



Live Your Strengths

Welcome to the March 2010 edition of *Live Your Strengths*, the monthly e-newsletter from In Search of Excellence.

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How Will You Choose To Evaluate?

Have you ever had the responsibility of evaluating something important? Perhaps you have been called on to carry out performance evaluations for employees, or to evaluate how well a specific department or program is functioning. These are important activities because the results of the evaluation will often affect decisions around priorities, continuation of funding, promotion, and so on.

You may have noticed that the starting point of many evaluations is an assumption that there are problems that need to be fixed. Traditionally when we create evaluations, we often take a problem-solving approach which begins by identifying the problems, then analyzing the causes of the problems, and finally identifying solutions to 'treat' the problems.

However, it is possible that this approach may actually create additional challenges because the evaluation's focus and language are based on deficits – deficits perceived in the program, in the organization, or in the person being evaluated. By focusing on and emphasizing problems, the issues of concern may actually become amplified.

Conversely, an evaluation from a solution-focused, strengths-based perspective begins by learning about the best elements of a program, organization or person. This appreciative stance creates opportunities for the participants in the evaluation to reflect on the positive outcomes they have experienced and creates possibilities for further 'moments of excellence' in the future.

By coming in with an open mind and asking the right kind of questions, you provide space for exploration of all the aspects of what is beneficial about what/who you are evaluating. By asking open-ended questions, the responses you receive will be less affected by the constraints and pre-conceptions you, as the evaluator, may be holding.

An effective tool for a strengths-based evaluation is to conduct an 'Appreciative Inquiry'. Much has been written about this type of evaluation (for more detailed information, a great resource is *Reframing Evaluation through Appreciative Inquiry* by Hallie Preskill and Tessie Tzavaras Catsambas).

However, to keep things simple for our purposes, you may want to consider an 'appreciative evaluation' as a guide to a conversation based on key questions about peak experiences, values and wishes for the future. Let's look at an example of how you might use this idea to evaluate a customer loyalty program. You could ask your customers questions such as:

Peak experience: Think back on your experience with our customer loyalty program and reflect on a time

when you felt most energized and excited to be involved with this program. Tell me about this situation in as much detail as possible. What were our employees doing? What contributed to the satisfaction you experienced with our organization?

Values: What do you value most about being part of this customer loyalty program? What do you value most about being a customer of our organization?

Wishes: If you had a magic wand and could instantly create a perfect program to reward loyal customers, what would the program look like? What would be the most important elements to include? How is that different from what you are currently experiencing as part of our current loyalty program?

While this is only one example of how to apply this idea, you can see how this approach to evaluation will allow you to gain insight into what are the program's core strengths and elements of success. These are the key elements that you will want to keep as an integral part of the program moving forward, regardless of what other changes may be made.

Approaching evaluations from an appreciative perspective provides space for negative issues and concerns to be raised by participants. However, the concerns are typically reframed into a positive statement focusing on how the problem area could be resolved in a more ideal future.

In particular, the 'wishes' question will help you to identify the ideal future that people would create, if given the chance. This information will allow you to create a common vision for the future. It will also allow you to surface any concerns people may have about the existing program without becoming stuck in the present or preoccupied with what is not working.

By talking about where the ideal future exists, it usually becomes clear where changes will need to be made in the way things are currently being done. By comparison, traditional problem-solving approaches can cause concerns and deficits to become the focus of the evaluation process.

You may have experienced this emphasis on the negative in past evaluations – people become so focused on nitpicking elements of a program or organization that are not working exactly the way they should be, that they lose sight of what is working. Often in an attempt to 'fix' the problems, the situation actually becomes worse because participants lose sight of their core strengths and shared vision for the future.

So, when is an appreciative evaluation most useful? Recent research has shown it to be most effective when:

- the purpose of the evaluation is to implement positive changes in an ongoing program or organization (i.e., the information found in the evaluation will be used to recommend changes for the future)
- one of the reasons for doing the evaluation is to learn and gain a greater understanding about the situation
- the philosophies of the organization or department are already based on an assets model
- the people involved are already aware of the problems and they need to identify their strengths to face those challenges, or
- staff members/volunteers have lost sight of the larger motivating goals of a program or organization

Do you believe (as I do) that our questions and our conversations create our worlds? Then you may want to consider approaching your next evaluation task from an appreciative stance and join me in this month's *Live Your Strengths* challenge.

***Live Your Strengths* Monthly Challenge: Appreciative Evaluation**

Is it time for you to evaluate something you are involved in? Perhaps there is an element of your work that you are curious about and would like to assess its effectiveness? Or is there a volunteer program you would like to ensure is creating the most value for the people involved?

Who will you ask?

I recommend that you talk to as many different 'stakeholders' as possible to get a robust picture from all different perspectives. For example, if you want to evaluate a non-profit community program, you may wish to talk to the clients who use the program, the staff who work/volunteer at the program and the organizations who fund the program.

Likewise, if you want to implement an evaluation of a new shipping/receiving method in your organization, you may wish to talk to the people who manage the logistics for your organization, your suppliers, and perhaps people in the finance or other departments who may have been affected by the change in procedure.

What will you ask?

Give some thought to what kinds of questions might give you the information you are seeking, using the three main elements of an appreciative evaluation: peak experiences, values, and wishes.

Using these three types of questions, you will be able to investigate just about anything you want. It's simply a matter of creating the appropriate questions. If you are unsure about how to create a question to help you evaluate something specific, a great resource is the *Encyclopedia of Positive Questions* by Diana Whitney, David Cooperrider, Amanda Trosten-Bloom, and Brian Kaplin.

How formal should the evaluation be?

The evaluations should be as formal as you feel is appropriate given the context. For example, if you want to evaluate a system in your business that may need some minor tweaking, it may be fine to just have some informal conversations with the people who are affected by the system, using the questions as a conversation guide.

However, if you are examining something more complex or where the outcome of the evaluation may determine critical aspects of how service is delivered or funding is allocated, it is worth the investment of time to host a more formal evaluation interview with as many of the people involved as possible.

Again, you will use the questions as a guide for your conversation but you will want to take notes or record the interviews, and allow people as much time as they need to fully answer the questions. This will give you the opportunity to look for themes in responses that will help direct your decisions about the future.

Could you use some guidance with this challenge? Call Denise for a free 30-minute coaching session to make 2010 your best year yet!

Cheers,

Denise Cornfield-Furlong
In Search of Excellence
www.insearchofexcellence.ca
Tel: 519.923.9968
Fax: 519.923.9997

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In Search of Excellence
RR#1 Proton Station, ON N0C 1L0
Email: denise@InSearchofExcellence.ca
Phone: (519) 923-9968

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