



For the first three Tuesdays in July, the Red Deer Chamber staff set aside their regular work and turned their attention to updating the organization's strategic plan.

This live document describes the Chamber's operational goals and defines what the staff, board and volunteers will do to advance them.

This year, in a prelude to the strategic planning process, the Chamber engaged Jim Taylor, of Rolyat Corp. Ltd. to provide the staff with an understanding of the Appreciative Inquiry process, to enable them to frame their planning process in a positive, forward-focused manner.

"The single greatest skill in unlocking business potential is to understand the art of questioning," Tim Creedon, the Chamber's Executive Director said. "Appreciative Inquiry brings with it a discipline which is focused on asking positive questions to unlock solutions which are focused on building on the best of an organization."

Taylor describes a scenario involving an Appreciative Inquiry-enabled Avon Mexico, where the organizational culture changed 180 degrees in less than two years and transformed itself from an organization that was hostile to women, to one that capitalized on a talented female staff and delivered unprecedented success. "In many businesses, people spend more time grousing about what they're not happy with, rather than creating an inspiring vision of where they want to take their organization," Taylor explains. "It's much more beneficial to place your emphasis on building on strengths, focusing your energy and attention on the desired future of the enterprise, rather than on the problems it may be facing at the moment."

The essence of Appreciative Inquiry centres on some basic assumptions, among others: in every society, organization or group, something works; what we focus on becomes our reality; it is important to value differences; the language we use creates

our reality. Growing out of those assumptions and with a positive focus, the Chamber staff crafted the questions they needed to ask about where they wanted the organization to go. "The work we did with Jim helped us come to a collective view of what we wanted to achieve in our business planning process," Creedon says. "Using the AI framework allowed us to look at what we do really well and what we could do even better in the future to become the best Chamber in Alberta."

Some organizations concentrate resources on correcting problems, troubleshooting and finding and identifying flaws. Over time, this is an approach that can lead to a stultifying negative culture. Approaching these challenges from a different direction affects the manner in which they are considered, generally leading to a more positive resolution. "I think people are open to it," Taylor says, "They're often unaware of the great value that can accrue to their business through changing their focus."

He cites another example of AI success, when the technique was employed by John Deere Harvester Works. In that case, antagonistic labour-management relations were transformed, individuals' input incorporated time and money saving ideas that reduced the product development cycle from five to three years. Taylor describes another exercise called "Ain't it awful - What I really want". "It gets people to write down the things they're really unhappy with and then convert those things into an expression of what they really want," he explains. At the end of the exercise, the person is left with a list of things, directions, attitudes and outcomes that replace the complaints that engendered the exercise.

Appreciative Inquiry isn't just a juggling of anecdotes, or mindless happy talk. It's a complex science designed with success as an outcome. The approach can be taught one-on-one, in a workshop setting or delivered to large groups as well. Defining the core principles, developing an understanding of the importance of discovery, dreaming, design and destiny, and applying these to an interview process enables the development of the tools required for positive resolutions.

"Asking those questions in the beginning of the AI process and reviewing the responses gave (the Chamber staff) an insight into helping us to plan what we wanted to achieve," Creedon says. You can learn more about AI by visiting www.rolyatcorp.com

The article above describes the work using Appreciative Inquiry that I have been doing with the Chamber.

"AI" has great potential to improve the profitability of your business, and increase the loyalty of your customers and employees.

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