

HOW DOES AN ORGANIZATION BECOME A "HAPPY ORGANIZATION"?

s ServiceCenter Gave It a Try - and Succeeded!

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1. Happiness Approaching

For some years now, the US has seen the advent of an unprecedented field of research, which has been getting an increasing amount of attention and has now arrived in Austria as well: happiness studies.

Psychologist and author Martin E.P. Seligman ("Learned Helplessness") laid the groundwork for this development by wondering why the entire field of psychology focused solely on the ailing, pathological and negative aspects of the soul instead of trying to answer the following question: What is happiness? Some years ago, he published a book on this topic, "Authentic Happiness", which became a bestseller. This made Seligman the "father" of Positive Psychology - a field which has yielded rich research findings about the factors and conditions of happiness, which have in turn yielded specific recommendations.

Go to www.authentichappiness.com to learn more.

Another widely known book on this subject was written by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who introduced the concept of "flow". Flow, as described by the author, is a state reached when one pursues goals with utmost dedication and passion, getting fully immersed in the task and thus feeling like getting carried by a current of energy. This state resembles experiences of enlightenment described by Buddhists and greatly differs from superficial moments of happiness experienced when eating chocolate or buying a new car. Experiencing flow changes people permanently.

German futurist Matthias Horx attaches great importance to the concept of flow. He predicts that in the future companies will have to focus more closely on happiness, both their own and their clients'. Happiness studies have thus reached European shores.

What all these approaches have in common is that their findings rely on scientific research and not, as one might be inclined to think, on a spiritual concept or rose-colored glasses. Happiness studies do not proclaim: "Don't worry, be happy". Rather, the focus lies on studying the circumstances of emergence of happiness.

2. Appreciative Inquiry – One Road To a Happy Organization

In the past couple of years, the "Appreciative Inquiry" approach has quietly and unobtrusively made its way into corporations. Today, there is a small community of enthusiasts. Anybody who has been involved with AI feels the power and energy inherent to this approach.

Among all American developments and trends described above, AI is the area that deals with questions of change within organizations and the evolvement of a positive management style. The other areas focus mainly on specific issues.

AI is a method and a "philosophy" of change. The philosophy says the following:

"Changes will be more successful and long-lasting if we discover our strengths and make use of them instead of focusing on problems and shortcomings."

The core methodology of AI consists of highly structured interviews, first done on an individual basis and then at large conferences. Interviews revolve around finding resources, strengths and positive qualities within an organization: what is working well in our organization? What are we best at? How have we solved our problems so far?

AI, as a method and an intellectual approach, triggers long-lasting changes by using an organization's skills and strengths as discovered during the process of change to meet future challenges.

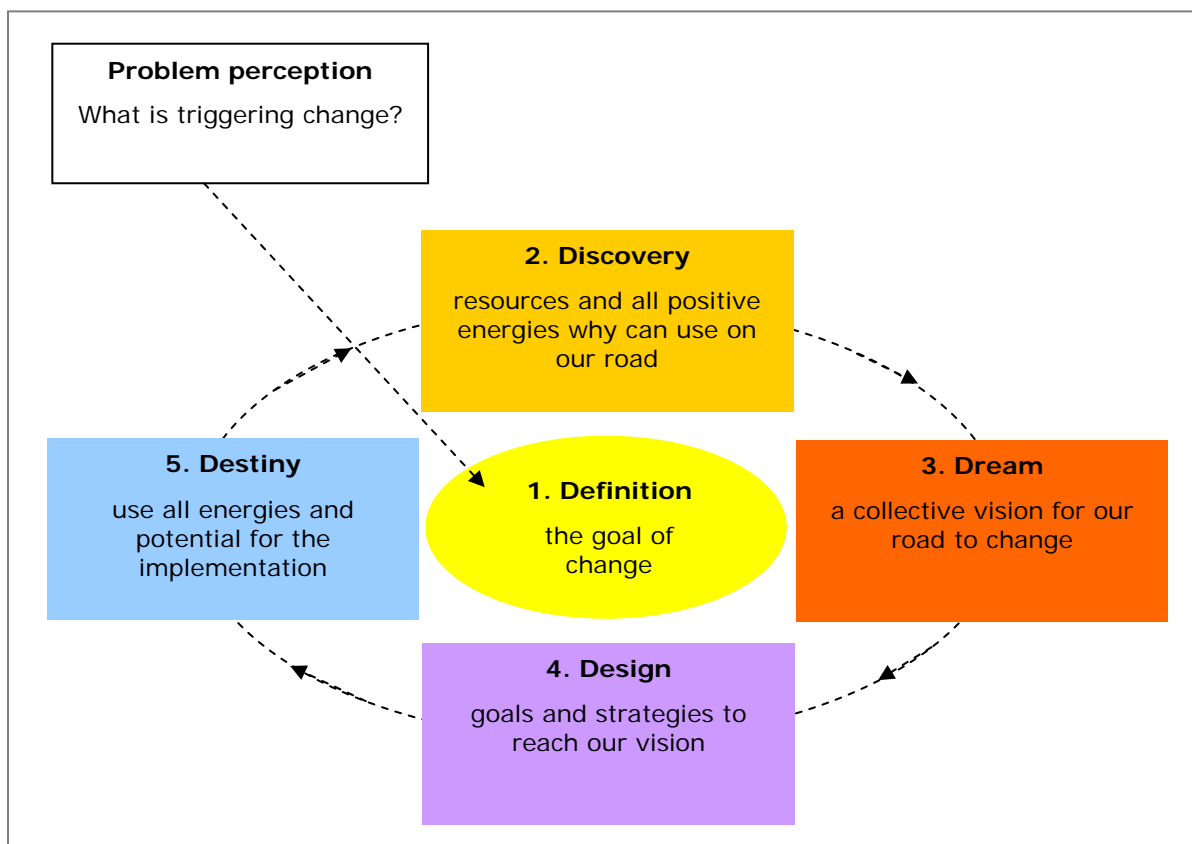
This makes AI an alternative concept to those approaches that rely on a problem and error analysis and go on to devote a lot of room to an organization's shortcomings and problems. In most cases, the consultant offers "the" solution following the client's deep immersion in his or her own shortcomings.

AI, on the other hand, AI relies on an organization's potential and does not propose any solutions. Everything that's available within an organization can be part of the solution or be a resource for getting there.

Many years ago, we adopted AI as part of our philosophy and our methodology. We have been using it in our work as consultants to accompany processes of change and we have also covered this topic in our newsletter (cf. Train Mail 2003-3 in the Train Mail Archive).

AI can be used both in very small settings, i.e. in short interviews at the beginning of a workshop and for large change processes.

AI processes always follow the 5-phase pattern shown below:



All these steps of the process are accompanied by the tool of Appreciative Inquiry. Organizations that pass through these phases emerge fortified. In addition to this, they have not only solved the problem, but also changed part of their corporate culture: the widespread culture of "disgruntled employees". This change in culture enables organizations to handle their problems differently in the future. Hence, the change has a long-term effect.

3. Practical Example s ServiceCenter: An Organization in Search of Happiness

The following notes about the process were written by employee development specialist Andreas Schöller in collaboration with Ruth Selinger, the external consultant.

Initial Situation

s ServiceCenter is a subsidiary of Erste Bank and Sparkassengruppe and currently has approximately 160 employees in Austria. The organization struggles with common call center problems: high employee turnover, many sick days and high psychological and physical strain on call center agents, resulting from a lacking sense of achievement and a high number of short, impersonal customer phone calls. The management had expressed its intention to conduct another employee survey to learn about their employees' motivation, level of satisfaction, their suggestions and needs. Being an employee development specialist who had already gained insight into the AI method during a TRAIN workshop, I suggested basing the upcoming survey on the AI method. This was in the spring of 2006.

We started from the following hypotheses:

Highly motivated employees play a crucial role when it comes to reaching corporate goals.

Strengthening the s ServiceCenter to develop an appreciative corporate culture will have a positive side effect on sick leave and employee turnover.

Initial Clarification with the Management Team

As a first step, a meeting with the management was arranged with the purpose of specifying the assignment for the consultant team (internal/external). Initially, some doubts and reservations needed to be dispelled. We also provided a lot of information about the method and the expected benefit for the company.

Doubts regarding this method arose periodically ("rose-colored glasses" etc.), but were dispelled to the point that the process was approved ("well, let's see if it really works out").

Process Road Map

The project structure and the first draft of the road map were worked out and presented to the management team. Project staff was selected and given preliminary information about the AI method.

Workshop with the Management Team

The goals of the process were described with three cultural concepts:

fairness/integrity/transparency

Hence the project name "FIT".

With this goal in mind, we went on to the next phase of the process.

The "Research Team" Is Formed and Trained

A group of employees is formed. It will be in charge of the AI-based employee survey and its analysis. The makeup of this group is intended to reflect the entire range of existing perspectives within the organization to the best possible extent. Hence, members of this group are recruited from all levels of the company hierarchy and all departments of the s ServiceCenter. This was to ensure that the entire company indirectly participates in all decision-making.

Employee Survey

Planning and actually carrying out the interviews was a major organizational challenge. A total of 145 interviews, lasting approximately one hour minutes each, to be conducted by 14 interviewers in July and August while minimizing disruptions to the operations in the call center, needed to be planned. Finding adequate rooms (meeting rooms with privacy were needed) also turned out to be difficult, as was handling short-term changes. However, all these difficulties were overcome thanks to the project staff's great dedication.

Results Are Processed

After the conclusion of the interview phase, results were reviewed, consolidated and adapted for the presentation. This was done during a three-day workshop with the research team.

Consolidated results were reworked in such a way that they could be presented to all employees at the large conference that was to follow.

The research team divided this task. Small teams were formed, each working on specific aspects.

Pre-Conference Preparations

All team members were very well aware of the fact that they were going to play a very important role. They had become true experts who had carried out a study about their own company, including every step from the planning phase to the final presentation. Their co-workers would be very intrigued to learn about the findings of the study: What did the others say? What came out of it? What will follow from this?

The Conference

And then the day arrived.

Title of the employee event:

Employees moving employees (FIT - fairness - integrity - transparency)

Duration: 1 day (a Saturday!)

All ServiceCenter employees - from management to call center agents - were there (with very few exceptions). A large conference room in a beautiful ambience at Erste Bank was a worthy setting that conveyed a sense of appreciation.

All issues were worked out in discussions, creative approaches and presentations.

It was agreed that every department would take specific steps in order to help the company move forward.

The conference was closed in a spirit of high energy and a sense of awakening.

Conference Snapshots:





Effect and Outlook: What Is Different Now and What Is Next?

That was in the fall of 2006.

The positive effects of this project are mostly felt indirectly. The positive perception of the corporate culture was reinforced, as proved by a lot of favorable feedback. Here are two examples of feedback by employees, provided during and after the interview phase:

An e-mail by a team leader, addressed to the management team:

"I believe we are on the right track to become a truly 'FIT' company - and getting all this positive feedback during evaluation interviews is a delightful experience. Here is one example that illustrates this positive feedback. I received it yesterday from a female employee: "It is apparent that s ServiceCenter is well on its way to becoming an independent department and that we now have very little in common with other call centers. It makes me proud to be part of this company and it also makes me very optimistic about the future."

The following is a written response by a female employee on the occasion of the employee interview: "I am very satisfied, but I still want to improve my skills and

become a "good call center agent". ... I have come to know the ServiceCenter and all my co-workers very well and I do place a lot of trust in the company, especially because you really get the impression that you matter as a human being, not just as another name on the payroll. Everybody is deeply "human" and very helpful and considerate: the agents themselves, the team leaders, HR people or the boss at the very top. I appreciate this very much because this is nothing you can take for granted nowadays. I feel like I am in very good hands at this company and I am very optimistic about the future because I am convinced that the ServiceCenter is a good employer and that this will not change in the future. I look forward to the upcoming changes in 2007!

Given the high spirits and excitement at the employee event, members of the research team were - not surprisingly - a little disappointed about the fact that this was not going to last. Some had concerns that these efforts would somehow "end up in a drawer".

In order to keep AI and FIT alive, further develop them and encourage continuous reflection about the process that had been started, a so-called "feedback group" was established right after the end of the employee event.

The feedback group's mission statement and responsibilities:

- We all work in different areas of the company, which makes us a "microcosm" of the s ServiceCenter.
- We are a prism where the corporate culture can be felt.
- We ensure that the spirit born with FIT lives on.
- We interrelate all work initiated by teams and units in collaboration with the management team at the employee event on October 21, 2006.
- We observe all steps towards implementation that were taken during project FIT.
- We observe the effects FIT has on our corporate culture and we report on them.

The start of the feedback group's activities as well as continuous information about its findings provided to the entire company contributes to the goal of permanently establishing the concept of FIT (as well as the AI approach) in the s ServiceCenter. Some specific follow-up projects, both small and large, are already in place. Findings have already been made available as well.

Several teams are working on the actual implementation of specific ideas regarding communication, competences, corporate culture, education, team development, social issues, transparency and leadership.

All 2007 employee review sessions (performance agreements) will focus on the enhancement of a corporate culture of fairness, integrity and transparency, embodied by executives at the s ServiceCenter.

As for many processes of change, it mostly depends on the management to ensure that obtained results have come to stay. And, if improvements to the corporate culture have been achieved, it is also up to management to actually live them on an everyday basis to promote these changes. The management team at the s ServiceCenter has, among others, pledged to ensure transparency and will hold a conference on that very topic called "The s ServiceCenter lives FIT".

In the summer of 2007, the management team plans to further develop the company's strategic principles by using AI. It was already been determined that the following slogans describing the desired corporate culture will be included in the company's strategy principles:

- FIT
- for a strong, lively and dynamic corporate culture
 - for a healthy and efficient organization
 - adequately prepared for future challenges

- Fairness - for an appropriate and fair leadership and decision-making culture
- Integrity - for an open and trustworthy communication culture
- Transparency - for a comprehensive and plausible information policy

4. Closing Remark

The AI process has shown what this method can do. In stark contrast to prior employee surveys, which actually weakened the company, barely enhanced employee motivation and did not reduce employee turnover, this process has left the s ServiceCenter fortified because the entire company identified its own energies and its potential and made good use of it. The level of motivation has risen, but also the willingness to actually contribute to changes.

Employee surveys usually set high expectations and eventually lead to disappointments. AI sharpens one's perception for one's own strengths and makes people take responsibility.

The decision of having the company's own employees conduct the interviews was highly rewarding and revealing. In addition to "discovering" skills and strengths, new ones emerged and were developed. It was especially the "research group" that developed unexpected skills. These skills will be available on a long-term basis and they can be used in the future.

An organization's "happiness" will, among others, depend on its ability to master challenges that are both interesting and realistic - by discovering in-house potential to deliver services required to reach that goal. Participants felt an immense joy about participating in such an important process and playing such a crucial and effective role. This was partially due to the trust the management placed in its employees and their willingness to assume responsibility. For many participants, this joy was associated with a feeling of flow, which has hugely positive repercussions in the company. The management team at the s ServiceCenter has decided to continue on this road and to define the corporate strategic approach by considering this aspect.

An organization in search of happiness.



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