

Organizational Consultation: An Appreciative Approach

I. What's In the Straw?

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There is an old joke that one of us first heard as a young person. It seems that an employee of a Russian factory was stopped one day by a security guard as the employee was leaving the factory. The worker was pushing a wheelbarrow full of straw. The security guard was absolutely certain that the worker was trying to smuggle something out in the straw, so he stopped the worker and carefully inspected the straw. There is nothing in the straw. He had to reluctantly allow the worker to leave the factory. Next day, the same story is played out. The worker came to the security gate with a wheelbarrow full of straw. A careful inspection ensues. Nothing was found.

This scenario was repeated many times over the following years. Careful searches, but nothing there. The security guard stopped the worker one day to tell him that he was about to be transferred to a post many miles away. He put his arm around the worker and asked in a plaintive voice, "Comrade, I know that you have been stealing from this factory, but I have never been able to discover what you are stealing. I will be leaving tonight and promise to tell no one about your remarkable secret. Please, comrade, tell me what you are stealing." The worker looked around and whispered in the security guard's ear: "wheelbarrows!"

The humor in this story lies in the overlooking of the obvious. We search in vain for the stolen item only to discover that it is the wheelbarrow itself that is being stolen. In a similar way we are reminded: "It's the economy, stupid!" We suddenly stop in the middle of the day and remind ourselves that our organizations are populated with people: "It's the people, stupid!" Employees aren't going to work hard unless they are motivated. We can't accomplish anything without a skilled and knowledgeable workforce. Organizations are living systems, not just machines. These simple truths are often overlooked.

Considering all the changes occurring in contemporary societies throughout the world, it is often easy to overlook these wheelbarrows—and, in particular, the indispensable role that people play in organizations. The people-factor in organizations is particularly challenging, for several profound changes are occurring that are not easily understood or addressed. It is not only the content of the work people do in organizations that has changed; more importantly, it is the structures and processes of the work that have changed in a profound and irreversible manner. It is the way in which we relate to one another in an organizational setting that is being transformed. We can handle the new technology and the new products and services being asked of our customers. What we can't handle very well are the new organizational forms that are being created in order to contain these new technologies, products and services and take into account the new world into which they are being delivered.

Toward an Appreciative Model of Organizational Consultation

During the past two decades, organizations throughout the world have undergone a transition so profound as to be revolutionary. Turbulent public policies and regulations, fickle consumer needs and interests, shifting values about the quality of life and work, and the intrusion and acceleration of technological achievements have all brought at times almost unbearable pressure on corporations, social service agencies, schools, governmental bureaus, and other complex organizations. The demands for new modes of organization consultation have been very much both a part of and a response to these rapidly changing conditions.

In attempting to respond to these critical issues, most organizational consultants have found little time for reflection on the nature of their practice or for expansion of the range and scope of their tools and strategies. This set of essays is intended to provide just such a resource, one which will enable the practitioner to reflect on and expand his or her own perspectives and preferences regarding ways in which to improve organizational functions and fully engage human capital. These essays are also intended as a resource for those who wish to practice an appreciative approach to organizational consultation. We build our model of organizational coaching on the foundation of a strongly held tenant regarding the appreciation of human capital in contemporary organization. We offer a variety of organizational consulting strategies and practices that lead through appreciation to the powerful, energizing release of human capital for the achievement of organizational success.