

Appreciative Problem Solving

Traditional problem solving models focus on fixing what is wrong with a current situation or result. Typically, you gather all the information on the complaints, create a chart of what complaints occur most often, start looking for who and what caused those problems, and then select counter measures to correct those causes. This is important work, but not always the best approach.

An appreciative approach to problem solving focuses on what is right - positive outcomes - and asks questions about how those results occurred. It requires engaging people in a process of telling stories about previous successes in an area you want to improve and discovering what the environment, conditions, and other relevant, observable factors were in place that contributed to that success. By focusing on replicating and enhancing the previous successful outcomes, people begin to notice the highest and best in their work and their teammates everywhere they look.

While you may want to customize your approach or fit this philosophy into other work you are doing, here is the structured process we've found to work very well:

1. Create a statement / description of the area needing improvement and what you stand for. The appreciative method focuses on what you want instead of what you don't want. It is important to let your people know there is a need to change and why, but avoid launching a mission to overturn every rock for incidents of less than stellar performance. Example: Customer complaints are rising. Acknowledge publicly that this is the situation. Declare that it needs to improve because you stand for excellent customer service. Invite everyone to join you in creating an organization with an outstanding reputation for the best customer experience.
2. Select a group you want to work on the issue from a cross section of people in the organization who have a stake in the improved performance or environment. Ask them to find a partner for one-on-one interviews with the rule that they be with someone from a different area of the company and/or they don't know very well. They interview each other one at a time in dyads.

Sample interview:

Providing 'Best Ever' Customer Service

We frequently hear the word customer service in every business and organization. We know it's important. We know that without it organizations struggle to achieve their goals, but what is it, exactly? There are many definitions. Receiving more than what they expected is one way some people describe it. Having a "Nordstrom's" experience might be another. Let's find out how you define it. By using this appreciative inquiry, focusing on the highest and best experiences of customer service in our lives, we will collect the clearest and dearest definition of customer service and use that to create the future we all want.

Interviewers

Please relax and have fun with this. It will put you and the person you are interviewing at ease. This is a chance to get to know another person on a deeper level. This is their story and one they cherish. Feel free to ask questions to get more detail especially about how they felt during their experience.

Interviewees

This is a time for you to share the most inspiring experience of 'best ever' customer service you can remember, those experiences that touched your heart. You don't have to do or say anything you do not want to. Just share as completely as possible, what your experience was - who was involved, what your role was, and how you felt during the experience.

Interview

Start by relaxing - breathe deeply a few times and get comfortable in your seat. I will be asking you some questions about your past experiences. This is a unique kind of interview so let me explain how I'd like to frame it. We all have ups and downs, peaks and valleys in our career. The questions I will be asking you will focus on your peak experiences, those moments that were the most positive. It will help if you can recall and focus on concrete stories from your past, incidents based on the topic of customer service. It might take a few moments for you to recall a story. That's just fine. Don't feel rushed or pressured to come up with a grand story. There are no "right" answers. Sometimes we achieve great insights from the simplest events.

Question #1

Please tell me about a time when you were involved in a situation, whether at a job, an organization, home, etc., where you either witnessed outstanding customer service from someone or you provided superior customer service yourself. I'm asking about a time when you felt the most alive and involved. I'm looking for a high point for you in experiencing excellent customer service.

- Who else was involved? What role did they play? What were the qualities they displayed that made your experience special?
- What was your role? What were the qualities in yourself that contributed to your experience?
- What factors made this a significant experience?

Question #2

Tonight when you go to sleep, you will fall into a very deep sleep and not wake up for 3 years. It is literally 3 years from now. When you arrive at work, you notice that the team you are working with is exactly as you imagined it could be - the highest performing team imaginable giving customers both outside and inside the organization the highest level of customer service you can imagine. Tell me what you see:

- If you could change or transform your own performance to look more like the dream in any way, what three things would you do?
- What small change could we make right now that would have the biggest positive impact on customer service and the teamwork needed to provide it?
- What bold change could we make that would have a big impact in improving customer service in our organization?

Thank you, very much for sharing your experiences, vision, and passion with me. (If there's time left, take a minute to relax, but be mindful not to interrupt other people who are still conducting their interviews)

1. **Have each interviewer report out in the larger group what they learned from the person they interviewed about what contributed to the peak experience for the interviewee.** This process of reporting by the interviewer is very powerful. It lets the interviewee know they were heard and seen. The interviewers take it as an honor and serious responsibility to tell their partner's story well. Build in enough time for each reporter to fully tell the stories. Watch the faces of the interviewees as their stories are told. Feel the atmosphere in the room transform during this process.
2. **Capture themes from those reports to use to begin creating a picture of a more positive future state and the factors that are most important to it.** While the interviewers are reporting out, assign someone as scribe to capture the key themes from the last question of the interview. That's the question about waking up after a deep sleep and walking into the best environment you can imagine. The scribe lists the themes as they emerge on a flip chart for use later. Themes include the qualities, observed behaviors, physical surroundings, and feelings people have in this imagined future state, as well as, actions that can be taken on small and large scales to move toward that future now.
3. **Begin to group the themes into categories and form the participants into sub groups of 3 to 6 people (depending on the size of your whole group).** Ask each sub group to take one of the themes and begin brainstorming ideas about how to create more of that in your organization. In each sub group, let them determine a leader for the exercise, a scribe, and any rules they decide about how they want to explore the theme. The scribe captures the ideas on a flip chart.
4. **Have the sub group leaders report out their group brainstorm results to the whole group.** This will begin to create excitement in the group as the creative and inspiring ideas and initiatives are spoken. People will begin to connect with particular areas of interest to them.
5. **Take the scribe sheets from the brainstorm sessions and group them into categories of interest areas.** You may have several ideas or initiatives under one interest category. Display these categories and the associated scribe sheets on the walls around the meeting room.
6. **Ask the members of the whole group to wander around the room and put their name on the category sheet(s) in which they have the most interest and want to be involved.** Typically by now, most people are very excited about a few things they see as inspiring and exciting to help move forward. You will see people standing in groups talking animatedly about their particular area of interest.
7. **Set up tables or conversation areas for the people who put their names on a category sheet to meet and discuss plans for how they want to proceed with that idea or initiative.** Often people have their name on multiple sheets so allow them to move from table to table as they want. Sometimes an idea or a few ideas will

have no one take an active interest in it at this time. That's how the group self selects the priorities needing attention. Let this be a spontaneous process.

8. **Reconvene as a whole group. Thank everyone for their participation and ask people to share what they received from the process. Invite them to keep the momentum achieved going by meeting together outside this meeting to take the next steps.** This can be a very moving and powerful time of community and connection for the group as they share their inspirations, commitments, and acknowledgements with each other. From here the process continues organically on the momentum built in the appreciative problem solving session. You will be amazed at the change in the participants.

Wonderful things happen as a result of these first steps in appreciative problem solving.

First, people naturally begin to appreciate the person with whom they shared the interview. Since they are sharing a meaningful experience, it is a vulnerable moment and their hearts open to each other. Hierarchical barriers tend to dissolve as well because they see each other as human beings instead of positions in the organization. A mutual excitement begins to build between the two people.

Next, the whole group excitement and intimacy grows as the various interviewers relate the story they heard from the other person. Positive themes and images of a future that people really want begin to emerge. This creates a strong motivation for positive change because what is possible is so compelling.

Ultimately, the spontaneously formed interest groups around recreating and enhancing certain themes continue organically. These groups act independently and have a life of their own. They may require little management or follow up. They are driven by their own attraction to a positive outcome.

While it is wise to not "over-manage this process" it is very empowering to provide opportunities to appreciate the positive actions and outcomes that begin to occur. After all, this approach is designed around the principle of catching people doing something right. If there is informal and/or public support of people's positive behavior they'll do more of it, but if you let one inspiring meeting go without any follow up, people can easily go back to business as usual.

The appreciative approach to improvement is powerful, inspiring, and compelling. The steps listed and explained here is only an outline, not a complete guide to successfully launching an appreciative problem solving adventure. **We highly recommend engaging a facilitator to plan and guide your team through the process.** This allows you time to fully participate yourself, without the schizophrenia of wearing both the participant and facilitator hat simultaneously.

Inspired by the work done by Dr. David Cooperider and Dr. Frank Barrett from Case Western University in Cleveland. Dave, Frank and a few others pioneered research into the study of Appreciative Inquiry.