

Appreciative Inquiry Breaks Down Walls: Foundation Facilitation of District and University Collaboration

Caitlin Scott & Elizabeth Gandhi

In our communities multiple organizations compete to provide services for the same schools and students. This competition is counterproductive and can lead to hurt feelings and discouragement among organizational leaders. What role can foundations play in breaking down silos and overcoming past negative experiences? How do Leadership Team meetings and use of appreciative inquiry influence collaborative decision making?

The appreciative inquiry process may be particularly important because it focuses attention on future improvement rather than past failure. The process involves four stages: (1) **Discovery**, in which leaders discuss the current state of their work and what makes it worthwhile, (2) **Dream**, in which leaders envision their ideal future work, (3) **Design**, in which leaders work together to decide on the steps they need to take to make their dream a reality, and (4) **Destiny**, in which leaders work to sustain this new reality.

Using online premeeting surveys and meeting agendas and notes, this study examined how a Midwestern family-based foundation built trust between potentially competing organizations by implementing monthly Leadership Team meetings to aid collaboration between a university and district implementing Career Ladder, a collaboratively designed and delivered graduate program in literacy for inservice teachers. During the seven-month study period (January–July 2014), the study found:

- 1. The content of meetings shifted and team members became more involved**
 - Over time the content of meetings shifted from a reactive response to technical challenges to a proactive collaborative approach.
 - Leadership team members became more involved in establishing the timeline and flow of meetings and even began taking responsibility for facilitating certain sections of the meetings.

- 2. Team members increased in their ability to make collaborative decisions**
 - Leadership Team members actively engaged in appreciative inquiry and used this process to make collaborative decisions.
 - Meetings included the first three stages of the inquiry, while surveys focused on the discovery and dream stages in order to inform the work conducted in the meetings.

- The Leadership Team used the appreciative inquiry cycle to address three main priorities: participant delivery of professional development to colleagues, establishing a vision around collaboration, and participant recruitment and selection for the Career Ladder program. The team is at a different point in the cycle for

3. Over time, the Leadership Team’s program goals became more realistic and appropriate

- Short-term (six-month) goals focused on work that could be accomplished through collaboration
- Long-term (two-year) goals became more far-reaching and ambitious, based on what they were able to accomplish in the short-term

This study demonstrates the role that foundations can play in providing structure for realizing a team’s collaborative vision.



Education Northwest works to transform teaching and learning in the Pacific Northwest and across the nation. Our services to states, districts, schools, and community-based organizations, and foundations include rigorous research and evaluation of new and existing programs; research-based technical assistance in areas such as equity, school improvement, and distance learning; widely acclaimed professional development in the fields of literacy and mathematics education; and strategic communications that maximize impact.

We are hiring! Find out about career opportunities at educationnorthwest.org or send your résumé to: 101 SW Main Street, Suite 500, Portland, OR 97204-3213. Call 503.275.9500 or 800.547.6339.