

Reidy Associates



results with integrity

The Power of Vision

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote this evocative passage:

“You must give birth to your images.
They are the future waiting to be born.
Fear not the strangeness you feel.
The future must enter you
long before it happens
Just wait for the birth,
for the hour of new clarity.”

At essence, leadership involves giving birth to our images, creating a vision of possibility and then working to realize that vision. Leadership is most needed to bring into existence something which has never been created, whether it is in the life of one individual or in a bigger arena.

Organizational consultants Dannemiller Tyson have devised a model that describes conditions necessary for change: $D \times V \times F > R$, where

D = Dissatisfaction with the current situation

V = Vision of the future that is positive, compelling and possible

F = First steps in the direction of our vision

R = Resistance to change

The model posits that change will only occur if the product of $D \times V \times F$ is greater than the amount of resistance. So if resistance to change is too strong, then one or more of these other factors will need to be strengthened or change will not occur. Dissatisfaction with the current situation is often the initial catalyzing force, a positive pre-condition to the exercise of leadership. As my colleague Mark Shoul said, “dissatisfaction is like looking into the abyss, it frightens people and makes them want to take action.” But unless you quickly establish a vision of the future that is positive, compelling and possible, discouragement and a sense of hopelessness are likely to set in.

DEBORAH E. REIDY, PRESIDENT

70 Lindor Heights

Holyoke, MA 01040

(413) 536-9256 ■ (413) 536-8282 (fax)

deborah@reidyassociates.org

www.reidyassociates.org

I know this from personal experience. Much of my professional life has been spent educating people about the reality of devaluation,¹ especially as it affects people with disabilities, and trying to alleviate it. Isolation, loneliness, lack of adequate support, poor quality services, people being victimized and mistreated, community members who don't understand: All these circumstances and more are the results of devaluation. The more I worked to address devaluation, the more it seemed to multiply.

Between 1996 and 2002, I ran an agency with the following purpose: *Cornerstone provides education and support for practice aimed at enabling individuals with impairments to be valued members of the communities in which they live and work.* It was a laudable purpose, one which we worked diligently to implement. But with fewer than three staff positions and an undefined geographic area, the gap between our aspirations and our capacity was unbridgable. Even when we set specific goals each year, we found it impossible to identify accomplishments that contributed to our purpose in substantive ways. Thus, at the end of each year, instead of celebrating the accomplishments we had achieved, we were disheartened and disappointed at the gap that still existed between our aims and our accomplishments. Although many of what I consider to be my accomplishments have made a positive difference in people's lives, they have had more to do with responding to social problems than they have with enlarging the good that already exists in the world. Cornerstone's purpose had elements of both, but in day-to-day practice our strategies focused more on identifying and addressing problems than they did on expanding capacity. Within the framework of the change model described above, we had been focusing on "D" (dissatisfaction with the current situation) and "F" (first steps) far more than on "V" (vision).

I saw the negative impact of this very clearly some years ago when I approached an agency about conducting an evaluation of their program which provided support to families with disabled members. We wanted to learn and share some lessons about the relatively new service area. The agency enthusiastically agreed, anticipating that they would both contribute to the field and learn something that would enable them to improve their services.

We assembled a team of people experienced in evaluation and family support and proceeded to conduct an in-depth external assessment using a instrument we were familiar with. Upon completion, we gathered our team together and delivered our findings to the key staff involved in the program. The findings were very critical but we had confidence in their legitimacy and believed we were providing a valuable service, serving as a mirror for the agency staff to see what was "actually" occurring in spite of their best intentions. During the report, staff

¹ Defined as attributing low or negative value to a person, thus judging that person as being of lesser worth, resulting in treatment in ways that reflect this perception, such as poor housing or education, poverty, stigma and discrimination and so on.

of the agency looked somber and stricken, but nodded their heads as if in agreement. At the end, they thanked us and we went away to enjoy a well-deserved weekend, feeling very pleased with ourselves.

Imagine my shock when I arrived at the agency office for a meeting on a different matter the following Monday and the program director passed me in the hall without saying hello. During the meeting, the executive director made numerous uncharacteristic hostile comments. Afterwards, I asked her if we could talk and talk *she* did: For about twenty minutes! Essentially, she said that in spite of the legitimacy of most of the findings, she and others found them impossible to separate from the negative, punitive and judgmental tone of the feedback. She felt that the good work they were doing had been downplayed or completely overlooked, that there were some people they served who would not have been alive had the agency not provided support to them. And more.

I left that interchange with the conviction that there had to be another way. Here was an agency—one of the “good guys”—which wanted to provide high quality services, wanted constructive feedback, and wanted to have their experiences serve as a lesson for others. What better preconditions would we ever have? And instead of supporting them to build on their strengths, we left them feeling diminished and disheartened.

It is a testament to the maturity of the program director that, three years after this experience, she stood up at a public event and told the audience how angry she had been and how she had eventually come to accept the legitimacy of most of our findings and used them to improve their services. But did it have to happen that way? After that experience, I became committed to finding other ways to help organizations improve the quality of their services and products.

Several years ago, I discovered an approach to organizational and community change called Appreciative Inquiry that seemed to have promise. Appreciative Inquiry is a form of action research developed by David Cooperrider and colleagues in the late 1980s. Drawing from evidence in at least half a dozen fields and based on research in over 100 countries in the world, Appreciative Inquiry is “a form of transformational inquiry that selectively seeks to locate, highlight, and illuminate the ‘life-giving’ forces of an organization’s existence” (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003, p. xiii).

Sue Hammond (1998), an organizational consultant, captures the power of Appreciative Inquiry as a way to create organizational change. She states that assumptions, which are shared beliefs that cause a group to think and act in certain ways, often interfere with seeing or discovering other data that may contradict those beliefs and thus result in missed opportunities. The typical approach to change is to identify and diagnose the problem and then try to find a solution. Since the major focus is on problems, it is problems that are found and emphasized.

One of the assumptions of Appreciative Inquiry is that **what we focus on becomes our reality:**

If we focus on what is wrong or what is missing, we tend to see everything through that filter or frame. The filter or frame is our unconscious set of assumptions. We tend not to be aware of our frame, and we fail to notice that we disregard information that doesn't fit our reality. ... In order to see data that conflict with our assumptions, we have to break outside of our filter or frame (Hammond, 1998, pp. 26-27).

A premise of Appreciative Inquiry that I find particularly compelling is the "heliotropic hypothesis." Heliotropic means to turn toward the sun, just as sunflowers do, or as the rain lilies blooming on my front steps. The heliotropic hypothesis states that "human systems have an observable tendency to evolve in the direction of those positive images that are the brightest and boldest, most illuminating and promising" (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2003, p. 12). There is research that suggests that people can actually improve their capability to envision and affirm an ideal image as if it is already so and that this capacity positively affects what happens. For example, imagery techniques are becoming important to the training of successful athletes.

In another arena, the power of positive images has also been established. Scholars have discovered that the underlying images held by a civilization or culture have great influence on its fate. Dutch sociologist Fred Polak, who has studied Western Civilization, argues that a positive image of the future is the single most important variable for understanding cultural evolution. When a culture holds a positive and dynamic image of the future, it grows toward that image. Once the image begins to decay and lose vitality the culture does not long survive. Of course, this finding was anticipated by the Biblical quote: "when there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18).

When we think about these premises in relation to devaluation, the implications are clear:

We will get more of what we go looking for: If we focus our attention on eliminating or even reducing devaluation, what we will encounter are more and more instances of devaluation.

We will grow in the direction of our positive, powerful and compelling images: Vision is the most potent force in the change formula.

We can improve our capacity to imagine a desired future: This, in turn, affects our reality.

Since I first learned about Appreciative Inquiry, I have incorporated this perspective more and more into my professional and personal life. Appreciative Inquiry has been used and proven in number fields and across scores of organizations and communities, but that is not the main reason I recommend the adoption of this perspective. The plain fact is it just makes so much sense. It does not in any way deny the reality of devaluation and all the other harmful

things occurring in the world. However, it is a conscious choice to discover what is working in a person's life or an organization and to strengthen that rather than put the same amount of effort into solving problems. Bill Joy, Founder and former Chief Scientist of Sun Microsystems captures this choice: "We have to encourage the future we want rather than trying to prevent the future we fear." (Fast Company, January 2004).

As a result of adopting this perspective, I have observed and experienced energy, enthusiasm, momentum and considerable positive change. If we had used Appreciative Inquiry as a framework for assessing the family support agency described above, I believe we could have accomplished our purpose—to learn some lessons about family support and provide them with feedback about the quality of their services—in a way that was affirming and constructive rather than demoralizing and judgmental.

2004