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Sandra Wiley • Mar. 10, 2014

Most firms are in the process of reflecting on their progress during this time of year. Often, that reflection leads to negative feelings of what did not happen, goals that were not met, numbers that were not obtained and people who left. A more effective process is one called *Appreciative Inquiry*.

Appreciative Inquiry is a philosophy and an organizational development process that is used to produce positive change. It is a process of asking questions that will help everyone reflect not on the negative, but the positive things that have happened in the firm during the past 12 months. Think about questions like “What went right this year?”, “What happened that we are proud of?”, “What gives life to our firm?”. These types of questions will turn attention to the strategies we can celebrate and ultimately build on.

As many of you know, we start all of our meetings with the positive focus that we learned from The Strategic Coach program. Eighteen years later, we still use the tool faithfully and feel that it puts our clients and us in a positive frame of mind before we tackle tough issues. The next step after the act of thinking and talking more positively is to develop a process in your firm for true Appreciative Inquiry.

The process is:

- Discovery – What are the firm's strengths?
- Dream – What are the possibilities for change in the future?
- Design – How can you make these ideas happen?

- Destiny – How do you implement and sustain the change?

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“upward motion” – positive and uplifting – you need to insure you do not put anyone that is a negative personality into the mix. This could be like a bad illness that spreads fast.

Many firms struggle with change management, and Appreciative Inquiry is the key to true change. When you stay the course of the process above, and you truly act on allowing each person to contribute their best ideas, the outcome is a change in culture and strategy.

If your firm has gone through a particularly tough year, this process is even more important to you. You must change the direction of the feelings in your team. This is not an easy change, but it is critical to the future stability and success of the firm. Appreciative inquiry can energize a firm even in tough times because it begins the conversation with possibilities instead of problems.

The initial meetings you hold should then turn into a yearly campaign. In other words, don't let the ideas and strategies that come out of these brain trusts turn into “those ideas we came up with a year ago and did nothing with them”. The excitement that is created in the meetings should be acted upon. Don't think that this should be initiatives by the ownership group alone. A group of people – often led by an emerging leader – should be given the responsibility and authority to take action and keep the changes going.

The outcome you should expect is a highly collaborative and highly engaged team throughout the firm that is sustainable over time as long as the firm remains committed to the goal of appreciative inquiry. Ultimately, this becomes a part of your overall firm culture. It is not simply a “feel good” meeting, it becomes a way of life and a day to day habit.

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