 31, 2016

End Date: August 31, 2019

Objectives

At the end of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Evaluate current strengths, assets and values of the practice, department or organization.
2. Construct a “discovery team” to elicit positive stories and themes from the organization.
3. Incorporate appreciative inquiry into daily work and existing performance improvement initiatives.

Target Audience

This activity is designed to meet the educational needs of practicing physicians.

Statement of Need

It has been recognized that the traditional problem-solving approach underlying many forms of quality improvement has demonstrated mixed results, and often yields changes that are not sustained. Given the current pace of change and administrative burdens placed on practices, new approaches to quality improvement implementation are needed. This module will assist physicians in using the appreciative inquiry approach when fostering organizational change.

Statement of Competency

This activity is designed to address the following ABMS/ACGME competencies: practice-based learning and improvement, interpersonal and communications skills, professionalism, systems-based practice and also address interdisciplinary teamwork and quality improvement.

Accreditation Statement

The American Medical Association is accredited by the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education to provide continuing medical education for physicians.

Credit Designation Statement

The American Medical Association designates this enduring material for a maximum of 0.5 *AMA PRA Category 1 Credit*[™]. Physicians should claim only the credit commensurate with the extent of their participation in the activity.

Claiming Your CME Credit

To claim *AMA PRA Category 1 Credit*[™], you must 1) view the module content in its entirety, 2) successfully complete the quiz answering 4 out of 5 questions correctly and 3) complete the evaluation.

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About the Professional Satisfaction, Practice Sustainability Group

The AMA Professional Satisfaction and Practice Sustainability group has been tasked with developing and promoting innovative strategies that create sustainable practices. Leveraging findings from the 2013 AMA/RAND Health study, “Factors affecting physician professional satisfaction and their implications for patient care, health systems and health policy,” and other research sources, the group developed a series of practice transformation strategies. Each has the potential to reduce or eliminate inefficiency in broader office-based physician practices and improve health outcomes, increase operational productivity and reduce health care costs.

Disclosure Statement

The content of this activity does not relate to any product of a commercial interest as defined by the ACCME; therefore, neither the planners nor the faculty have relevant financial relationships to disclose.

Media Types

This activity is available to learners through Internet and Print.

References

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Introduction

Appreciative inquiry is an approach to change that identifies and builds on what is already working well in an organization to foster positive change. Developed at Case Western University in the 1980s, appreciative inquiry uses “unconditional positive” questions to identify what is best in an organization.¹ Asking questions such as “Think of a recent successful team project,” “What made the team so successful?” or “Have you noticed a colleague go beyond the call of duty recently? What happened?” orients team members to build on the positive and even create a shared vision going forward.

Focusing only on what’s wrong in an organization, such as a clinical practice or department, can lead to exclusive attention to problems and create a negative atmosphere, whereas taking the time to focus on the positives can help individuals recognize what gives life, vitality and joy to the practice.

Fostering the best in one another begins with noticing what is being done well. For example, providing recognition for a job well done has been shown to significantly lower physician burnout scores and result in other positive organizational results.²



Q&A

What are the benefits of appreciative inquiry?

- Appreciative inquiry fosters a sense of optimism, and people tend to work best when they are feeling optimistic.¹
- It encourages collaboration, which engages and aligns team members, while helping teams focus on the meaning of their work and inspiring members to do their best.
- This technique also facilitates storytelling, which engages the emotions and inspires collaboration and confidence.

Five STEPS for changing your organizational culture using appreciative inquiry

1. Build a guiding coalition of leaders to shape your organizational culture and work experience
2. Form a “discovery team” to elicit positive stories and themes from your organization
3. Share positive stories to catalyze and spread culture change
4. Incorporate appreciative inquiry into daily work to maintain positivity in your organization
5. Link appreciative inquiry to existing performance improvement initiatives

1

Build a guiding coalition of leaders to shape your organizational culture and work experience

Sustainable culture change requires leadership. It can be very challenging to “unfreeze” staff from the status quo. The shift to a more positive, productive work experience demands the engagement of leaders who are skilled in non-traditional competencies, such as emotional intelligence, team building and appreciative inquiry.

To build a coalition of leaders to guide culture change, it is helpful to identify individuals who are dissatisfied with the current workplace and who are ready to participate in disruptive innovation.³ These individuals can be physicians or other health care professionals who are curious and ready to embrace change.

See these STEPS Forward modules on leading change for more information.

- [Preparing your practice for change](#)
- [Select sustainable change initiatives](#)
- [Starting lean health care](#)

2

Form a “discovery team” to elicit positive stories and themes from your organization

It is important to begin appreciative inquiry by gaining a sense of the strengths, assets and values of the practice, department or organization. A discovery process can use appreciative interviewing to uncover themes and values from across the organization. This process will help the group understand “how we interact and connect with one another” and “what goes on in this organization when we’re at our best.”⁴

One way to begin the discovery process is to form a discovery team, a small representative group within your larger organization or practice that can use appreciative interviews to inform change within the organization.

Q&A

Who should be on the discovery team?

Consider including representatives from all aspects of your practice or department: medical assistants, nurses, physicians, administrators, front office and clerical staff, and maintenance staff.

How many people should serve on the discovery team?

A practice or department with 25 employees might want five people on the discovery team. For larger organizations, consider creating a discovery team for each pod or department.

What can the discovery team do?

The team can use a script for appreciative interviewing and can capture the responses either with an audio recorder and transcription or with paper-based or electronic notes. Leaders need to clearly communicate the guidelines regarding anonymity to both the members of the discovery team and potential interviewees. Although the goal of an appreciative interview is identifying the positive aspects of a practice or organization, a truly informative interview requires that the interviewee feels safe enough to speak about the challenging aspects of these subjects as well; thus, clarity about anonymity is important.

You can also begin the discovery process by using a staff meeting or other large group meeting to do appreciative interviews (pairing up to interview each other during a one-to-two-hour meeting).

How do I pair people up for the interviews?

Using a concept called “improbable pairs,” pair people together who don’t generally get to know one another and whose jobs are very different. For example, a doctor would be paired to interview a medical assistant or a pharmacist. These pairings can help break down barriers during the interview process.

What happens after the interviews?

After the interviews, put the pairs into groups of six to eight and ask them to share their partners’ stories with each other. You can also ask groups to provide a depiction that represents the important positive ideas that came forward during the discussion. Afterward, come together as a large group and share the themes or the depictions. These positive depictions can become important symbols of “who we are when we are at our best” in the practice.

How can I respond when my team resists appreciative inquiry, saying “We can’t afford to focus on what’s going well when there are so many problems?”

When initially learning about appreciative inquiry, people often see it as a “Pollyanna” approach that won’t help things improve. However, appreciative inquiry is not about denying or ignoring problems, but rather it is a way to build a collaborative culture and to gather the energy and enthusiasm needed to address problems.

3

Share positive stories to catalyze and spread culture change

Introduce appreciative inquiry on a small scale by including appreciative check-in or debrief in your staff meetings. Using these tools in meetings will familiarize your team with the concept of appreciative inquiry through experiential learning.

To use appreciative check-in, before beginning your meeting’s stated agenda, pose a positively focused question to the team and allow each team member to respond. Possible questions include:

- “What is something that went well for you today?”
- “What is a recent positive experience in your work or personal life?”
- “How would you fill in the blanks? I am feeling ____ today, because ____.”



To use appreciative debrief, reserve a few minutes at the end of the meeting to identify positive aspects of the meeting and opportunities for improvement. Ask the team to answer questions such as:

- “What was a positive experience you had in the meeting today?”
- “What did we do well in the meeting?”
- “What can we improve for our next meeting?”

Using these tools can shift the focus and atmosphere of meetings and help your team experience the benefits of appreciative inquiry. They can be especially helpful at garnering enthusiasm for required early-morning meetings.

Q&A

How can I make sure we get to our agenda items? Won't these practices consume our entire meeting time?

Often teams find that meetings become more productive when using these tools, because appreciative inquiry has shifted the atmosphere within the team or larger organization to be more positive and collaborative. If you are concerned about time, try using appreciative check-in and debrief questions that require a single-word response.

You might also consider hosting a “town hall” meeting to share positive stories. Spreading positive stories within your team or unit is an important component in changing its culture. Hosting a town hall meeting on a regular basis can bring your team together to focus on recent successful experiences. At a town hall meeting, the interviewer or interviewees from an appreciative inquiry exercise can share their positive stories (de-identified if desired) with the entire team. Include “open mic” time in the meeting, when participants can get up and speak or be interviewed in front of their team.

A variety of other communication channels can be used to share positive stories and help the practice become a narrative organization. The inclusion of positive stories supports culture change. Identify ways to include “positive gossip” in your internal communications; for example, you can post positive vignettes and inspirational quotes from staff or patients in newsletters, in company-wide emails, on your intranet, and on physical message boards in your office or clinic. For example, Indiana University School of Medicine sends an electronic newsletter weekly to the entire medical community that includes reflections of faculty and medical students, poetry and information about related workshops, conferences and awards.

4

Incorporate appreciative inquiry into daily work to maintain positivity in your organization

Once the staff members of your practice or department have gained some experience with appreciative inquiry, it is important to embed this approach into the daily work of your organization. Embedding appreciative inquiry can take several forms. The essential element of these activities is looking for and highlighting mutual values and positive experiences.

Appreciative inquiry activities might include:

- Appreciative check-ins at the start of meetings
- Introductions: ask people to respond to an appreciative question
- Shout-outs: ask team members to share something positive that they observed recently about another member’s actions or performance
- Appreciative de-briefs: ask an appreciative question relating to the strengths of a meeting
- Clinical interactions: use appreciative questions with patients
- Positive gossip
- Assuming positive intent
- Taking a barrier and turning it into an opportunity
- Finding the value behind a complaint

Events at which appreciative inquiry can be used:

- Daily huddles
- Staff meetings
- Leadership meetings
- Performance improvement team meetings

- Other team meetings
- Performance evaluations
- Interactions with patients and family members
- Practice or administrative rounds

See [Conducting Effective Team Meetings](#) for more information on using appreciative inquiry in team meetings.

Q&A

How can I learn more about incorporating appreciative inquiry into our work?

Consider additional training, consultation or discussion on this approach with a colleague who has used this process.

Contact the Center for Appreciative Inquiry for training or consultation opportunities. You or a staff member could obtain certification in appreciative inquiry. Certification is available through the Center for Appreciative Inquiry.

What do I do if my team is not responding and participation is low?

Timing is an important consideration in initiating culture change using appreciative inquiry. Just as one wouldn't counsel a patient to stop smoking at a time of high stress, so too must the decision to implement appreciative inquiry take any recent events or issues into account when introducing the concept. Consider using Prochaska's stages-of-change [model](#) or [motivational interviewing](#) techniques to identify sources of resistance to change.⁵⁻⁷

5

Link appreciative inquiry to existing performance improvement initiatives

It is important to look for existing skills and strengths within a group to fuel positive change.⁸ For example, if your organization already uses [PDSA \(Plan-Do-Study-Act\)](#) cycles, you might start by inviting staff to write brief (one- to two-page) proposals outlining the question or challenge that the PDSA cycle would address, the way(s) in which appreciative inquiry would affect the desired outcome, the appreciative inquiry methods to be used, and plans for using the results within the cycle. Members of the discovery team can act as a selection committee for these proposals. For example, a practice might use appreciative inquiry within the daily team huddle to test ways to optimize the care of each patient to be seen that day and identify time slots for same-day appointments. By using this technique, the practice can build on its strengths and work collaboratively to identify the most effective scheduling process for the group, ultimately improving care coordination, reducing wait times and increasing access.





AMA Pearls

Focusing exclusively on the negative about a situation (“what’s wrong”) can sap the energy and enthusiasm needed to make positive change. Identifying and noticing the positive (“what’s working”) can catalyze positive change in an organization.

Ensure the involvement of leaders when introducing appreciative inquiry. A coalition of leaders can help guide the introduction and continued use of the appreciative inquiry.

Forming a discovery team is an effective way to begin appreciative inquiry in a practice, department, or organization. These representatives of the larger group can conduct appreciative interviews to inform change.

Encourage the sharing of positive stories to catalyze and spread culture change. Staff members can share stories at staff meetings, “town hall” events, and other forums.

Using appreciative inquiry activities in daily work can maintain a more positive environment.



The creation of a Provider Wellness Program at HCMC demonstrates that we recognize that the well-being of providers is critical to the health and wellness of our patients. Small changes that come from the suggestions of providers can be hugely impactful and strengthen the unity of the care teams, thereby improving the quality of care and satisfaction of patients, families and providers.



— A clinician using appreciative inquiry to improve team-based care

Conclusion

Appreciative inquiry is an approach to change that identifies and builds on what is already working well in an organization. This technique fosters optimism and collaboration. It also encourages the sharing of positive stories, which can change an organization’s culture.



Additional Resources

[AMA Wire – Appreciative Inquiry](#)



To demonstrate completion of this module and claim *AMA PRA Category 1 Credits™*, please visit:

www.stepsforward.org/AppreciativeInquiry

Get implementation support

The AMA is committed to helping you implement the solutions presented in this module. If you would like to learn about available resources for implementing the strategies presented in this module, please call us at (800) 987-1106 or [click here](#) to send a message to StepsForward@ama-assn.org



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