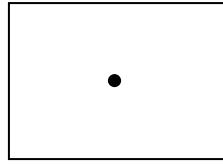


Appreciative Inquiry: White Space and Knuckle Balls

White Space / Black Dot Metaphor

Take a piece of blank paper and put a small circle in the center of the paper. Fill in the circle so you have a black dot in the center of your paper.



Step back from the paper. What do you see?

A black dot . . . and what about all the white space?

Let the piece of paper square be a metaphor for our organizations.

Let the black dot • represent all the stuff that doesn't work—the faults and failings of the human system we call our organizations.

The white space is all the social arrangements, the norms, the structural components, the ways of being and working together that are successful.

*What's
working!*

The white space represents everything that the past and present members of the organization have created that give life to the organization and make it work well.

An Appreciative Inquiry review is an exploration into the “white space.”

For the most part we ignore the white space and focus on the black dot.

Some people become so engrossed in the black dot that eventually everything, even the organization itself, looks like a problem to be solved.

Appreciative Inquiry reverses the change process and suggests that by studying the white space we can make more positive change with greater speed and less conflict than we can through problem solving.

Let's Play Ball!

How might this “white space” metaphor play out for a promising baseball pitcher?

Imagine a baseball coach is working with a young, promising pitcher. The young hurler has two, impressive mainstay pitches--a fastball and a slider. Almost every time he throws the fastball or the slider, he gets hitters out. Fastball a swing and a miss! Slider ... fools the hitter and catches him looking--strike three! Success.

Every once in a while the young pitcher feels that he needs to throw a knuckle ball. Somewhere along the way, a previous coach (or perhaps a teammate) told the pitcher that he needed a knuckle ball to complement his other two commanding pitches, the fastball and the slider. The only trouble is that most of the time when he throws a knuckle ball, it

gets clobbered. Knuckle ball smack--a double. Knuckle ball ... crack--a home run. Oops. Whoa.

One afternoon at practice, the coach takes the young pitcher aside for a conversation, an appreciative inquiry of his pitching repertoire. He helps the young pitcher to see, understand and discuss what is working. He helps the young pitcher to appreciate the wisdom in doing more of what is bringing him (and the team) success--throwing more fastballs and sliders.

They agree to focus on those pitches, the things that are working. Instead of trying to "fix" what is broken, the knuckle ball, they commit to concentrating on making his fastball and slider even better, more effective pitches. The coach and the pitcher decide that it is best to put the knuckle ball aside, at least for the rest of the season.

How many of us, whether we were the coach or the pitcher in this example, would have spent a great deal of time trying to improve or "fix" the pitcher's knuckle ball? How much time in your organization is devoted to "trying to fix the knuckle ball?"

Ready for a change in tactics? ... one that will likely take your results to a higher level ... delve into what's right and good about your organization's best pitch!