

Armed and Contagious

Model and Multiply a Conscious, Positive Focus

BY ROBIN LEE KENNEDY

When was the last time you gave power to the negativity around you? You have a wonderful idea, something you feel passionately about, and feel you could follow through to success. You mention it to a friend in passing, looking for support. Your friend tells you stories she has heard about people trying to do what *you* are proposing – and how badly it's gone. Her intention is not to dump on your plans; she is just caught up in the negative knowledge she has on the subject. Whether there is any truth to the tales or not, they become relevant to you. You grab on to those negative outcomes and, by the time the conversation is over, you have given up on your idea. It wasn't that great an idea after all. Or was it?

Every day, in casual conversations, in the news, at work and at home, the fascination with what is not working, who is not participating, and what isn't being accomplished, become the focus. We don't intend to move through the world constantly seeking out and sharing the negative moments in our lives. But it's become a habit, a way of connecting socially, an easy path to follow. Our brains are simply geared towards giving negativity more credence than we give the positive. Over thousands of years, our brains, in response to overwhelming dangers to our very survival, have developed systems that make us more sensitive to negative stimuli. From an evolutionary perspective, these systems are the reason our species has developed to the remarkable level we have. The downside is that these systems are part of us, at all times, even when we no longer require such an extraordinary level of sensitivity.

We need to shift the focus away from the negative biases in our lives and focus on the positive. Only then can we break

the cycle and begin to approach everything we know with a new understanding that will lead to successful outcomes. By seeking out the best in others and ourselves, recognizing and appreciating the best of "what is," as well as focusing on winning results and influencing others to follow our lead, we can effect positive change.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI), conceived by Dr. David Cooperrider and his colleagues at Case Western Reserve's School of Organizational Behaviour, is a process for effecting lasting change in our vision of the world around us. AI takes into account all aspects of a process or project and tightens the focus on those things that are working within any system. Then, it encourages us to explore the reason behind the success, and pull out knowledge that we can apply to other situations to generate the same successful outcomes.

One of the best-known examples of the principles of Appreciative Inquiry in action occurred in April 1970, in the hallowed halls of NASA, and aboard the Apollo 13 spacecraft on its mission to the moon. Experiencing a critical failure in the main command module of the spacecraft, the men and women of NASA were forced to re-evaluate every piece of equipment and material available to them to bring the astronauts home safely. Instead of focusing on the problems – the things that were not working – they focused instead on what *was* working and *how* it was working, so they could apply this knowledge in new ways to overcome many life-threatening obstacles. They had to **appreciate** the situation for what it was, **focus** on the positive and **identify** what made some things work, while other things failed. Then they laboured to uncover the properties of the items and

processes that were successful. Once they had that information, they applied it to saving the crew of the spacecraft, and were able to make continued adjustments as new information became available. The result was a failed mission that provided more valuable information than any other perfect flight before it.

From establishing rapport and trust between government officials and village leaders in post-civil war Mozambique, to bringing a North American product to market two years ahead of plans, AI has a proven record. It's been fundamental in producing some dramatic corporate results:

- \$3 million in savings (John Deere)
- Profit increase of 300 per cent (Nutritional Foods, Brazil)
- Annual savings of over \$2 million (City of Denver)
- 20 per cent improvement in bottom line; retention increase of seven per cent (Hunter Douglas)
- ASTD Award for the best organizational change program, based on significant increase in stock prices (GTE Telecom).

What some might consider the best result of all is people's renewed enthusiasm for their work and their life. When you look for what's right with the world, it's incredible what shows up. Catch yourself the next time you're feeling critical and about to share your negative observation. Instead, look for the gold in the situation and see how it impacts the outcome. Envision a future filled with your dreams, and remember, the best way to predict your future is to invent it!

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