

A Strategic Planning Intervention Employing Large Group Change: A Scholar/Practitioner Application

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We present a scholar-practitioner collaboration applying a large group positive change project, representing the first such application methodology involving first responders. Positive change intervention is based on a multistage process involving Appreciative Inquiry and S.O.A.R. (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results), designed to engage the community in inclusion, transparency, and mutual commitment in developing a strategic plan. Part of this plan's objective is acquiring national accreditation, which has only been obtained by 217 of 30,052 fire department in the country. The project included 30 interns and 64 interviews with employees, trustees, and community residents, in preparation for the SOAR strategic planning session.

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a scholar-practitioner collaborative effort involving the field application of a large group multistage positive change method, incorporating a combined Appreciative Inquiry and Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results (SOAR) approach. The study has important implications and application of large group methodologies in that it:

1. Presents a case study of successful collaboration of a scholar-practitioner team;
2. Presents findings of a strategic Organization Development intervention;
3. Presents findings regarding a relatively new form of positive change (SOAR) based on the concepts of Appreciative Inquiry;
4. Presents findings related to a first responder organization and the relationship to major stakeholders they serve; and
5. Presents both empirical findings and conceptualization of the process and findings, providing increased understanding of the role of strategic large group positive change efforts.

The research team is comprised of four members: two scholars, and two practitioners. All members collaborated on the development and submission of this paper. The paper reviews the concepts that served as the basis for the intervention, beginning with a short discussion of the origin of the positive organization scholar movement, followed by a brief description of the development of Appreciative Inquiry and the development of S.O.A.R, which is closely related to and an adaptation of Appreciative Inquiry to strategic planning. The paper then presents an overview of the project, a description of the process, and results.

Positive Organizational Scholarship

Appreciative Inquiry has been closely linked to and related to the Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) movement, and consequently SOAR, as a product of Appreciative Inquiry is part of that movement. POS in turn is related to the Positive Psychology movement, associated with Martin Seligman. Two sources that are exceptionally helpful in providing background on POS are the works of “Positive Organizational Scholarship: What does it Achieve,” (Caza and Cameron, 2008) and an earlier piece, “An Introduction to Positive Organizational Scholarship” by Cameron, Dutton and Quinn (2003). In both of these works, the Positive Psychology movement was described as being initiated by Seligman (1999) who was then the president of the American Psychological Association. The intent of the movement was to place greater emphasis on the positive aspects of psychological behavior in contrast to the dominant and overwhelming emphasis on pathology.

Topics that have been identified with Positive Organizational Scholarship include individual virtue and social concern, leadership, organizational virtue, positive relationships and performance, psychological capital, and absence of negativity.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry has clearly made a significant impact on the study and practice of organizational change and improvement. In 1987, David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva published the first public statement regarding Appreciative inquiry, entitled “Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life” (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). It has grown from an approach practiced by a small group at Case Western Reserve University to a world-wide phenomenon (Ericson & Bengsston, 2002). It has been cited in a survey of the leadership of the field as the most important recent contribution to the field (Warrick, 2002). It has been the subject of special issues of the *OD Practitioner* in 1998 and 2003, as well as a special issue of the *OD Journal* in 2000. It has also been the subject of a number of sessions at the Academy of Management, ASTD, the OD Network, a major international conference in 2001, with a 2nd international conference in 2004, as well as a number of others.

A comprehensive review of Appreciative Inquiry is presented in two reports: “Assessment of the State of Appreciative Inquiry: Past, Present, and Future,” (Sorensen, Yaeger & Bengsston, 2003) and “Research Methodologies and the Promise of Appreciative Inquiry: A Review” (Sorensen, Yaeger, & Narel, 2015). The first report reviewed 50 studies and more than 400 publications, including 76 dissertations between 1987 and 2003. The study reported highly consistent favorable outcomes, including studies from Brazil, Canada, Nepal, and the U.K.

The second study reported on a review of 608 publications and an additional 64 dissertations between 2005 and 2014. The study reported studies from Africa, Australia, India, Mexico, Netherlands, China, South Africa, Canada, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, and Malaysia. Again, reported results were consistently favorable. However, several criticisms were identified, which included ensuring that all levels of the system and key stakeholders were engaged in the intervention, and second, lack of support or momentum once back in the day-to-day routine. In the review, SOAR was identified as an approach that blends the concept of Appreciative Inquiry with strategic planning, an approach designed to deal with the above mentioned criticisms.

SOAR

The first systematic presentation of SOAR appeared in 2009, in the publication *Thin Book of SOAR: Building Strengths-based Strategy* (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2009). There, the authors described SOAR as a “positive approach to strategic thinking and planning that allows an organization to construct its future through collaborative, shared understanding and commitment to action” (Stavros & Hinrichs, p.10). Additionally, in a recent article, Stavros, Hitchcock and Cole (2014) described SOAR as a process that builds on the identification of aspirations, defining what an organization and its members want to become, and a strategy of implementation for moving into the future.

Because it is a relatively new approach to organization improvement, reporting systematic research on SOAR has been limited. However, in the article previously mentioned, the authors presented a summary of a number of research projects, which included the following studies: Malone (2010), Chandramouli, (2011), Swafford (2013), Hitchcock (2014), Hinrichs and Newman (2013), Sprangel, Stavros and Cole (2011), Glovis (2012), and Cox (2014).

The study by Malone (2010) supported the successful application of the SOAR approach across groups of various sizes in the development and implementation of planning. The study by Chandramouli, (2011) reported on the results of a one-day group session with 65 members associated with a private school in India, a session which demonstrated the effectiveness of SOAR in creating a combined positive vision of the school among various stakeholders.

The Swafford (2013) study reported on the application of SOAR based on the results of 21 interviews with members of a California-based management association who had attended a SOAR professional development program. Member interviews reported SOAR as a positive-based approach to moving the organization forward. Hitchcock (2014) reported on the concept of collective motivation in organizational transformation, and found that SOAR resulted in increases in commitment and beliefs during an organizational transformation effort.

Hinrichs and Newman’s (2013) work extended the application of SOAR by applying SOAR concepts to, and demonstrating the effectiveness of, SOAR on professional and executive coaching. Sprangel et al. (2011) demonstrated the effectiveness of SOAR in building trust in the development of collaborative relationships with customers, and improved supplier performance in interviews with 71 chemical management service program managers and customers.

Glovis (2012) presented findings based on a total of 122 SAP (Systems, Applications and Products) professionals, indicating that SOAR presented a framework that resulted in the alignment of individual and organizational needs in a positive manner, resulting in the encouragement of higher levels of individual, project, and organizational performance. In a study of teams, Cox (2014) was able to demonstrate that team members competent in SOAR were able to maximize the impact of emotional intelligence on collaboration.

Unlike Appreciative Inquiry on which the SOAR approach is based, the number of field studies exploring the impact and effectiveness is limited. But, like the reported studies of Appreciative Inquiry, the studies to date on SOAR demonstrate similar patterns of effectiveness. And like Appreciative Inquiry, SOAR studies are beginning to show its application in different kinds of organizations, and related to different approaches, such as counseling, project management and teams, and even international applications, such as in the school in India.

This current study adds to the emerging body of research with the reporting on a lengthy, multi-staged implementation of SOAR in a type of organization that has received considerable recognition as serving a critical role in the nation and in the community; namely, a first responder organization.

OVERVIEW

This study has added significance to the change and consulting world in that it is a study of a strategic planning process involving a first responder organization that is preparing for accreditation by the national accrediting agency, the Center for Public Safety Excellence (CPSE). Accreditation by the CPSE

is a significant distinction, in that only 217 fire departments out of 30,052 in the United States have achieved this designation.

The purpose of applying for accreditation is described by the fire department as:

the pursuit of accreditation symbolizes the dedication of the Lemont FDP in achieving the most effective and efficient delivery of emergency and non-emergency services; provides a forum for communication to management and leadership philosophies as well as facilitating input and building positive relationships with internal stakeholders; encourages continuous quality improvement; and fosters pride in the Lemont FPD, community and citizens.

Summary of the Process

The strategic planning process involved a series of steps that included the following:

1. The initial phase, which involved the creation of a charter for the strategic planning process, including the creation of the core team and interns in planning the strategic planning process.
2. The second phase involved conducting 64 interviews with employees, trustees, and community residents; training interviewers who were graduate students with a concentration in organization development in the application of Appreciative Inquiry interviews; conducting the interviews; data analysis; and creating of a summary report of these interviews. The training of these graduate interns involved specific training in conducting appreciative inquiry interviews and data analysis, focusing on the identification of categories and themes. A total of 30 interns were involved in various stages of the project.
3. The next phase involved identification and invitation of stakeholders to the large group strategic planning session, also known as the SOAR Summit.

The interventions employed represented an increasingly growing approach to strategic planning, a movement away from an isolated, non-inclusive process dominated by a few major and influential decision-makers and professionals in strategic analysis and planning, to an inclusive process designed to increase the inclusion of greater relevant information, motivation, transparency, and commitment through the systematic inclusion of multiple and all relevant stakeholders. This trend is illustrated by the early and ongoing work of Marvin Weisbord in his large group intervention, known as Future Search (Weisbord, 1987). Large Group Interventions have been described as focusing on shared personal values, visions, and principles that establish commonality among individuals within an organization. Large Group Interventions are designed to create an environment of trust (Arena, 2009).

The early concept of large group strategic interventions was followed by the work of David Cooperrider, which shifted the focus from problem-based interventions to interventions that focus on opportunities, an approach often associated with the positive change movement. Appreciative Inquiry has grown over the years since the early Cooperrider articles to become one of the most popular and effective organization change interventions (Warrick, 2002). It is described as consisting of a process for identifying organization strengths, and envisioning and building on opportunities. One of the most important components of Appreciative Inquiry is the nature of the question asked (Sorensen et al., 2003). For example, in this study, questions that the interviewers asked as part of the Appreciative Inquiry Interview phase included:

“Looking back over the last decade, think of when you were most proud or grateful for being part of the organization’s services,” and:

“It is now 2020. Imagine that the organization has undertaken significant efforts in the last six years. They are now acknowledged as a best practice in providing innovative protective community services. The development is beyond your wildest dreams. Tell me what is happening.”

SOAR is differentiated from the more traditional strategic planning process of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT). SWOT has been described as a strategic planning methodology that has an emphasis on adversities. It is described as an analysis-oriented process that involves an executive-level perspective of weakness and threats from a competitive orientation. SOAR, in contrast, is described as an affirmative-based, action-oriented process designed to generate energy by focusing on the possibilities of innovation and opportunities, a process involving all stakeholders (Hinrichs, 2010; Holman Devane, & Cady, 2007; Stavros & Hinrichs, 2009). In brief, the SOAR process consists of an identifying strengths (S); identifying aspirations, resulting in the creation of a shared vision of possibilities and opportunities (O & A); designing strategic initiatives, often including creating priorities and a time framework, and creating meaning and measurable goals or results (R).

World Café

The SOAR intervention also incorporated the method or concept of World Café, which is described as a way of creating meaningful conversation designed for constructive dialogue and gathering information for developing creative possibilities for action (Brown & Isaacs, 2005; Holman et al., 2007).

RESULTS

Ten categories emerged from the data in the following rank order: relationship building was the most frequently cited category, followed by training, process transparency, cultural elements, communication, technology/equipment, leadership style, innovation, recognition, and resources.

If one looks at the patterns of responses across various stakeholders, common patterns and responses differ across various stakeholder groups. First, the most dominant theme is that four of the twelve most frequently cited responses are identical across all four stakeholders: relationship-building, process transparency, communication, and training. There are some differences in the order of responses, with community respondents ranking relationship building, process transparency, communication and training in that order, while employees ranked communications, relationship building, training and cultural elements, in that order. Administrators and trustees ranked relationship building, process, transparency, training, and communications, in that order.

Community Responses

Responses by community members reflected the critical nature of the role and mission that first responders play in the community, namely, the transparency related to the use of their tax dollars and the commitment to training and expenses associated with training initiatives. A quote from one of the respondents reflects these responses:

Not long ago there was a lifesaving event. The police department was called to an overdose. They provided the victim with a medication to reverse the effects of the overdose. Because the fire department had recent training with this product they were able to access the situation and provide further treatment that saved the life of the victim. It was the communication and the training between the two departments that resulted in a positive experience.

Employee Responses

The employee responses related to the importance of communication, relationship-building and training is not surprising. However, the employee responses to the need for recognition may be a surprise; this was related to the sense that the first responders believed that they were simply doing what they are expected and what they want to do, which is representing the dedication and commitment of first responders to others. A quote from one of the respondent reflects these responses: "It is very important for the public to know and understand what we do. In most cases they don't know or are misinformed. They are entitled to know we are here to serve."

Administrator Responses

Not surprisingly, administrators focused on building relations, in other words, building a culture of commitment. These responses are reflected in the following quote: “We are all together. We all have value to the organization. From the probation firefighter, to part time secretary to the battalion chief.”

Trustee Responses

Trustees are representatives of the community, with a special role of responsibility to both the first responders and the community, ranking relationship-building and transparency as high. A simple, straightforward yet powerful example of the importance of building relationships with the community is reflected in the following quote: “Get out and cruise the neighborhood. Wave to kids and shake hands with people”.

Participant/Observer

The frequency of, and ranking of responses by group provides a limited interpretation of the intervention. An overall reporting of the event by one of the practitioners acting as a participant/observer provides additional and potentially more significant insights into the intervention. The roles of the practitioners actually encompassed several roles. One role was the designer and implementer of the intervention, and the other was as participant/observer, or in a sense, the combination of both the practitioner and scholar roles. A summary of key observations by the participant/observer, as scholar/practitioner include:

1. From an participant/observer perspective, the process for gaining the participation from all four groups resulted in over eight weeks of multi-layered communications being sent to the community residents’ home, to employees in the workplace, and information being posted on the fire station website to garner support for both the interviewing process and for the SOAR Summit.
2. The most frequently mentioned categories were relationship building, communication, and process transparency. These are the same processes that are identified with both AI and SOAR, in that both are focused on relationship-building with all stakeholders involved, including transparency, because all stakeholders are together discussing ideas and future possibilities and communication methods. .
3. A particularly significant observation was that two stakeholder groups, the community residents and administrative group, expressed both gratitude and desire to understand or better explain facets of fiscal responsibility and knowledge. The participant/observer noted that community residents had either directly or indirectly experienced the impact that the Department had in responding to various neighborhood emergencies and inquiries. These experiences provided an understanding on the part of community residents of the relevance and critical nature of Departmental funding and expenditures. The administrative group also expressed the importance of not only fiduciary responsibility, but the need to fully and transparently communicate Departmental expenditures to the community. This agreement and mutual understanding on the part of the Department and the community is probably one of the most significant outcomes of the intervention in terms of strategic planning.
4. The intervention also resulted in a significantly greater sense of transparency between trustees, the community, and the Department, again a crucial element for strategic planning in a community service and community-funded program.
5. The intervention resulted in increased trust between the Department and the community. Some of the community members, in fact, commented on their surprise at the openness and desire for community participation and involvement, particularly at a time of frequent mistrust of their government.
6. The intervention successfully accomplished its primary mission or intent: the creation of a five-year strategic plan with intentional and open participation by all stakeholder groups. This plan has

been shared with all participants and has been publically posted on the home page of the Department website.

The study represents the extension and reporting on the application of both classic and recent OD and consulting work in the form of large group positive change interventions, to an organization that has become increasingly recognized on a national level since 9/11 for its critical mission and dedication: the First Responder Organization.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper reports on a scholar-practitioner project. The project is unique in several aspects. It reports on the application of a large group strategic planning process as part of an accreditation application process for a first responder organization. It is also unique in the fact that it presents the application of a process based on the sequential application of two related positive change interventions: Appreciative Inquiry and SOAR. Appreciative Inquiry was used in interviews in preparation and context setting for the application of SOAR sessions.

The project resulted in the following:

1. The creation of a five-year strategic plan;
2. A plan that is inclusive and incorporated the views and needs of all stakeholders-community members, trustees, employees, and administrators;
3. The process provided the basis and foundation for a strong positive strategic plan based on the emergent outcomes of the AI/SOAR process, which included the opportunity to voice and discuss relationship-building between the community and the organization, and the opportunity to voice and discuss feelings of gratitude for service to the community, the role of the community and organization in terms of fiscal responsibility, and the importance of process transparency;
4. An analysis of the interview data and the SOAR Summit indicated a high degree of consensus between all project participants as to major themes and their priorities: agreement which in and of itself created a sense of inclusion and commitment to a common objective;
5. The project provided the basis for the implementation of a systematic set of activities directed toward sustaining and building on the initiative and momentum created through the involvement of all relevant stakeholders through the creation of a 5-year Customer Centric Strategic Plan available to the entire community through the organization's website;
6. A demonstration that the inclusion of basically a double stage intervention -- the use of Appreciative Inquiry interviews followed by a large group SOAR experience, that the combination is a powerful and effective way of establishing a sense of transparency, common agenda and commitment to a common objective;
7. Established a strong foundation for movement toward a prestigious and difficult to obtain national accreditation;
8. Finally, the project presented an illustration of the application of a combination of AI and SOAR to the strategic planning process in an organization which has become increasingly critical and central to the welfare of the general community, and that has been increasingly recognized for the importance of its role: the first responder organization.

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