

# North Star Insights

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## Guiding Organizations to Success

The theory of Appreciative Inquiry, which I learned of a little over a decade ago, seeks to foster change from a positive core. The theory is that change is more likely when we use success to build upon success, rather than focusing on fixing problems. The feature article this issue describes a practical application of this theory, employed to kick-start a strategic initiative. We've included a link to a case study on this work should you wish more details.

-Tracy

### Creating Momentum

#### *Using Appreciative Inquiry to drive your strategic initiative*

We often think that we cannot move forward on a strategic plan until we have resolved all of our issues. There is growing evidence of an alternative approach. Leaders can create momentum in a strategic initiative by identifying and building upon a small area where their group is aligned. This counter-intuitive approach was illustrated in a recent North Star Strategies strategic planning engagement with The Keystone Center and the Green Products Roundtable.

#### **The Negative Impact of Our Problem-Solving Culture**

The article *Appreciative Inquiry: New Thinking at Work* highlights our Western cultures' focus on fixing problems and closing gaps of inadequacy. It states that the "ability to identify and successfully solve problems is viewed in most workplace settings as crucial for organizational effectiveness and change."

"We are among the best problem solvers in the world. We trouble shoot everything. When used continually and over a long period of time, however, *this approach can lead to a negative culture*. If you combine a negative culture with all the challenges we face today, it could be easy to convince


ourselves that we have too many problems to overcome--to slip into a paralyzing sense of hopelessness." (emphasis added)  
-Thomas White, President, GTE Telephone Operations

This unproductive, negative culture prevents teams from having productive dialogue on issues.

#### **A Positive Core of Alignment Can Create Momentum**

By shifting our paradigm from problem solving to growing our positive core, we can build on our strengths to inspire transformational change. This method can be best understood through an example.

Recently North Star Strategies was invited to facilitate the Green Products Roundtable (GPR) as they endeavored to launch a new organization. They needed valid, objective evaluation of the continually increasing number of eco-labels and standards telling purchasers what is green, greener and greenest. The GPR recognized they had differences of opinion on critical implementation issues. These ranged from the scope of services and customers to the entity's governance and funding. The group did



believe they could move forward until these issues were resolved.

The process we used assessed the alignment of the group on a full range of opinions regarding the design and launch of this new non-profit organization. The results of the assessment indicated divergence on most of the opinions.

There was, however, full agreement on just over ten percent of the opinions. These results validated the feeling of frustration among the group.

Following the philosophy of building on the positive core, we decided not to pursue the arduous work of finding consensus on all the areas where this diverse group disagreed but chose to begin with that small area where they agreed. As we reviewed and analyzed these points of agreement, trust began to increase, and misperceptions began to fade away.

These positive conversations created excitement and momentum. The GPR believed they could create the new organization.

Within a few weeks the group, with its new optimism, began to resolve several critical issues that had been challenging them. For example, they were able to narrow the scope to offering a small number of services to North American institutional purchasers. They agreed that they could expand the scope in the future.

### **Positive Momentum Leads to Change That is Sustainable**

The final result was a consensus-based business plan for the new organization endorsed by government, academia, for-profit companies and environmental NGOs members of the GPR. As the new organization is launched and gains success, the

group knows it can build on its success and continue to resolve other issues over time.

The next time you are in a group that is hindered by frustration and conflict, consider using a process that can identify a positive core of alignment rather than focusing on traditional problem solving techniques.

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The third topic of our simple model for strategic planning is *who*.

*Who* has several dimensions in strategic planning, and each is important to consider.

- *Who will be the beneficiary of the initiative? In other words, who are the people and organizations—customers—that we want to serve? Will this change over time?*
- *Who will be implementing the plan? In the short term and in the long term?*
- *Who will be approving the plan?*

Addressing each of these questions separately and thoughtfully will often lead to insights in the content of the plan and in the process used to create the plan. Alignment on the answers to these three dimensions of *who* will increase the ability to execute successfully.

## **Contact Us**

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