Appreciative Interviews

Idea In Short

Appreciative Interviews, rooted in the concept of Appreciative Inquiry, are a powerful tool for fostering positive change and growth within individuals, teams, and organizations. This approach shifts the focus from problem-solving and negativity to highlighting strengths, successes, and the positive aspects of any situation. By asking the right questions, Appreciative Interviews aim to uncover what works well and build upon those successes.

Appreciative Inquiry, developed in the 1980s by David Cooperrider and other researchers, is a methodology that emphasizes constructive and strengths-based conversations. Unlike traditional problem-solving approaches that delve into what went wrong, Appreciative Inquiry explores what is going right and how to amplify those positive elements. This method is based on the premise that human systems move in the direction of the questions they most frequently and authentically ask.

In the context of Appreciative Interviews, participants are encouraged to share stories of success and what made those successes possible. These interviews typically involve asking "unconditional positive" questions that help identify the best practices and strengths within a group or organization. Questions such as "What was a recent successful team project?" or "What made the team so successful?" orient the conversation towards the positive aspects, creating a shared vision for future achievements.

The Process

The process typically involves a series of open-ended questions designed to encourage storytelling and reflection. These questions are carefully crafted to elicit detailed narratives about specific experiences, rather than general opinions or beliefs. The interviewer actively listens and encourages the interviewee to share their stories in detail, focusing on the positive aspects of their experiences.

A common framework for appreciative interviews is the 4-D cycle:

1. Discovery
2. Dream
3. Design, and
4. Destiny

In the Discovery phase, the focus is on uncovering the best of "what is." Interview questions explore past successes, strengths, and moments of peak performance. This phase aims to identify the positive core of the individual or organization.

The Dream phase focuses on envisioning "what could be." Interview questions encourage the interviewee to imagine a future where the best of the past is amplified and expanded. This phase helps to generate a shared vision of a desired future state.

The Design phase involves creating action plans to bring the dream into reality. Interview questions focus on identifying specific actions and strategies that can be implemented to achieve the desired future. This phase helps to translate the vision into concrete steps.

The Destiny phase focuses on sustaining the positive changes and ensuring that they become embedded in the culture. This phase involves ongoing reflection, learning, and adaptation.

Case Study - Financial coaching

A compelling example of Appreciative Interviews can be seen in a financial coaching program. Imagine a financial coach working with a client to improve their financial health. Instead of focusing on the client's financial struggles or debts, the coach uses Appreciative Inquiry to ask questions like, "What three hopes do you have for your family's financial future?" or "What has worked well for you in managing your finances in the past?" These questions help the client envision a positive future and identify existing strengths that can be built upon.

In a case study involving volunteer tax preparers, Appreciative Inquiry was used to coach clients on financial planning. The coaches asked clients to recount times when they had successfully managed their finances or made smart financial decisions. This approach not

only boosted the clients' confidence but also provided concrete examples of what they could replicate in the future to achieve their financial goals.

Case Study - Improving Employee Engagement

Imagine a company experiencing low employee engagement. Instead of focusing on the problems and complaints, they decide to use appreciative interviews to understand what motivates and engages their employees. They conduct interviews with employees from different departments and levels within the organization.

In the Discovery phase, interviewers ask questions such as: "Tell me about a time when you felt truly engaged and energized at work." "What are you most proud of accomplishing here?" and "What do you value most about working at this company?"

One employee shares a story about a time when they led a successful project that had a significant positive impact on the company. They describe the sense of teamwork, the excitement of overcoming challenges, and the satisfaction of achieving a meaningful outcome.

Another employee talks about the company's supportive culture and the opportunities for professional development. They describe how they have grown and learned new skills during their time at the company.

In the Dream phase, interviewers ask questions such as: "Imagine the company at its best. What does it look like?" "What are the key characteristics of a truly engaging work environment?" and "What would make you even more excited to come to work each day?"

Employees envision a future where there are even more opportunities for collaboration, innovation, and personal growth. They describe a work environment where everyone feels valued, respected, and empowered to contribute their best.

In the Design phase, the company uses the insights from the interviews to develop specific action plans to improve employee engagement. They implement new programs for employee recognition, professional development, and team building.

This example illustrates how appreciative interviews can be used to uncover the positive

core of an organization and generate ideas for positive change. By focusing on what is working well, the company was able to identify key drivers of employee engagement and develop targeted initiatives to improve the work environment.

How It Works

Appreciative Interviews are often conducted in pairs or small groups, where participants take turns sharing success stories and the factors that contributed to those successes. For instance, in a workplace setting, employees might share stories of successful projects, highlighting what made them successful and what roles each team member played in achieving that success. This process reveals the root causes of success and generates a list of conditions essential for future achievements.

The Impact

The impact of Appreciative Interviews is multifaceted. By focusing on what works well, these interviews create a positive and energized environment within organizations. They help to uncover "hidden" success stories that might otherwise go unnoticed, providing social proof of local solutions and promising prototypes. This approach also helps organizations avoid the common pitfall of underinvesting in social supports that generate success, instead emphasizing the non-financial elements that contribute to positive outcomes.

Summary

Appreciative Interviews are a powerful tool for positive change, focusing on strengths and successes to build a brighter future. By asking the right questions, these interviews uncover what works well and how to amplify those positive elements, creating a shared vision for future achievements.