

Meetings That Work

Empowering Your Leaders to Design Effective Meetings Using Appreciative Inquiry

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We live in business environments that require collaboration and teamwork to achieve optimal results. To accomplish this we find ourselves in what seems to be an endless stream of meetings. If we take the time to calculate the amount of compensation paid to each of the participants for the time spent in each meeting, we would find a staggering amount of money is spent in meetings. The question is, are we reaping the value of the investment made in these meetings. I would venture to say that most organizations could benefit from making their meetings more effective and stimulating.

After numerous conversations with John Rae, Vice President of Research and Development, Todd Harmon, President of Cleveland Golf decided to do something about the less than productive meetings that his organization was having.

“John and I noticed that as our company had grown over the years and taken on more layers of organizational complexity that much of our top talent now spent a good portion of their regular work hours in meetings”, said Todd, “We could see the real world effects of meeting fatigue on our employees. We were certain that with a different approach to meetings across the entire company we could re-energize our people while making them more productive.”

When Todd contacted me about helping them improve their meetings I reflected on the best way to approach the situation. I suggested an approach where their leaders would have the opportunity to develop and design their own approach to meetings. I felt this would give them the best likelihood for sustained results. Todd agreed that his leadership team would like this approach. The approach I intended was Appreciative Inquiry.

Appreciative inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry has been defined as *the study of what gives life to human systems, when they are at their best*. In *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*, authors Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom continue:

This approach to personal change and organization change is based on the assumption that questions and dialogue about strengths, successes, values, hopes, and dreams are themselves transformational. In short, Appreciative Inquiry suggests that human organizing and change at its best is a relational process of inquiry, grounded in affirmation and appreciation.¹²

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¹¹ Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry, 2nd edition* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2010), p

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Process

We took 35 leaders and had them participate in three hour-long sessions. You can imagine the looks on their faces when they walked into a 3 hour -long meeting to talk about meetings. We established that if we could make meetings more effective and efficient it would be worth some effort. To initiate the dialogue, they paired up to interview one another on the best past meeting experiences as well as what meetings would be like if they got it right. We proceeded to learn about the best of their past experiences. Once these interviews were completed we had 35 stories of the best meetings they had ever experienced. After we identified the most meaningful content from these stores we looked at some best practices information. Even I was shocked that their interviews had essentially surfaced all of what was important in the best practices.

Next step we discussed their ideas about the best possible ideas for the future of meetings at Cleveland Golf. They sorted out the possibilities that they felt had the most promise for their organization. The level of enthusiasm and energy was actually more than I expected. One fellow said, “when we get this right, it will be just the way that we roll”. This excitement is exactly what it takes to make successful change happen and to sustain the effort.

Volunteers who wanted to work on taking this information to the next step identified themselves. We had a total of nine leaders who wanted develop the plan and work on implementation. Now was the time to make some design choices. What will be the approach chosen for meetings at Cleveland Golf? They identified the appropriate designs and reached agreement.

Now for the planning.

A clear robust plan was created with little effort. There were small things to do such as put clocks in each of the conference rooms as a reminder to stay on time. The company brand for Cleveland Golf is the “Feel of Golf”. They decided to build the design and the communications around the design of the “Feel of Meetings”. They worked to build the implementation and communications into the fabric of their organization and did it all around a golf metaphor. They have a “Front Nine”, the Cleveland Golf best practices for meeting leadership. This is framed and is hung in all meeting rooms. They also created a “Back Nine” these are the best meeting practices for participants and include such things as “arrive to tee time on time”, “play in the appropriate order”, “use appropriate etiquette”, “don’t hit balls into the woods”. To emphasize that meetings should be fun they have a 19th hole. The energy and enthusiasm for the outcomes made establishing the individual commitments for accomplishing these innovations easy and smooth.

“The method for learning employed by Corporation for Positive Change really connected with our leadership team program participants. Tying in best practice meeting methods with the use of golf metaphor and familiar golf themes really worked. This approach made it easy for our team to embrace, as well as, quickly

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adopt the concepts that lead to well organized and well run meetings”, noted Todd.

Fifteen months later they are still communicating twice a month to the organization about some aspect of their meeting design. They developed an instructional PowerPoint program that includes all of the above that was shared at the 20-month point. All these actions were designed to keep the conversations alive. This PowerPoint will be used for new employee and new leadership orientation. They have successfully built it into the fabric of their organization. In addition they have planned to put golf style scorecards on the conference tables so they can track the accomplishment of the front and back nine, as well as the 19th hole. There is discussion about creating a meeting handicap to track success.

This is a great example of what is needed to successfully bring about change. All leaders had a voice and participated in the process. Through the appreciative process they developed the excitement and energy necessary to sustain the change. They were empowered and supported to make the change happen. Appreciative Inquiry is known for the energy, commitment and innovation necessary to design a desired outcome and create enduring change.

They have turned their dreaded meetings into more efficient, effective and positive experiences. They forged commitments to one another to make this happen. They are supporting the change over time. I would expect that all of this will bleed into their general culture. In addition to “solving the meeting problem” a new level of leadership teamwork was established. They “owned” this meeting issue and brought it to fruition together. I would expect that an unintended consequence of this project resulted in a more confident, more collaborative team of leaders.

“Our company initiative to improve the quality and efficiency of meetings was a tremendous success”, mentions Todd, “Not only was there an immediate and noticeable improvement in our meetings but there has been a sustained ongoing continuous refinement to our meeting approach. I credit much of this success to our participants eagerness to “take ownership” of the process. I believe this high level of commitment and buy in from our team was the result of a well constructed learning method and process.”