

Welcome to the July 2002 issue of **Management Shorts**
Written by Andrea Corney (ACorney@acorn-od.com)
Published by Acorn Consulting (www.acorn-od.com)
Back Issues available at <http://www.topica.com/lists/shorts/read>

IN THIS ISSUE

1. INTRO: Getting Uncomfortable
2. MANAGEMENT SHORT: Appreciative Inquiry
3. GETTING STARTED: Tell Some Stories

1. INTRO: Getting Uncomfortable

Like most people I love the IDEA of growth and learning, but I find the REALITY pretty uncomfortable. It would be so much easier to lie back on the metaphorical couch and watch soap operas! In the past few weeks I've had two opportunities to get uncomfortable. And I've decided to choose to stay uncomfortable and see what I learn in the process.

The first opportunity was signing up for Team in Training, a fundraising program for the national Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. Training for a 111 mile bike ride, raising funds, learning about the huge challenges faced by people with blood-related cancers – I'm getting more uncomfortable by the minute! But I'm committed. I've already learned what a huge difference the fundraising makes in medical research – in the past 20 years the survival rate for childhood leukemia has grown from 5% to over 80%. If only every investment yielded that kind of return. And yesterday I talked with one of our team honorees – Tom, who has leukemia, joins us regularly at training events to talk about his experience and to provide support to us in our training. When I thanked him for the support he gives us, he told me the program was a life line for him; the only thing that kept him going. I can already see that embracing the discomfort of this experience is going to have a positive impact on my life as well as the lives of people with blood-related cancers.

The second opportunity to get uncomfortable is the real topic of this newsletter. (Finally) A colleague recently introduced me to a concept called "Appreciative Inquiry". The basic idea is that positive thought leads to positive action, so its most productive to spend your time thinking and talking about what works, not what doesn't work. This goes against the grain of so many of us who pride ourselves on being great problem solvers. How can we fix things if we don't talk about and fully understand what doesn't work?! Well, rather than dismiss it as

pure Pollyanna, I decided to live with the discomfort of a new idea that doesn't fit my preconceived notions. I'd like to ask you to do the same for a few minutes.

2. MANAGEMENT SHORT: Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry is a frame of mind that assumes you get more of whatever you focus on. If you focus on problems, even with the goal of solving them, you just get more of those problems. If you focus on what works, you get more of that (and presumably that leaves less space for the problems).

Studies show that the brain tends not to hear negative words like “no” and “not”. A golfer who thinks “Don't hit the sandtrap” is really telling his brain, “Hit the sandtrap”. A golfer who instead thinks, “Hit the green” is more likely to get the golf ball where he wants it. Have you ever noticed that Tiger Woods only talks about what he is doing well? Even when an interviewer asks about a mistake or problem, his response is positive.

Another example of how internal dialogue influences action is a study done many years ago called the Pygmalion Project. For reasons that will become obvious, a study like this would never clear today's ethics committees. In this study, grade school children were randomly assigned to three groups. Their teachers were told that Group 1 had been identified as high performers, Group 2 as average students, and Group 3 as poor performers. In reality, all 3 groups had the same mix of abilities. Only the teachers had been given this false information. At the end of the school year students in Group 1 had indeed done better than average in school, Group 2 had been middle of the road and Group 3 had done poorly in school. The only difference was that the teachers had a certain story in their head when they interacted with each student!

Now apply this to the work setting. What story do you have in your head about each of your direct reports or about your peers. Where did that story come from? How long had you worked with each person before the story started to form in your head? What might happen if you started thinking of each of them as high performers? (Did you just wince at this suggestion? Embrace your discomfort.)

I learned about Appreciative Inquiry at a retreat for a nonprofit board on which I serve. We were developing a 10 year vision for the organization. Members of the Board shared stories of times when the organization had been at its best. These stories generated a lot of positive emotional energy and creativity about what we could be in the future – all grounded in reality by the specifics of real stories. It was a terrific experience with some great outcomes – not just great ideas about where we should go as an organization, but a lot of energy and enthusiasm for making those ideas come true.

This experience opened me up to the power of Appreciative Inquiry. I admit I'm still a little uncomfortable about using this approach when the task is problem solving and conflict resolution. Still, I've decided to live with the discomfort and see where it takes me.

3. GETTING STARTED: Tell Some Stories

There are many approaches to using Appreciative Inquiry, but the simplest is to set aside some time for your team or group to share stories of real events. Ask them to talk about a time when they experienced the team or organization at its best (most effective, productive, creative, or any other quality that matters to you). What was so great about the experience? How did it happen? How did they feel about themselves and about the other people involved?

Once you've shared your stories, ask the group to identify the factors that made these stories possible. Push them to be as specific as possible. Was it a level of coordination that had the team working like a well-oiled machine? Was it specific training or resources that were easily available? Was it seeing how the boss handled mistakes? Maybe a weekly staff meeting that allowed rapid identification of upcoming challenges, a commitment to supporting team members facing a crisis, or regular visits to customer sites. List all the factors and ask the team to identify the most important ones. Now ask the group how to increase these factors in your daily work. What can each person do to allow the team or organization to function at its best?

On a smaller scale, think about a work or personal relationship that is frustrating you. You've probably told the story of this relationship to a few friends or co-workers. Try telling a new story that focuses on the aspects of the relationship that work. Can you do it? Try again! Could you talk with that person about what each of you could do to expand the parts of the relationship that work? Rather than focus on all the things they do that you don't like, talk about the positive action you'd like from them. So instead of "don't leave your dishes in the sink!", how about "Please wash your dishes before you leave the house".

As I write this I've got all kinds of "yes, buts" going through my head. Even so, I've decided to experiment by telling myself a positive story about the value of Appreciative Inquiry and seeing what happens if I choose to believe it can be effective.

In future newsletters I'll be letting you know how this experiment goes – as well as a few reflections on what we can learn about team building from the Leukemia Society's Team in Training Program.

Many thanks to Carole Robin, Ph.D., Senior Partner at Destra Consulting Group (www.destraconsulting.com) for introducing me to Appreciative Inquiry.

Please forward this issue of Management Shorts to colleagues and friends who could use a little “appreciation”. (As opposed to “don’t delete this e-mail and forget about it”!)

Warm regards,
Andrea

About Management Shorts

Management Shorts is a free newsletter for senior managers on leadership, management and teamwork – the key leverage points for improving the speed and quality of decision-making and execution.

Copyright 2002, Acorn Consulting

Feel free to forward this newsletter to friends and colleagues. You may reprint this newsletter in whole or quote with attribution to Andrea Corney and Acorn Consulting and a link to www.acorn-od.com.

Back issues are available at <http://www.topica.com/lists/shorts/read>