

## **Appreciative Inquiry Fostering Wholeness in Organizations**

We are all in search for completeness; thus aiming at making our organizations, our relationships, our lives, and ourselves whole. Nevertheless, our natural tendency is to divide, fragment and differentiate. This is also true in organizational life: fragmented, divided and separated in departments, divisions, and business units. Yet what happens when there is an innovative strategic planning and decision making approach that brings the whole organization, the entire system together in the same room? Can this experience bring wholeness? Can this enhance the possibility of integrity and bring out the best in human organizations? Nutrimental Industria e Comercio de Alimentos S.A. confirmed so.

### **A Story of a System: What is Nutrimental?**

Nutrimental Industria e Comercio de Alimentos S.A. is a manufacturer of healthy food products, located in Curitiba, State of Parana, in Brazil. It is a privately held Brazilian corporation, founded in 1968, that produces a wide range of food products targeting several different markets. It employs approximately 700 people and had revenues of US\$ 70 million in 1997.

In 1968, when Nutrimental was founded, its purpose was to manufacture bean soup and powder mashed potatoes to supply a public school meal program from the Brazilian Government. Twenty years later with revenues of US\$ 60 million it had a variety of products and a considerable technological, economical, and organizational capacity to not only take the leadership in supplying governmental programs, but also to expand into the consumer market.

In the early 1990's, Nutrimental decided to create a diversification strategy called 'Nova Era' (New Era), that aimed at reducing the dependency from government programs, as well as, enhancing the organizational culture that would be in position to identify, develop and implement the necessary changes for the new Nutrimental.

In 1991, during the implementation of the New Era project, all government programs collapsed with the government canceling orders. From 1992 to 1995 Nutrimental had very limited working capital.

In 1997 the organization decided to face boldly their need to go through a complete transformation. The leadership contacted us at Case Western Reserve University and invited us to work with them as they focused their goals on the development of a workshop that would help the organization regain its confidence and become more competitive. Appreciative Inquiry (A.I.) was the approach selected to help them reach their objective. We worked with them to launch a two-year project that started with an "Appreciative Inquiry Summit" and helped the organization identify its best practices and most important strengths.

In September 1997 we prepared for the Appreciative Inquiry Summit. The day before the Summit we facilitated a one-day meeting. 180 people attended, including employees, managers, clients and bankers. They were introduced to A.I. and given the opportunity to practice A.I. in interviews with each other. The following day we had 700 people in a warehouse inside the main manufacturing plant in dialogue about Nutrimental's past, present and future. People who had never spoken in public suddenly were on the stage sharing their life stories in the company with other 700 people! The energy generated during the main events was unheard of in the company. We followed the 4 cycles of AI and at every new event we confirmed the commitment and engagement of Nutrimental's personnel, from the janitor to the CEO, clients and suppliers.

### **The Outcome of the Intervention**

There are many ways in which organizations express the transformations that they are going through. In business terms, results are expressed in a quantitative manner. At

Nutrimental the average return per worker from the period between September/96 and April/97 compared to September/97 and April/98 increased by 22.3%. This result reflected the dynamic atmosphere of the organization after the A.I. Summit. It also demonstrates the commitment of Nutritional's personnel to the company's new initiative.

### **The Spirit of the Whole**

Several voluntary teams were formed with the purpose of implementing the action plans. Many signs and sounds of wholeness emerged throughout the organization. A feeling of connection and a sense of being heard surrounded the entire company. For Joana Lechnicki, machine operator: *"The Appreciative Inquiry gave the employees, including people from the production line, the freedom to know more about Nutritional. We are all presenting new ideas and collaborating with the company. Before, the doors were closed but with the new approach and participation in the process the employees can put their voices on the table and that's why we are all committed and motivated to attain the company's objectives"*.

Nutrimental experienced an increase of 27% in sales from the period September/96 to April/97 compared to September/97 to April/98. The increase in sales reflects the development of company's personnel. After the signs of change in the market place, the team decided to invest in the implementation of the new ideas that came from the Appreciative Inquiry Summit.

### **Conclusion**

Modern behavioral science, small group theory and systems theory served us well as foundations for organization development principles and practices to date. The new millennium brings with it a context of globalization and a demand for organization development processes that engage large numbers of people, on line, and in person simultaneously in the co-creation of our shared future.

Appreciative Inquiry as one of these processes fosters a sense of wholeness in the organizational context. It is in this kind of intervention, one that liberates human spirits to voice their feelings and thoughts about what really matters for them, that wholeness surfaces. To have the whole system in the same room empowers the human potential and gives wings to everyone's imagination. As a consequence, the sense of recognition and equality that arises makes organizational transformation possible.

We have witnessed the power of this new generation of OD practices that is appreciative in nature, rather than problem oriented. Our experience encourages us to move boldly into whole system process with a radical, participatory view. It invites a cornucopia of diverse voices to be expressed and heard and it will lead to the co-creation of a higher ground for meeting our transformational vision for our organizations and for our world.

Central to this new generation of practice is the Appreciative Inquiry Summit. It is a whole system of positive change process for moving an organization towards its highest potential - the highest ideals imaginable among its members and stakeholders. It is an invitation for participants to discover what gives life - to themselves and to their organization. It is an opportunity for participants to dream of what might be possible if their most cherished values are enacted as organizational realities. And it is a time for the members of an organization to engage with one another in meaningful ways, so that today's interactions, conversations and stories become the seeds of a well-lived destiny.