

# Chapter 10

## INITIATING CULTURE CHANGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Robert L. Head, RODP

Benedictine University

Michele M. Young, Ph.D.

Benedictine University

### Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to describe an attempt to initiate culture change in the faculty of Benedictine University utilizing Appreciative Inquiry as the intervention. The traditional academic culture, dating back to the medieval period, is ill-equipped to respond to the public's demand for change and increasing accountability. The fragmentation and alienation which persists in the academy cries for the development of shared purpose and common values if it is to survive. Appreciative Inquiry is designed to articulate and affirm the positive values of an organization. This paper presents a summary of the process utilized, the outcomes of the intervention and the learnings we derived from this experience.*

### The State of Higher Education

Higher education is in trouble. This sentiment can be heard both without and within the academy today. Whether the focus is the relationship between cost and value, curricular inclusiveness or increasing competition from without, or shrinking resources and balancing priorities from within, change is required and, in fact, long

overdue. The demand for change in higher education has taken many faces, including cost-cutting, outsourcing, business partnerships, faculty retrenchment and curricular redesign, among others.

In 1971, Sanford observed "We find in our institutions of higher learning widespread unhappiness and cynicism." (p. 357). This view was echoed by Jensen (1995) 24 years later when he speaks of the disaffection and cynicism pervasive in our colleges and universities. In a recent research project, Wilger and Massy (1996) interviewed faculty at 20 higher educational institutions. They found the prevailing theme to be one of atomization and fragmentation.

These findings, and others like them, illustrate that the current academic culture is not providing an environment in which faculty can find meaning and fulfillment in their work. The resultant bitterness can sound a death-knell to an organization besieged on all sides.

If the culture of an organization is the sum of the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of its people, cultural change can only be accomplished by impacting those variables. Cultural assessment and change has long been housed in the discipline of organization development. However, organization development rarely has been utilized in colleges and universities (Boyer and Crockett, 1973).

One possible explanation for this is that the academic culture, with its foundations in rational thought and dialogue, is ill-suited to the feeling and relationship focus of OD. Or, it may be that the autonomy so strongly defended by faculty prevents the collaboration needed to engage in organizational change. A third explanation may be that colleges and universities rarely invest the financial resources necessary to engage in a system-wide OD effort (Bergquist, 1992).

The traditional academic culture is grounded in philosophy, ritual and practice that can be traced back for hundreds of years. In this culture, loyalty to the discipline transcends commitment to the institution. Tradition and custom serve as the bedrock of the professorial identity (Freedman, 1979). Subcultures confuse the issue further, as faculty can be divided by discipline, level of development (Freedman, 1979) and educational philosophy (Bergquist, 1992).

The resistance and complexity generated by these realities requires any OD effort to utilize processes designed to gain the faculty's active support and involvement for experimenting and modeling new behaviors (Boyers, 1973). Since it is anathema to faculty for anything to be imposed from without, the process of change must generate from the voice of the faculty. An OD intervention which seems uniquely designed to fit the academy is Appreciative Inquiry.

## Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI), developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva, "is a philosophy, it's a methodology for working with organizations, and it's an

intervention theory," (Cooperrider, cited in Gotches and Ludema, 1995). The theory of AI is grounded in five principles (Cooperrider, 1994):

1. **Constructionist Principle.** Our capacity for imagination and creation of images of the future allows for human systems (including organizations) to be altered or reconstructed.
2. **Simultaneity Principle.** Seeds of change are planted in the first question asked. Therefore, inquiry and intervention are interrelated and simultaneous.
3. **Poetic Principle.** Organizations are like an open book or poetry. They are open to multiple interpretations and conclusions.
4. **Anticipatory Principle.** An image of the future precedes the actual change.
5. **Positive Principle.** The more positive the question, the more positive the data. The more positive the willingness to participate, the more lasting the change process.

Unlike traditional problem-solving which seeks to identify and analyze problems in systems and relationships, AI seeks to appreciate and dream about their possibilities. Where problem-solving views organizations as a series of problems to be solved, AI looks at organizations as mysteries to be embraced. The Appreciative Inquiry model is constructed in four phases (Cooperrider, 1996):

1. **Discovery.** Determining what it is about an organization that should be appreciated and valued. What gives life to the organization? What in the organization is exceptional?
2. **Destiny.** What we learn in the process of inquiry should lead to sustainable change and growth.
3. **Dream.** Envisioning possibilities for the organization's future. What might be?
4. **Design.** What is the ideal? What is the human potential of organizational life?

Cooperrider (cited in Gotches and Ludema, 1995) states, "AI is a deliberate attempt to look at what gives life to organizations, and use the power of positive questioning to develop a data base out of which we can envision more provocative and positive futures" (p. 7). Barrett (1995) describes the appreciative process as a combination of emotional and cognitive energy which creates a positive image of the future and uncovers the core values of an organization.

There is a growing body of research to indicate that core values lead to organizational effectiveness. Collins (1995) reported on a study of exceptional organizations in the corporate arena. Those firms included Hewlett-Packard, 3M, Disney, Marriott and Motorola, among others. The firms had an average age of nearly 100 years, and combined they outperformed the stock market 15-1 since 1926. The key finding of the research was that these firms, all high-performing organizations,

were "guided more by a core ideology—core values and a sense of purpose—than comparison organizations." (p. 84).

Schroeder, Brief and Guzzo (1996) identify two factors that are important in creating sustainable organizational change. The first is changing what members of the organization believe, while the second refers to the degree to which members understand what the organization values. We contend that mutual trust is an outcome of the convergence of these factors. Allowing Benedictine University to identify and commonly agree upon its core values would generate the framework for a shared purpose. This shared commitment will assist the institution in building an environment of trust and fostering constructive responses to change (Policy Perspectives, 1996).

## The Change Process

Early in the summer of 1996, key administrators of Benedictine University engaged in a process of updating the 1994 strategic plan which formulated initiatives designed to increase the competitive advantage of the institution. One of these initiatives was related to academic culture. There was tacit agreement that a culture change was integral to any effective improvement in the institution's functioning. Therefore, an initiative related to culture was included in the document. It stated: "Establish a long-term strategy that will address issues that negatively affect morale in an attempt to develop higher levels of trust, cooperation, team-building, and community across the campus."

While no formal assessment of culture had been conducted, substantial anecdotal evidence existed to validate a less than desirable culture and a need for a second-order change. To add validity to these impressions, a content analysis was conducted of the minutes of faculty meetings and memos generated through the previous two years. The results of the content analysis lent support to the initial diagnosis.

Generally, the culture could be characterized as one of fragmentation and mistrust. The lack of trust manifested itself in increasingly intense discussions around governance and participation. Also prevalent was a language of separation and perceived hierarchy between employee groups.

An initial tactical decision was to engage senior members of the faculty who shared in the desire to improve the culture at Benedictine University. The first outcome from this planning group's discourse was to target the fall opening faculty meeting for initiating dialogue around culture. The opening faculty meeting was selected for two important reasons:

1. It brought together all returning and new faculty, who tend to be energized with the prospects of a new year. The hope was to capitalize on the high

**TABLE 1. The Benedictine Core Values**

<b>Learning Community</b>	A community in which education is the central value where both the sharing and discovery of knowledge are valued and rewarded.
<b>Benedictine Community</b>	A community which shares the values reflected in the "Rule of St. Benedict." A community which seeks to integrate the growth of the mind, body and spirit in every member, while calling each one to discover the presence of God in their own unique life circumstances. A community which strives for openness to the process of change and growth within the context of faithful commitment to the stewardship of God's gifts.
<b>Human Community</b>	A community where diversity is sought and appreciated; where all members of the community are treated fairly in a supportive manner, and provided with the opportunity for meaningful growth and development. A community in which social justice is understood as a driving value which is taught, lived and modeled by members of the community.
<b>Open Community</b>	A community in which differences are dealt with in an open, constructive and appreciative manner free from the fear of retribution; a community which recognizes its relationship to the external community of which it is an integral part; is sensitive to and appropriately responsive in fulfilling its responsibility to that larger community.
<b>Effective Community</b>	A community in which each member is working toward explicit objectives and valued for their contribution to the mission of the school; a community in which each member internalizes a responsibility for, and is accountable for the most effective use of the organization's resources.
<b>Celebrative Community</b>	A community where the achievements and accomplishments of the members are recognized and celebrated by all; one in which rituals affirming both tradition and change are widely shared.

energy level and positive outlook and to create a collaborative roadmap for change.

2. The meeting had traditionally been used to establish a theme and priorities for the year. Symbolically, it was important that a dialogue on culture occur at this meeting of the full faculty and with visible participation and support of the administration, most notably the president. After considerable discussion, the second outcome of the planning group's efforts was the selection of AI as

the appropriate intervention. The institution had some experience with AI but, to date, had not utilized it to engage the faculty.

The final choice of AI as the appropriate intervention for an academic environment was based on the following:

1. It requires a high level of participation that is not always realized in a traditional problem-solving intervention where there is an exploration of a problem (and, inherently, an identification of cause/blame).
2. It pursues a spirited, intellectual pursuit of an ideal, which is congruent with an academician's pursuit of understanding and truth.
3. Its principles are grounded in the research of Maslow, Lewin, and Gergen (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987).

Formatting the Appreciative inquiry intervention was the next task of the planning group. Should we utilize a Search Conference method capturing the energies of the entire faculty simultaneously? Would we have "trained" facilitators interview each faculty member? These are some of the questions with which we wrestled. Given the AI principle of simultaneity, the idea that inquiry and intervention occur together, we chose to have one faculty member interview another. Following the interview, the two individuals would switch roles.

The next task was to develop the AI protocol. A traditional AI model served as the framework covering concepts such as:

- organization and affiliation
- organization and personal high points
- visioning/common purpose
- collaborative processes/cooperation
- commitment/empowerment

Another tactical decision was to enlist a senior faculty member, also a member of the planning group, to deliver a brief explanation of AI, the purpose of the inquiry, and specific instructions. This introduction, delivered by a respected natural scientist who had become an enthusiastic supporter of AI's possibilities, was critical to engage the faculty in this intervention.

Of the 86 faculty present, all but one participated in the interview process. Interviews were alive with stories of Benedictine University's strengths which included its students, academic purpose, the diversity and dedication of its people, and the fundamental grounding in the traditions of its Benedictine heritage. For illustration, one comment is included here:

One of my most satisfying experiences at Benedictine University was working with science faculty from several disciplines to create a successful grant proposal. A novel feature of the proposal was the creation of an interdisciplinary laboratory course intended for all entering science majors. In doing so, faculty members from Biology, Chemistry, and Physics

were able to put aside partisan interests and to transcend the traditional discipline boundaries. The Howard Hughes Medical Institute awarded this proposal \$600,000.

The themes and stories that emerged from the interviews were shaped by a volunteer group of faculty into a set of Core Values (Table 1).

## Conclusion

Although the adoption of the Benedictine University Core Values, which developed through this intervention and the entire organizational development process, is far from complete, the use of AI in our institution has yielded some promising results. Our assessment of the intervention produced the following learnings:

1. The all but universal (n-1) participation in the intervention lent support to our choice of venue and the content of the protocol.
2. The speed at which we were able to capture data from all faculty proved very economical.
3. The intellectual isolation inherent in the faculty role was bridged by the partnering of faculty and the sharing of values through the interview process.
4. The focus on the positive and the possible produced an upbeat tone rarely found in faculty meetings.
5. The AI intervention produced an environment where cynicism was set aside and faculty were able to transcend the problems and celebrate the strengths of our organization.
6. The themes which were developed from the interview data do reflect a sense of shared values and a commitment to a common purpose among the faculty.
7. The themes developed by the faculty were very similar to those developed in an AI intervention conducted previously with administrators and staff.

In the months that followed the AI intervention, a small group of faculty and administrators (Core Values Group) continued the work begun at the opening faculty meeting. Specific accomplishments of this group include: (1) the development of behavioral definitions for the core values; (2) the creation of a preamble to the core values document; and (3) the development of an implementation plan which will guide the incorporation of the core values into the activities and relationships of all members of the university community.

Of equal importance with the tasks accomplished during this period, the members of the Core Values Group identified several outcomes which were personal in nature. These included areas such as developing a working relationship with extremely committed members of the university community; increasing sensitivity

to the environment and culture; identifying the areas of congruency and incongruency between the historical values of the institution and current behaviors; and serving as change agents to help make informed decisions about the future of the organization.

The refinement and adoption of these Benedictine Core Values continues to be a work-in-progress for Benedictine University. However, the successful engagement of the faculty in the AI process and the resultant core values document give evidence of a culture which can once again anticipate a more vibrant future through a shared language of affirmation.

## References

- Austin, S. (1990). Assessing academic climates and cultures. In W. Tierney (Ed.), *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 61–74. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Barrett, F. (1995). Creating appreciative learning cultures. *Organizational Dynamics*, 24, 36–49.
- Berquist, W. (1992). *The Four Cultures of the Academy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Boyer, R. and Crockett, C. (1973). OD in higher education: Introduction. *Journal of Higher Education*, 44, 339–351.
- Collins, J. (1995). Building companies to last. *Inc.* 17, 83–86.
- Cooperrider, D. (1994). *A Constructive Approach to Organization Development*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Cooperrider, D. (1996). *Appreciative Inquiry Manual*. Unpublished manuscript. Case Western Reserve University.
- Cooperrider, D. and Srivastva, S. (1987). Appreciative Inquiry in organizational life. In W. Pasmore and R. Woodman (Eds.) *Research in Organizational Change and Development*. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Freedman, M. (with Brown, W., Ralph, N., Shukraft, R., Bloom, J., and Sanford, N.) (1979). *Academic Culture and Faculty Development*. Berkeley, CA: Montaigne.
- Gotches, G. and Ludema, J. (1995). An interview with David Cooperrider on AI and the future of organization development. *OD Journal*, 13, 5–13.
- Jensen, E. (1995). The bitter groves of academe. *Change*, Jan-Feb, 8–11.
- Sanford, J. (1971). Academic culture and the teacher's development. *Sounding*, Winter, 357–371.
- Schneider, B., Brief, A., and Guzzo, R. (1996). Creating a climate and culture for sustainable organizational change. *Organizational Dynamics*, Spring, 7–19.

Shared Purposes. (1996). *Policy Perspectives*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Institute for Research on Higher Education.

Wilger, A. and Massy, W. (1993). Prospects for restructuring: A sampling of the faculty climate. *Policy Perspectives*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Institute for Research on Higher Education.