

Try Starting with the Positives for a Change, Academic Advises

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David Cooperrider says, “you can never change things by solving yesterday's problems.” Instead focusing on strengths could create conditions for innovation which would be beneficial to the company as well as society.

Managers are too prone to dwell on what's wrong, says visiting professor.

A child comes home with a school report which has two As, a B and an F. Chances are, 80 per cent of the parents' attention will be devoted to the F. The same thing happens in businesses: more attention is given to problems than successes, in a similar 80/20 ratio, says David Cooperrider, an internationally known professor of organisational behaviour at Case Western Reserve University in the US.

Cooperrider has been working with what is known as Appreciative Inquiry (AI) business theory since the 1980s. He says AI is about the search for the best in people, their organisations, and the world around them. It involves asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to anticipate, and heighten positive potential.

The management professor says he found inspiration talking to the (now late) management guru and author Peter Drucker. He asked him what leaders should be doing. "Drucker replied: 'It's easy. The task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths in ways that make our system's weaknesses irrelevant.'"

Management teams often go about organisational reviews in a "deficit based" way, argues Cooperrider.

They go in asking, almost like a medical examination: "What's wrong? Where does it hurt?"

Management has become fixated on error reduction and solving problems, says the professor. The AI theorist remembers a case study where he asked a large accountancy partnership for an organisational analysis.

They came back saying the biggest problem was they had lost touch with customers. He responded by asking why they thought he wanted them to come back with the company's problems.

"Deficit analysis is about control and specialised separations. Appreciative Inquiry is about innovation and strengths-based configurations of wholes. In short, creating is different than solving."

The head of a large US telephone company, which had 2000 measurements for things that went wrong, asked Cooperrider to help with some positive psychology. Cooperrider suggested that adding just one strength-based question would change his corporate culture.

If a positive approach is taken at the outset a whole different debate ensues, argues Cooperrider.

"Rather than spending hundreds of thousands on another low morale study, let's study moments of courageous risk taking. I find that the power of that work is incredible."

Cooperrider, who has worked as an adviser to a variety of organisations including Boeing, McKinsey and Walmart, recently ran a workshop in New Zealand for 40 business leaders from corporates, government departments and top law firms.

Cooperrider says those senior executives wanted to create conditions for innovation not just among their staff but in society and government.

"There was a real recognition that the economy was so dependent on innovation, that it was going to require a whole new management [approach]," he says.

"I think the whole idea of working across borders of all kinds ... is a very important theme."

Some of those New Zealand organisations are now using Cooperrider's Appreciative Inquiry summit methodology. This is where the leadership team brings together a wide group of internal and external stakeholders to help come up with new ideas.

"The New Zealand people were really excited," says Cooperrider.

"People came away with major projects that they are designing. One is to use AI strength-based model to design a summit for NZ trade relations with China. This is an example of the kind of

thinking that can happen when you have the tools to bring whole systems together very rapidly, not pushing certain strategic agenda, and not just for dialogue, but for collaboration."

Cooperrider worked on a recent case with a logistics trucking company which, in doing its strategic planning, brought together the full gambit of their stakeholders - from truck drivers, customers, dock workers and supply chain partners, through to the CEO and the management team.

"This is the Appreciative Inquiry management model of the future: every management act is propelled by configurations of strengths," he says.

"It's a way of living that is called systems thinking - not just talking about systems thinking but living it, doing it, together."

In another example, the fast-growing US company Dealer Tire held an AI summit, inviting client representatives from BMW, Toyota, and Jaguar as well as all its own staff. "These customers made the most creative contributions and got a standing ovation at the end," says Cooperrider. Relationships grow from these meetings, he says, and make it worth the risk of being open about your business with clients.

In New Zealand, these kinds of collaborative meetings work well in companies with 50 to 300 people, says Cooperrider. "You can really get your arms around that. There's no reason to do strategic planning with six to eight people at the top."

When advising corporates, the academic teaches them to identify strengths, elevate them and then multiply them.

Cooperrider has also worked with Fairmount Minerals, a sand mining company recently named America's number one corporate citizen by the Chamber of Commerce.

A few years ago, the CEO did an Appreciative Inquiry summit bringing together environmentalists who were protesting against mining, through to lowly sand loaders and the board of directors.

Summit participants looked at the global issue of people dying from bad water. The company committed itself to designing a sand water filter priced at less than \$10 for vulnerable communities. It was a tangible solution. "People want to work for a company that has meaning and purpose," he says.

Cooperrider also works with Walmart, which is working with outside suppliers to become "co-designers" of new ideas using AI summit methods. Walmart has brought the whole cotton industry together to work on how make cotton organic instead of tainted with chemicals.

Part of the management's role here is in building a collaborative spirit, says Cooperrider.

"I've come to the conclusion you can never change things by solving yesterday's problems.

"You change things by assembling new combination of strengths and then creating fresh designs that establish the new and eclipse the old."

Gill South is an Auckland freelance writer