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Points of view

THE APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AS A WAY OF ENHANCING ORGANIZATION PERFORMANCE³

Abstract

The organizational management, organizational performance and other topics related to the concept of the organization are areas of interest for researchers, whereas our world is concerned with the way in which organizations function (as holistic systems), in order to study their behavior according to certain variables. A new research method has emerged within organizational sociology – the appreciative inquiry - which aims to pursue the 4 D phases: the discovery, the dream, the design and the destiny. The appreciative inquiry aims to co-transform the positive parts of individuals and organizations into the main features and vectors of evolution.

In this paper we aim to focus on the appreciative inquiry as a way of researching organizational behavior in order to enhance performance, in the benefit of both employees (individuals) and organizations (institutions, entities).

Keywords: *appreciative inquiry, organizations behavior, performance.*

1. Introduction

The term *appreciative inquiry* was launched by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivatsva in „Appreciative inquiry in organizational life”, a work which was published in 1987. Etymologically speaking, the *appreciative inquiry* involves, on the one hand, the inquiry, which is the action to explore or discover and the other hand, to appreciate involves valuation.

The appreciative inquiry was given several definitions, including:

- the cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations and the world around them [Cooperrider, Whitney, 1999, pp. 245-263];
- a theory and practice for approaching change from a holistic framework. Based on the belief that human systems are made and imagined by those who live and work within them, the Appreciative Inquiry leads systems to move toward the generative and creative images that reside in their most positive core – their values, visions, achievements and best practices [Watkins, Bernard, 2001, pp.,xxxi-xxxii];
- the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate and heighten positive potential [Cooperrider, et. al., 2000];
- a form of progressive discovery of what works in organizations, communities and individual experiences and also gradual development of individuals' potentialities,

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communities and organizations, in order to fulfill the objectives they set themselves [Sandu, 2009], [Ponea, Sandu, 2011, pp. 147-157].

The appreciative inquiry comprises four phases:

- discovery: the identification phase of positive stories and spreading thereof across the organization;
- dream: the phase where people describe their wishes and dreams they have about work, the motivations, labor relations they have with the other members of the organization;
- design: during this stage the system's management infrastructure is designed which is required to support the system;
- destiny / delivery: the support, maintenance, adjustment and development plans of what was projected are implemented during this stage [Sandu, 2012, pp. 139-144].

Efficiency and effectiveness in organizations is vital. For this reason the involvement of the people within organizations to discover the aspects which work well is one of the most important issues of the *appreciative inquiry*. It is a well know fact that today the access to information can make the difference between success and failure in business. For this reason, we consider appropriate to talk about the fact that through the appreciative inquiry the chances that an organization becomes increasingly strong and provide to the beneficiaries of its services reliability can increase. Quoting Bushe, Cojocaru, D., stresses that the appreciative inquiry is an intervention in three stages, namely:

- the appreciative discovery;
- the appreciative understanding;
- the appreciative amplification [Bushe apud. Cojocaru, 2003, pp. 203-207].

2. The organizations as social systems

Innovations in the new technologies are part of everyday life. The new technologies aim to increase the efficiency and effectiveness in organizations in order to be more competitive in the market, to provide prompt responses to customer needs, an so on.

Behind every organization there is, of course, a team of people who aim to ensure its smooth running, to provide reliability and to provide sustainability in time in exchange of material benefits. Since providing a unanimously accepted definition for the word organization is difficult, especially in our society, we believe it is the sum of individuals and resources that seek to achieve a goal. From the sociological point of view, the organization is a social entity, consciously coordinated with identifiable boundaries that operate on a continuous basis to achieve a common goal and whose members are aware of [Robbins et. al., 1987, p. 5] or complex social structures that have inputs and outputs of different types and different ways to turn the first one into the last ones [Furnham, 1997, pp. 6-7]. Because organizations are considered to be systems, we believe it is appropriate to emphasize that the system is a set of elements that experiences interaction relationships [French, Bell, 1999, p. 87]. As we previously stated, within organizations there are individuals sharing a common goal; most of the times this goal is, on the other hand the organization's survival through time, and on the other hand the financial capital and reliability capital [Trifu, Terec-Vlad, 2013, pp. 48-50].

3. The performance of an organization – as a final use of the appreciative inquiry

As we have seen, the sociological method proposed to determine the quality of the organization members and the relationships between them to determine the functional structure of that entity is based fundamentally on the issue of personal, subjective view of the psychology and personality of each member of the organization.

The art and skill of organizational management is to succeed to perceive from the discussions, opinions, and even predictions of these members, the direction that is being investigated and the direction where it heads the transformer vector (if any) that characterizes the entity at a given moment in time.

It was seen, especially in the opinion of Van der Doricke Haar, that we valued most in this situation, that free discussions applied within functional departments (resembling the brainstorm method used in the decision theory) to focus on unleashing the creative energies of the staff and support and guide all the activity of the organization on the positive, beneficial aspects of the entire activity, both endogenous (activity of divisions, departments) and exogenous regarding the relations of the entity with the competitive environment (business) and the natural surroundings.

In fact, the organizational performance should be seen as its ability to withstand a specific market and be successful. This latter aspect can be measured by comparing the specific outputs of the entity (organization) to the expected outputs. This is an issue that should, of course, indicate a ratio greater than one, where the effective (real) output > intended objectives.

The literature and we mention here Richard alone (one of the authors most recommended in this field) and the collaborators saw organizational performance as comprising three basic elements of economic performance, namely:

1. The financial performance including the size of profits, the returns on investment, the return on assets, and so on.
2. The performance of products on the market, the size of sales, the market share, and so on.
3. The gains of shareholders represented by their total income, the economic value added [Richard et al., 2009, p. 718-824].

Moreover, lately, to assess organizational performance, the so-called balanced scorecard is utilized, including several dimensions that should be taken into account to fully understand the analyzed economic concept.

The term was introduced to align the practical business activity to the organization's strategic vision formulated, in this case, on the use of the appreciative inquiry method [www.balancedscorecard.org-Balanced Scorecard].

We make this statement taking into account that besides the three major purely economic components, as stated above, it also includes the following aspects:

- The Customer Service;
- The social responsibility which synthetically aims at [<http://corporate-citizenship.com/>]: understanding what is happening around oneself; thinking of a strategy to for appropriate action; actions that lead to improved individual performances and especially organizational performances; creating and strengthening both individual and inter-organizational partnerships;
- The *stewardship* of the staff which generally translates into responsibility for the sustainable development shared by all those whose actions have an impact upon performance and is singled out both as values and practices at staff, organizations communities' level.

These additions provide, indeed, a multidimensional character to the concept of organizational performance and we believe they are appropriate to highlight the contribution of the sociological method of the appreciative inquiry – through the process of the 4 Ds – to the existence and functioning of this entity. We deal with specific aspects of the human activity, the personality of individuals and how they socialize within the organizational system for achieving the desired results and goals of that organization.

We can thus understand that the organizational assessment is a systematic process of obtaining valid information (data) concerning the organization's (entity's) performance, as well as the factors that influence or can influence this performance in the specific economic environment. In this context it should be noted that the presence of the ethical elements is fundamental especially in our society since ethics within organizations can make the difference between success and failure [Terec-Vlad, Trifu, 2015, pp. 84-87].

4. Conclusions

Organizations are obliged to continually adapt, to perform, to enter into relations with other competitors and also with other entities in the economic, social, political, cultural environment if they want to survive and continue their work both in their selfish interest (to use the expression of Adam Smith) and the interest of the community (as a result of the supply-demand game of a specific market).

To achieve this, skills, knowledge to administer the work of that organization (entity) are required and therefore to perform, which is given by the human factor, by individuals, employees, managers and shareholders.

As a result, we believe that one can imagine and achieve a direct link of cause-effect between the appreciative inquiry (analysis) and the organizational performance.

We make this statement based on the fact that, however, in its essence, we are dealing with an inquiry as an approach of sociological methodology which can achieve not imperatively, but free-consented, voluntarily and with high sincerity in approaches and answers (we refer in particular to the first two phases of the inquiry, Discovery and Dream, those which need to point out facts, desires, aspirations, and so on) but out of which one must retain the positive, motivating aspects and which must give actions a meaning to be followed and performed within the organization.

What we believe is that the *appreciative inquiry* is very useful as a tool for analysis and sociological method in any type of organization, but it must be in conjunction with the other issues that we have highlighted in the last part of the work namely the ethical, social responsibility aspects and the stewardship of employees. The reason why we highlight these aspects is because working on the cohesion aspect of the team, (which can be even called socialization during the periods meant for it), one can get to strengthen beliefs in the positive and powerful aspects of the entity and thus the design and implementation of tactics and strategies agreed upon may easily lead to achieving the desired economic results which can exceed the planned and expenses incurred.

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