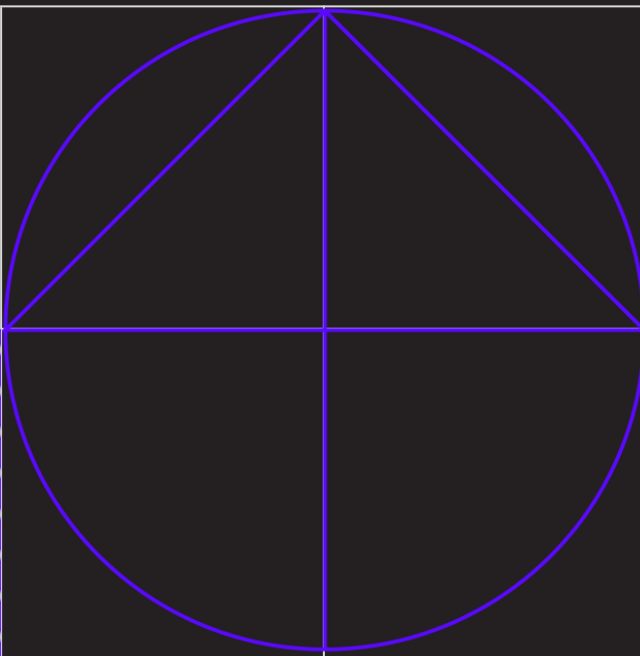
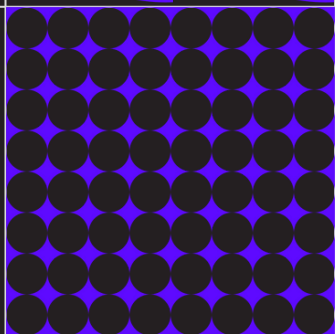
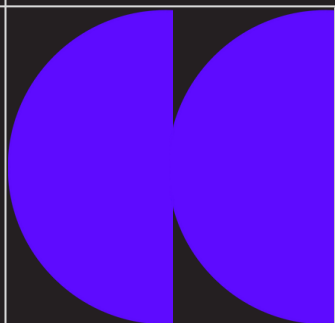


INNOVATION NORTH



Session 15 Briefing Note:

ENABLING ACTION FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE



Through prior Lab sessions, we have learned about different sections of the Compass – the North Star, Problems space, Awareness space, and Ideas space. We still do not know much about the Actions space and how organizations can act on ideas to change systems.

We believe ‘Appreciative Inquiry’ may provide some answers. Rather than focusing on the negative aspects of a topic or issue (what to lessen or fix), Appreciative Inquiry recognizes and leverages the organization’s strengths to enable or elevate positive change.

In this briefing note, we first describe the Actions space of the Compass. Then, we provide a brief overview of Appreciative Inquiry, the principles that guide it, the benefits of engaging with it, and how it can be applied. In the Lab session, Ron Fry will guide us through the Appreciative Inquiry process. We will also collectively brainstorm about how Appreciative Inquiry can motivate actions and systems change.

The Actions Space of the Innovation North Compass



The Ideas space of the Compass aims to generate a number of ideas, and then select those that are most viable and impactful. In our session with Terry Irwin, we learned that many organizations take these actions and decide what they have to change to execute. However, this tends to perpetuate existing systems and mindsets.

Terry Irwin recommended that we anchor not on the present, but on the future and determine what the organization wants to ultimately achieve.

We should then backcast to the present to determine what actions should be taken today. The goal is not to find moonshots – the big investment that will leap the organization forward. Instead, as we learned from Peter Senge, it is important for organizations operating in complex systems to find a series of nudges that will help to learn about the system and build momentum.

Beyond these insights, the Actions space remains somewhat of a black box. Appreciative Inquiry seems to offer an opportunity to learn and fill the void.

What is Appreciative Inquiry?

When facing problems, most organizations focus on what is 'broken' in the organization and how it can be 'fixed'. This tends to stifle creativity, as people become risk averse and narrow their field-of-view by locking into vulnerabilities.

Appreciative Inquiry shifts the focus from deficits to strengths in tackling contemporary problems. Appreciative Inquiry widens the field of view to the whole system, as people start to imagine strengths, possibilities, and successes. Appreciative Inquiry surfaces the opportunities that align with the resources at the organization's disposal – whether it be human capital, financial capital, or social capital. Appreciative Inquiry does not ask innovators to ignore problems, but asks them to shift their framing of and approach to problems.

What Principles Form the Core of Appreciative Inquiry?

Words Create Worlds

Reality as we know it is subjective, not objective. It is socially created through language and conversation. The words we use influence our perception of reality, which guide our actions and influence actual reality.

Inquiry Creates Change

The moment we ask a question, we catalyze change. We direct energy and effort towards the subject of the inquiry, we configure our mind to start making sense of the reality, and we influence others as we embark on that inquiry. These inquiries can be good or bad, depending on the questions we ask. We design our future

We Choose What We Study

There is no limit to where we can direct our attention and inquiry. Where we direct it shapes the foundation of our knowledge and what we further encounter in our world.

Images Inspire Actions

People tend to move towards the images of the future. Give people a negative image and they will create it; give them a hopeful, positive one and they will create that one. Positive images bring about positive, sustained actions today.

Positive Questions Lead to Positive Change

Changing systems requires lots of positive emotions and social bonding, which are helped by how questions are asked. Asking good questions can increase hope and motivation among change agents and stakeholders, which sustains the change effort.

The Nutrimental Transformation

Nutrimental is a food company that dehydrates food. For many years its main customer was the government. When the government decided to decentralize its food purchases, Nutrimental had to radically change its strategy. CEO Rodrigo Loures realized the challenge they faced was not just about sales but multifaceted, including expanding the product line, developing employees to handle change, and re-engineering the production processes.

In an Appreciative Inquiry workshop, company executives, employees, and stakeholders were shown positive images to build energy of the possibilities. Participants were asked to narrate their high point stories and share their feelings and expectations with others. The 5-D cycle ultimately helped Nutrimental to find a new identity and create a culture of hopefulness.

Why Engage in Appreciative Inquiry?

It Increases Confidence

By framing problems as deficits, change agents turn their focus to the resources needed to fix the problem – whether it be financial resources, human resources, or social resources. The attention then turns to the competence of the person tasked to fix the problem. As the challenges become even greater and as the business environment becomes even more turbulent, there are no quick or easy fixes to problems. Often, energy starts to seep away from the change effort.

For example, consider the impact of COVID-19 and the fatigue felt by most leaders and administrators in sustaining the perpetual changes needed in organizations.

Instead of a “catch-up” or deficit-reduction mindset, Appreciative Inquiry assumes an “advancement” or enabling outlook. The shift of focus is from preventing unfavorable consequences to promoting favorable outcomes. This mindset fosters self-confidence and offers cognitive and emotional resources to sustain action and build new solutions amid successes and failures. Put another way, we learn very little about success from studying failure. If we desire to be great, excellent, world-class, etc. then we need to study greatness, excellence, and so on – not the absence of it.

It Increases Creativity

Creativity requires change agents to take risks and accept failures to challenge the status quo. In a deficit-focused problem-solving approach, change agents find it difficult to take risks, as the perceived stakes feel high. Because change agents are trying to ‘fix’ problems, they tend to take a narrow approach, which could blind them to potential opportunities.

The strength and hope that forms the foundation of Appreciative Inquiry provides change agents the confidence to look further for ideas, take risks, leverage their strengths, and seek creativity. Change agents focus on their available competencies, which generates the motivation and resources to generate creative solutions.

It Sustains Collaboration

Stakeholders are often willing to collaborate with change agents that seek to positively impact systems (whereas stakeholders with a deficit-focused mindset can fatigue, especially if progress is slow and not visible). Stakeholders are willing to embrace the opportunity to engage in complex issues to create a better future and sustain collaboration. The positive sentiments and group efforts tend to generate energy, invoke hope, and motivate people to leverage their individual strengths.

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