

ACCELERATING CHANGE THROUGH APPRECIATIVE CONVERSATIONS



"I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by conscious endeavour." - Henry David Thoreau

Appreciative Conversations

Appreciative Conversation was originally described around the same time as social analysis by Geoffrey Vickers who developed the idea out of his work in high level international commercial and diplomatic settings where value systems meet and are debated. Vickers described the way people see and value the world/a situation as an 'appreciative system' - an idea very close to what Bioss calls perspective and capability.

The essence of an appreciative conversation for Vickers is that the representatives of different value systems know they have to maintain their mutual relationship even when their values contradict each other. So for him an appreciative conversation does not aim for consensus or compromise but for continuation of the conversation. If appreciative conversation fails, ideology takes over with the restrictive and repressive powers that are released when diversity is jeopardized. In other words, the representative of the different value systems stay *with* each other in respect and working together to open their eyes and their minds to the way things are for each of them.

An appreciative conversation is an open two way dialogue between two or more people. Appreciation means to be open to the best in each other and to operate with a positive intention to learn, grow and realise potential.

A conversation that is held **with each other is appreciative**. A conversation that is conducted **at or to each other is an assumptive conversation**, i.e. assumptions are being made that either or both individuals are not aware of.

The origins of the word **conversation** as opposed to **discussion** also illustrates the fundamental shift in approach - *conversation* originates from words meaning "act of living with", "keep company with," or "turn about with", whereas *discussion* means "a shaking", "examination, investigation, judicial trial" or "smash apart". Based on this description, one can visualize a synergy that takes place when individuals in an organization engage in a conversation, resulting in the whole becoming bigger than the sum of its parts.

Conversations and Change

Mary Ann Hazen believes conversation is essential for effective organizational change - *"If we conceive of organization as many dialogues occurring simultaneously and sequentially, as polyphony, we begin to hear differences and possibilities. We discover that each voice, each person, is his or her center of any organization. And it is from each of these dynamic centers that change occurs."* She describes dialogue as a post-modern metaphor, which is a counterpoint to the bureaucratic discourse and offers ways to understand organisations as inter-subjective and constantly changing (Hazen, 1993).

John Kotter and Dan Cohn describe conversations as the key to building trust among members of a group (2002). They utilise the power of stories to illustrate their theory on how people change their organisations. To illustrate - the story provided by Roland de Vries describing the process to bring together seven armies in South Africa to form one cohesive SANDF. The beginning was difficult, but the breakthrough came with honest conversations that were started by de Vries. He describes the growing conversation between and among members of the group that resulted in the group understanding and respecting one another. I was personally a witness to such a conversation that filled me with hope and inspiration for a transformed future. The implications regarding organisational change are that if the dialogical processes are understood, they can be used to achieve a desired change effort.

Conclusion

The BioSS methodology and approach to Change Management is fundamentally based on a conversational focus as a tool to enable engagement, and not just manage resistance. It makes this step an explicit part of dealing with planned and unplanned change efforts. Behind this step, some skills are required to truly listen and accept alternate perceptions and ideas. Appreciation is one of our core principles in assisting clients to build Organisational and Individual Resilience. The Appreciative Conversations training programme offers a methodology that enables management to conduct the kind of conversations with employees that will “unleash” energy to create organisational resilience, and accelerated change.

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References:

Hazen, Mary Ann. 1993. Towards Polyphonic Organization. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, Vol. 6, No. 5, pp 15 –16.

Kotter, John P. and Cohen, Dan S. 2002. *The Heart of Change Real Life Stories of How People Change Their Organizations*. John P. Kotter and Deloitte Consulting, LLC, USA

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