

Using Appreciative Inquiry To Promote Diversity In Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

*The topic of diversity and inclusion often evokes negative responses either spoken or unspoken. The importance of common language and promoting trust are necessary to begin dialogue. Appreciative Inquiry as a philosophy and approach began in the 1980's and was formalized as an application in organizational change. The major principles of Appreciative Inquiry have informed the philosophy of Appreciative Leadership, the relational capacity to convert creative potential and to transform it into positive power. In addition to organizational change, the core values have been applied to social issues, team building, individual relationships, and global and international affairs. Appreciative Inquiry is a strength-based process through which people act in partnership to determine and co-create how to move an organization forward. As the importance of diversity and inclusion has become better recognized, social systems have become less homogeneous in fact and in our understanding of them. The principles and core values of Appreciative Inquiry can be applied to workshops on diversity. Rather than shame and blame, a workshop such as, *Opening Doors: A Personal and Professional Journey*, is based on recognition and appreciation of the many dimensions of diversity. The focus of these educational workshops is to provide tools for engagement and the deconstruction of the paradigms that have given rise to the various oppressions. The model is a collaborative relationship with allies and those who are empowered to be advocates for positive personal change and for the good of the whole. Thus the concept of fostering inclusion in diversity includes and not limited to position, religion, gender, ethnicity, age and other invisible identities. The goals are to create a welcoming, safe, and inclusive environment for all and to give voice to those who have been silenced. The program has been delivered to universities, human service agencies, government and community organizations in the United States and internationally. Results from a small sample of participants from a major university are presented. The data represent an overall view of the effectiveness and acceptance of the program as an alternative to the traditional workshops on diversity. Subsequent activities include sharing of resources and using discretionary power to interrupt oppressive behaviors and to give voice to the voiceless.*

Keywords: Appreciative Inquiry; Social Change; Diversity

INTRODUCTION

In order to formulate solutions, there must be a common language in order to accurately name the issue, analyze its impact and then move on to improve it. Thus, efforts to open discussions on diversity and inclusion are often uncomfortable and evoke several reactions that are often negative. Those reactions range from not wanting to hear about the unfair treatment of under-represented groups to becoming defensive about having a homogeneous workforce. There is often resistance engaging conversations regarding substantive aspects of oppression and inequitable distribution of power (Johnson, 2005).

Appreciative Inquiry had its beginnings as a defined philosophy in the mid-eighties (Cooperinder and Srivastva, 1987). The traditional approach to organizational development and change focuses on the problem and strategies to fix the problem or challenge. Appreciative inquiry focuses on what is right with the organization, what is working in the organization, and how to move forward. This approach provides energy and creativity. Thus, initial questions regarding organizational development should be formatted to facilitate positive change as well as

for the greater society. Rather than beginning with the premise of ‘what is wrong’, the question should be ‘what is working’ or ‘when the organization at its best was’ (Hammond, 1998). The same approach can be used as to engage in discussions about diversity and inclusion. Looking at the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, it is important to recognize the history and its realities and at the same time to appreciate what was learned and accomplished. As Graff (2011) so eloquently stated, “America defines itself by its accomplishments. They mark our progress. For instance, we celebrate the civil rights movement today not because it was a glamorous and enjoyable time, but because it was a time when we fought to become something better, a time when we evolved because we worked at it, a time when we gave the next generation a better place to live”.

Today, we view diversity as a positive and inclusive force. We recognize the unique qualities of each individual. At the same time, we recognize that as human beings, we share similar needs such as food and shelter. We also share wants such as being loved and appreciated. We share culture and experiences with some groups of people. As a result, we have connections to specific identity groups (Miller and Katz, 2002). As we seek to embrace diversity and inclusion both as a personal goal and one for organizational development, the goal is to put together a set of strategies that allow sharing the vision, educating managers and leaders, leadership reorganization and building a mass of change agents (Miller and Katz, 2002). The process of creating a clear vision of success and the willingness to work towards that vision embraces the tenets of Appreciative Inquiry and its evolution to Appreciative Leadership. Appreciative Leadership creates an environment that is inviting of all the relevant voices of people and groups to engage in the conversation (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, Rader, 2010).

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AND APPRECIATIVE LEADERSHIP TO PROMOTE DIVERSITY

Appreciative Inquiry has been suggested as a viable alternative strategy to implement and manage diversity within organizations. Appreciative Inquiry is grounded in organizational development theory and practice for the development and implementation of successful diversity initiatives (Easley, 2002). Appreciative Inquiry includes a structural method of inquiry allowing individuals to be inspired and mobilized to progress on a pathway to sustain human systems change. The approach seeks to enhance the core values of organizations and those who make up organizations to think beyond the boundaries of external differences (Cooperinder and Srivastva, 1987; Thatchenkery, 1996). According to (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, Radar, 2010) the five core strategies are Inquiry – leading with positive and powerful questions; Illumination – bringing out the best in people and situations; Inclusion – engaging people to co-create future; Inspiration – awakening the creative spirit and finally, Integrity – making choices for good of the whole.

Traditional diversity training programs are ineffective for obtaining and sustaining organizational diversity and diversity management (Hayes and Russell, 1997). The literature supports the concept of positioning the organization to attract and retain the best talent, enhance problem solving, and facilitate creativity (Cox, 1994; Brief, Buttram, Reizenston, et al, 1997). In higher education, traditional diversity initiatives are often limited to include the recruitment of a more diverse student body or hiring a more diverse workforce. In institutions of higher learning, the focus is on hiring faculty. In order to survive and succeed, organizations must go beyond the traditional. The old standard or quick fix may not be comprehensive enough to drive the change necessary for long term success (Loden, 1996).

As the importance of diversity and inclusion has become better recognized, social systems have become less homogeneous in fact and in our understanding of them. The principles and core values of Appreciative Inquiry are represented in a holistic workshop on diversity. One example of this type of workshop is *Opening Doors: A Personal and Professional Journey*, It is based on the recognition and appreciation of the many dimensions of diversity and explores multiple group identities to build a collective vision for partnership and collaboration for the good of the whole. The workshop also focuses on providing tools for engagement to deconstruct the paradigms that have given rise to the various forms of oppression.

The historic beginnings of the *Opening Doors* workshop began with the Cornell Migrant Program, a statewide project based in the Department of Human Development at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, USA. The recognition of disparity, difference, and power fueled the resultant racism and classism toward the farm workers. In 1992, Kathleen Castania, who had been employed in the program, planned and with Betty Garcia-

Mathewson co-facilitated the first Opening Doors workshop for staff in the New York state outreach system. The Curriculum was developed using a collective theoretical framework from many social scientists. Over 1700 participants from 37 national and international groups including government and community development organizations, universities, and school district agencies have attended since 1992.

Through this workshop participants explore a framework that deepens personal diversity awareness and enhances the ability to envision and create inclusive organizations. The participants are expected to:

- Increase understanding of diversity by identifying and learning more about personal identity groups;
- Identify personal feelings and experiences related to cultural and other differences among people;
- Examine how practices of institutions, as well as personal practices, maintain inequalities among people and prevent us from reaching full potential;
- Develop a framework and common language in order to facilitate change collectively;
- Identify practical strategies for implementing and supporting change;
- Build alliances and networks.

Table 1: Compares the basic tenets of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperinder and Srivastva (1987) and Opening Doors

Appreciative Inquiry	Opening Doors
Best of “What is”	Acknowledge & appreciate self & others
Ideals of “What might be”	Active listening
Consent of “What should be”	Envision & empowerment
Experiencing “What can be”	Model the behavior

The *best of “what is”* is grounded in observation. Its corollary in the workshop begins each day with reflection and for those who wish to speak, provides an opportunity for participants to acknowledge some new insight gained or revelation or the appreciation of something that someone said or did. The *ideal of “what might be”* addresses the vision. Active listening is practiced through exercises such as ‘pairing’ where one person speaks and the other listens. This process is neither a dialogue nor a conversation. The group develops working agreements by which all members can agree to abide and to be accountable. As the workshop goes forward, participants are open to greater vision.

The *Consent of “what should be”* is based on collaborative dialogue and choice. The workshop allows for the co-creation of what true partnership and collaboration would look like in a world not dominated by power and privilege. Opening Doors participants practice how to identify allies from those groups with power and how to give voice to the voiceless. The workshop provides confidentiality, respect and trust creating a safe space for those who have been victims to move towards empowerment.

Finally, *Consent of “What can be”* seeks knowledgeable action and collective experimentation. In a workshop using this paradigm, facilitators model the behavior of collaboration and partnership. Discussions include the use of discretionary power within the organization and society. The participants create lists of allied behaviors and practices to use as tools to effectively interrupt oppressive behaviors when such are observed. The workshop ends with final appreciations and a means to go forward.

Another cadre of facilitators has been trained to deliver the program to administrators, faculty, other professionals, graduate students and staff at universities. The basic curriculum is the same with slight modifications made to adjust to specific audiences. Results from a small sample from a major university have been compiled from questions asked in the evaluations. The sample presented is a reflection of the body of responses from participants across the United States. Participants in this cadre (n=37) were asked to circle from 1 – 5 with 1 being the lowest and 5 as very high:

1. The degree to which you were invited to create a welcoming, safe & trustful environment to explore identities;
2. The degree to which you created a framework and common language to interpret cultural differences, power and behavior of others;
3. The degree to which you increased your understanding of diversity by identifying and learning about your own identity groups;
4. The degree to which you increased your understanding of diversity by increasing your awareness of other identity groups;
5. The degree to which your understanding of institutional practices that prevent us from reaching our potential;
6. The degree to which you increased your understanding of our individual practices that maintain inequalities and prevent us from reaching our own potential.
7. Scale of 1 (lowest) – 10 (highest): The number which best indicates your feelings about this workshop.

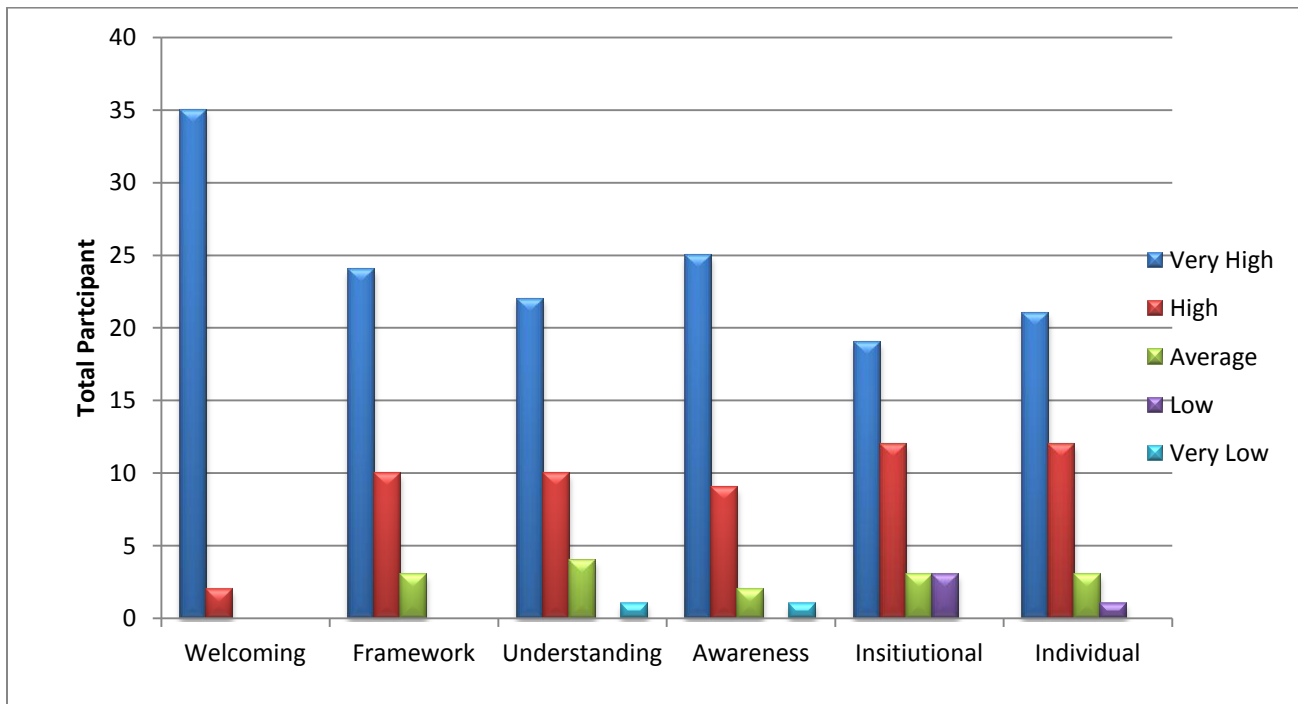


Figure 1 Summary of evaluation scores from participants from Michigan State University for questions 1 – 6. n=37

Table 2: presents the overall opinion of the workshop for question 7. n=37

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	8.5	9	10	No Answer
	Very Poor				Average	Average	Average				Excellent	
n=37						2	1	7	1	7	18	1

CONCLUSION

The importance of a common language and trust is the basis of an effective workshop to begin conversations about diversity. Traditional workshops, whether presented to corporations or institutions of higher learning, or government agencies often focus on one to few dimensions of diversity. The core values of Appreciative Inquiry and Appreciative Leadership are mirrored in an example of a holistic workshop, Opening Doors: A Personal and Professional Journey. The strengths of both approaches are the recognition and the appreciation of differences while honoring commonalities and memberships to different groups. As with

Appreciative Inquiry, this workshop and others using a similar model, focus on the building of connections and relationships and trust to assure the inclusion of all relevant voices to engage in co-creating a vision for organizational change.

Subsequent gatherings, of former participants generate the sharing of resources and discussions regarding an increased awareness and appreciation of colleagues, students, faculty and administration within the university system and organizations in general.

Combining Appreciative Inquiry and Appreciative Leadership with effective professional development results not only in personal growth; it is also a sustainable method that allows us to continue on the journey of promoting a welcoming and inclusive environment for the common good. (Brief, etal 1997).

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Brenda Alston-Mills serves as the Associate Dean and Director for the Office of Organization and Professional Development for Diversity and Pluralism, College of Agriculture and Natural Resources at Michigan State University. She lectures and has published on the topic of underrepresented groups and women in science. While previously serving at North Carolina State University she, along with other colleagues, examined methods for implementing curriculum transformation as it relates to diversity. She holds a Ph.D. in Zoology from Michigan State University and is Professor of Animal Science. She has been recognized for her contributions to teaching, research and outreach. E-mail: alstonmi@anr.msu.edu

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