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Using Appreciative Inquiry as a Tool for Revitalizing Community Organisations: A Case Study of WISALTS Inc

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Abstract: WISALTS Inc. is one of the oldest Environmental Community Organisations (ECOs) active in Western Australia (WA). The organisation has been tackling the issue of land degradation in the agricultural areas since 1978. However, declining membership as well as the departure of key leaders has cast uncertainty over its future. It has been argued that the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach has the potential to induce sustainable transformative change within organisations. Grounded in the theory of social constructionism, AI is a different approach to organisational development; one that focuses on past strengths and successes rather than the weaknesses and failures. In this context, this paper discusses the principles and processes of AI and explores its use in supporting a lifespan change process within WISALTS Inc., as a case study.

Keywords: Appreciative Inquiry, Environmental Community Organisations, Change Processes

Introduction

IN THIS PAPER we have used Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a tool to assist members of a community based organisation to explore possibilities for the future by learning from the past in the context of a need for revitalisation. The aim in this paper is to report the preliminary findings of the pilot survey of the organisational leaders using an AI approach. Firstly, the paper introduces the history, principles and processes of AI. Secondly, a brief background of the organisation is provided, followed by the method used in the study and the results and discussion are presented. Finally, the paper concludes with the discussion on potential application of AI within WISALTS and beyond.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

AI is a compound term incorporating two key concepts; “appreciative” and “inquiry”. Watkins and Mohr (2001) suggest that “appreciative” comes from the idea that when something increases in value it ‘appreciates’ and “inquiry” means the process of seeking to understand through asking questions. It is in this context that Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) refer to AI as the study and exploration of “what gives life to human systems when they function at their best” (p.1). This approach to personal change and organizational change is based on the assumption that questions and dialogue about strengths, successes, values, hopes, and dreams are themselves transformational. AI can be succinctly characterised as a practice of strengthening and sustaining organisational capacity by posing questions that identify the past successes and enables relevant stakeholders to contribute towards organisational vision.

History of AI

AI in its early form emerged during the early eighties when the potential of positive organisational analysis in transforming the ways organisations go about their business started to become apparent. Researchers from Case Western Reserve University in Ohio, David Cooperrider and his supervisor, Suresh Srivastava had undertaken an organisational change project at the Cleveland Clinic. They found that the more clinic staff discovered the problems, the more disheartened they became, and more they ended up blaming each other for the problems. Consequently, Cooperrider and Srivastava adopted Schweitzer's (1969) teaching of 'reverence of life' and focused on learning and discovering *inquiry* instead of *intervention* as a new organisational analysis framework. When applied in the context of the Clinic, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) helped the researchers to focus on the factors that influenced effective functioning of the Clinic. The output of the research was such that it immediately facilitated cooperation amongst staff and enhanced the Clinic's performance outputs (Watkins and Mohr 2001). Since then the practice of AI has been applied to promote transformation in a variety of organisations including large corporations, NGOs as well as community based organisations (Watkins and Mohr 2001; Finegold et al. 2002; Vuuren and Crous 2005; Akdere 2005).

Principles of AI

Grounded in the theory of social constructionism, AI is a different approach to organisational development; one that focuses on past strengths and successes rather than the weaknesses and failures. AI represents departure from a traditional problem-solving approach which postulates that any given organisation is full of problems that necessitates intervention and instead assumes that an organisation is a mystery to be embraced (Hammond 1996). AI is also geared towards premeditated transformation of the organisation based on identifying what has worked in the past and what is working at the present. AI therefore makes deliberate affirmative assumptions about relationships within and between organisations (Reason and Bradbury 2001) based on several core principles (summarised in Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of Five Principles of AI

Principles	Premises
1. The Anticipatory Principle	Organisations evolve in the direction of their collective imagination and compelling image of the future
2. The Constructionist Principle	Organisations are dynamic systems that can be effective through social interaction and communication
3. The Poetic Principle	Organisations are like open books and they have a choice to seek and learn either what has worked well or what has gone wrong
4. The Positive Principle	Positive questions create the impetus and energy for organisational change
5. The Simultaneity Principle	Inquiry is intervention. Organisational transformation begins at the moment questions are asked and the questions asked determine the desired change
(Adopted from: Watkins and Mohr 2001; Finegold et al. 2002; Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2003)	

AI Process

The AI process is built around creating an atmosphere for opportunity-centred organisational change based on a model known as the 4-D cycle: Discover, Dream, Design and Deliver phases.

The core purpose of the *discovery* phase is to appreciate the best of ‘what is’ by focusing on what did work within an organisation. In this phase, the organisation’s stakeholders share stories of accomplishments and deliberate on the aspects of organisation’s history that they value the most. The primary aim of *dream* is to envisage ‘what can be’ by discussing the preferred future. In this phase, organisation’s stakeholders engage in meaningful conversations about the better outlook of an organisation. The main goal of *design* is to co-construct mechanisms to articulate the dream. In this phase, organisation’s stakeholders collectively propose and choose action plans to fulfil the dream. The core purpose of *deliver* is to allocate specific responsibilities to individuals or teams within an organisation to implement action plans designed earlier. In this phase, organisation’s stakeholders express commitment to achieve what has been envisioned. The phases of 4-D cycle are concisely illustrated in Figure 1.

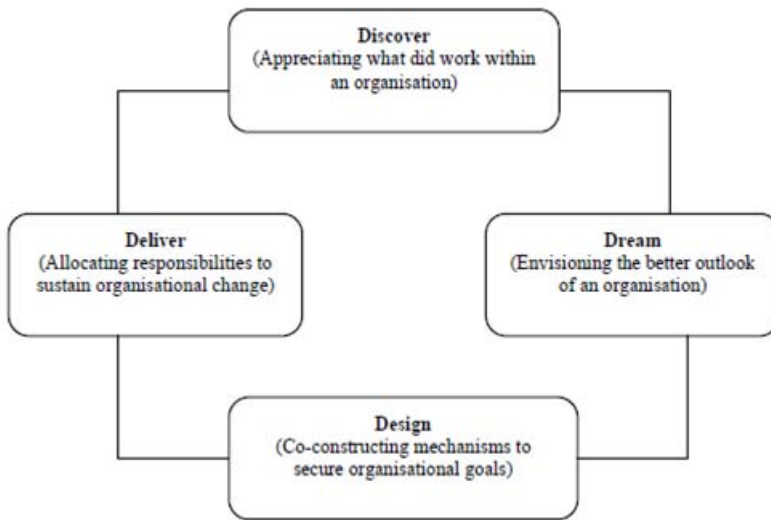


Figure 1: The Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle (Adopted from Watkins and Mohr 2001)

AI as a Research Process

The potential of AI as a method to induce transformative changes has increasingly been accepted as an effective organisational development strategy. Whitney (2004) described the implications of using AI as a method to transform organisations and the people in organisations as when engaged with AI, “organisations change, people change, their relationships to one another change, and more importantly, their way of being in the world changes” (p. 144). It is in this context, that the practice of AI has emerged as an area of interest to practitioners, policy-makers and academic researchers and to all those with an enthusiasm for enabling community organisations.

AI as a research tool has been utilised by academics as well as practitioners. For instance, Michael (2005) explored the promise of AI as an interview tool for her field research and reported that it played a key role in achieving successful research outcomes when compared to unsuccessful field interviews in the past without using AI. Bushe (1998) and Hart et al. (2008) describe the benefits of utilising AI as a method accrues from formal or informal conversations between people within organisations. When conversations are guided by affirmative questions, it can help to generate new insights and awareness about the organisational circumstances and outlook. Bushe (1998) also suggests that AI as a method is more likely to yield desired transformative change when a given organisation is in a social process ‘rut’ and organisational stakeholders are willing to put some energy into changing the situation. If there is an issue of frustration and misdirected energy within an organisation, (WISALTS Inc. in the case in this paper) AI certainly presents an opportunity to recall times that organisational stakeholders have felt most motivated and energized. AI as a method was therefore deemed appropriate for assessing a lifespan change process within an organisation

such as WISALTS as a substitute to the problem-oriented approach to analysing organisational prospects.

Setting the Scene

WISALTS Inc. (Whittington Interceptor Sustainable Agriculture Land Treatment Society) was founded in 1978 by a group of Western Australian Wheatbelt farmers. The organisation was set up to build on the success of Brookton farmer, Harry Whittington in developing an interceptor bank system to deal with waterlogged and saline land and returning it to productivity. Whittington designed the interceptor banks to counter erosion and evidence of increasing salinity following a long period of practical research into the hydrology occurring on his farm, Springhill from the time he took it over from his father in the late 1940s (Paulin 2002; Whittington 1975). He communicated his findings to other farmers and the Western Australian Department of Agriculture through field days, talks and newspaper articles. As a result, many farmers took up the Whittington interceptor bank technology on their own farms. The society formed by Richards, Mills and others at Quaraiding (a shire in WA) in 1978 formalised the membership and enabled more consistency in transmitting information and training to a wider audience. At its height, WISALTS had some 1200 members and installation of the technology in a variety of settings brought more innovation with regard to adaptation to higher rainfall events, varying topography and different soils as well as better controlling surface and sub surface water through sealing the banks with plastic sheeting. In its early years, the Society had several local sub-groups and ran training schools for “WISALTS consultants” who were then licensed by the society as qualified to plan and implement the technology (Paulin 2002).

More than three decades later, WISALTS continues to be a farmer lead organisation which has survived antipathy from government agencies due to disagreements about the efficacy of the technology, the death of their charismatic leader and a diminishing membership base (currently 50). With an aging membership, WISALTS is currently considering how best to deliver their message, to make it relevant to a new breed of farmers and expand their membership base in the future. In recent years, annual field days have drawn small attendances (mainly existing members) and public outreach activities have been limited to hosting information booths at regional agricultural shows. Some interest in the technology has occurred as a result of these activities but further broad take up is limited by historical critique of the process. In fact, it has been suggested that it is through the members’ active belief in the technology, which has been proved effective in many landscapes and an obstinate desire to prove the naysayers wrong that WISALTS has survived till now (Paulin 2002).

This attitude of continuing to promote their technology despite the difficulties has meant the organisation continues to exist and individual members still champion the technology. However, it has also created an inherent scepticism amongst members of reactions to WISALTS activities by government agencies and others who know about the history but who may not have on-ground experience or knowledge of how the technology actually operates. Efforts have been made over recent years to turn around the negative dialogue amongst members and to promote possibilities rather than prejudging reactions. This has had some benefits in terms of instigating new conversations with some in the farming bureaucracy and recognition by the WA Farmers Federation that alternative technologies such as WISALTS offers should be considered as options when considering new directives or policies (WISALTS

Minutes 2010). The wider issue has also been discussed at a federal level and a recent senate committee inquiry recommended that “the Australian Government, as part of its ongoing strategy development to issues affecting agriculture and climate change, develop a strategy to capture, evaluate and disseminate the range of farmer driven innovations that have a significant capacity to increase the resilience and productivity of farm enterprises” (Commonwealth of Australia 2010.57 Recommendation 10).

Method: A Descriptive Case Study

Based on Yin (1984), descriptive case study as a research method can be described as an empirical investigation of a contemporary organisational experience within its real-life context (p. 23). Case study is particularly useful in understanding an organisational phenomenon because the case study method is open to the use of theory or conceptual categories that guide the research and analysis of data (Meyer 2001). Consequently, in order to build a case study, interview questions were framed according to the AI 4-D cycle (Table 2).

Table 2: Interview Questions

<i>Re-discovering success</i>
1. Can you provide an account of a brief history of your organisation, its instrumental leaders and the key outcomes that you are particularly proud of?
<i>Re-calling dreams</i>
2. What sort of organisational visions or missions inspired you to be involved in this organisation to begin with, and why?
<i>Re-visiting designs</i>
3. Were there any specific action plans or priorities of your organisation that you thought, oh ok, this might work and ended up working?
<i>Re-examining deliveries</i>
4. What have been some of the noteworthy commitments of the leaders/members/volunteers that have substantially helped the organisation to keep going?
<i>Re-inventing the leadership</i>
5. If your organisation is to be run under a new team that wanted to learn from your positive experiences, what would be some of your key suggestions to the new team?

To explore the possibilities of using AI with WISALTS Inc., we piloted a small appreciative inquiry based survey with four women leaders holding key positions in the organisation to develop a case study and explore the possibility of using AI to support a lifespan change process within WISALTS Inc. The survey was administered between August and December 2010 and individual respondents were identified by a number when analysing the results.

Results and Discussion

Leadership Attributes

All four of the respondents were aged between 51 and 70 years of age. As indicated in Table 2, three out of four responding leaders possessed Bachelors level education or higher. On average the four respondents have been affiliated with the organisation for 13 years. Two of the responding leaders were also involved in other voluntary organisations, and were either employed or had their own businesses.

Table 2: Attributes of the Leaders Interviewed

Attributes	Leader 1	Leader 2	Leader 3	Leader 4
1. Current position	Treasurer	Committee Member	Committee Member	Secretary
2. Duration of affiliation	5 years	33 years	10 years	5 years
3. Involved in other voluntary organisations	No	Yes	No	Yes
4. Employment status	Self employed	Self employed	Employed full time	Self employed
5. Age organisation	61-70	61-70	51-60	51-60
6. Education	Bachelors	Bachelors	Postgraduate	TAFE

4-D Cycle Analysis

Discover

Cooperrider (1990) suggested that the premise behind discovery analysis is that leaders enact assumptions and images into the reality of organisation. The first interview question addressed this assumption in order for the leaders to rediscover what worked in the organisation. Leader 1 recalled that WISALT's outstanding achievement in the 1970s and 1980s was attracting broad farmer interest and the organisational ability to educate farmers about the principle behind the interceptor bank system and demonstrating that salinity control was possible. Not surprisingly, leader 2 stated that 'I am proud and relieved that WISALTS Inc. is still there as it has the only positive answer to saline land treatment'.

Dream

Boyd and Bright (2007) suggest that dream analysis draws on the assumption that recognising the best of the past and present can be useful in maximizing the potential for visioning a better organisational future. The second interview question explored this assumption by asking leaders to recall organisational visions that inspired them. Leader 1 had witnessed the slow spreading of bare salt in the farmland which deeply eroded the paddocks. She also

learned that the innovative interceptor banks acted as small dams and slowed down water movement thereby minimising the overcoming erosion. She was then inspired to spread the benefits of the interceptor bank system which not only halted the salinity increase but also healed the land to other farmers.

Design

Past analysis of the *design* section of the inquiry process suggests that leaders are more likely to become actively engaged in organisational activities when they are involved from inception to implementation (Burke 2002). The third interview question explored this hypothesis by asking leaders to revisit specific action plans or priorities of WISALTS that ended up working well. All of the responding leaders struggled with revisiting this particular aspect of design analysis. In this context, it is interesting to note the statement made by leader 2, - 'we need to focus on what's important (in the box) as it is very easy to wander off into areas which would bring fewer results, in my opinion the organisation is doing this'. Similarly, leader 4 stated that 'members and executive members have to take ownership—read and step by step—point by point attend to action required rather than react'.

Delivery

Watkins and Bohr (2001) suggest that the delivery analysis assumes that creating a pathway to new images of the future enables the desired change and helps sustain the change. The fourth interview question explored this aspect of the delivery phase by asking leaders to re-examine some of the noteworthy commitments of the leaders and/or members that have substantially helped the organisation to keep going. Most of the leaders recalled various contributions and commitments from several key figures ranging from writing a regular WISALTS column in the agricultural press to keeping records of before and after photos to illustrate the changes that resulted over time from implementing the technology. In recent years, the legacy and contributions of WISALTS is being documented at a University library as well.

Organisational Future

Leaders were asked about the likelihood that WISALTS would keep functioning until the organisational objectives were fulfilled. Only one leader had a positive outlook, two leaders were not sure, and the fourth leader was positive but feared that the continuing impact of historical critique of the technology may hinder the organisational future. It is in this context, Leader 4 stated, 'one of the reasons that our organisation [has been] around for so long ... is because of the rejection of our sustainable farming ideas and techniques by some government agencies ... Our difficulty is that we concentrate on one specific issue and most of us involved [with the organisation] have other full-time commitments. Some of us have been thinking about ... reaching out to other organisations, especially the Landcare groups, and working in some sort of an alliance developing partnerships with them would be useful [for our organisation] to make our ideas acceptable to the wider farming community and eventually the government'.

It is clear from this response that apart from maintaining the close relationship between the organisation's leaders, WISALT's relationship with other organisations might be crucial in its' revitalisation. This sentiment about organisational relationships was stressed by all four leaders. For instance, Leader 3 stated, 'To reinvigorate [WISALTS], I believe the organisation must meet and be a part of a regional NRM body—for example the Northern Agricultural Catchment Council'

Conclusion

As the importance of community based organisations in tackling local environmental issues is being increasingly realised (Dhakal 2011, Dhakal & Lilith 2011) developing an understanding of the potential of using AI in assisting organisations like WISALTS to prosper is certainly in the broader interests of the community sector. This pilot study provided a clear understanding of the WISALTS leaders' experience and expectations about their organisation using the AI model. In general, community based environmental organisations in WA are struggling to sustain what they are doing (Dhakal & Paulin 2009). It was in this context that the potential application of AI as an agent to bring about life span changes within an organisation was deemed useful. It is clear from the findings that most leaders were proud of organisational achievements and could identify key commitments and contributions made by members or volunteers of WISALTS. However, it is also clear from the analysis based on the 4-D cycle that WISALTS needs to develop specific action plans and garner commitments from the leaders based on past successes in order to enhance the future outlook. While changes to established thinking with regard to extension (Commonwealth of Australia 2010) are small steps, they are positive with regard to future opportunities for WISALTS to promote their technology as a tool to support carbon sequestration and balancing water in the landscape. In this regard the use of the AI process to ascertain ways of working in the future based on previous success validates some of the more recent activities undertaken by WISALTS to broaden their constituency and to continue to submit responses to public inquiry processes (for example KPMG for The Minister for Water May 2010). Meanwhile, the findings reported in this paper are a reminder that attempts to transform environmental community organisations in Australia look much more sanguine with an AI lens than without it.

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