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Appreciative Inquiry Introduction

Guest was Sara Orem



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Sara L.Orem, Ph.D. has twenty years of management experience and fifteen years management consulting in and to major financial services companies in the U. S., Britain and Australia. Her current focus is on the development and use of positive methods



including Appreciative Inquiry in coaching and group processes. *Appreciative Coaching* describes in detail the method Sara has developed for her coaching practice which serves women and men looking at self-started transitions.

Sara teaches in the area of leadership development and have led leadership development efforts among global leadership teams and as part of succession planning efforts. She often coach leaders in transition as part of these consulting contracts.

Sara has consulted to small non-profits, large corporations and government agencies around the themes of leadership development, leader transition and change, organizational change, and using positive processes to accomplish any of the aforementioned.

Appreciative Inquiry (sometimes shortened to "AI") is primarily an organizational development method which seeks to engage all levels of an organization by taking an "asset-based approach." It starts with the belief that every organization, and every person in that organization, has positive aspects that can be built upon. It asks questions like "What's working well?", "What's good about what you are currently doing?" David Cooperrider is generally credited with coining the term 'Appreciative Inquiry'.

Sara's Website: <http://www.saraorem.com/>

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Sarah Orem: I borrow, teach, and work with other faculty to try to help them be more effective in the course room, sometimes have a better presence in the course room. All of Capella is online so that when I talk about having a presence in a course room it's not me standing in front of 30 learners, it's me communicating via the Internet in emails and discussion responses to them and presence is really important because that's how we meet.

I do some consulting for a local company that works primarily with city and state agencies and large non-profits. I do that work usually with people who are currently not in a happy place. I've worked with transportation agencies and the juvenile probation department in San Francisco.

The trick is to turn the mindset around of the management in those places. That really helps them speak to people in a different way, speak to the people who work for them in a different way.

I'm trying to develop a topic around appreciative teaching and I've done some blogging about that on my website. I don't know if that turns into my next book project but that's what I'm currently interested in.

Joe Dager: Welcome everyone. This is Joe Dager, the host of the Business901 podcast, and with me today is Sarah Orem. She is one of the co-authors of "Appreciative Coaching" and we've been just chatting here a little bit about appreciative work and I find it quite

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interesting on the different uses. Can you just give us a brief summary of what appreciative is, Sarah?

Sarah: Appreciative coaching comes from the work of David Cooperrider who is the co-creator of Appreciative Inquiry. Usually he and his adviser at Case Western Reserve University are given credit for that co-creation in so far as David did his initial work under Srivasta who was his mentor and adviser. There were several more people in his class who worked on that project and they have also continued to work in the area of Appreciative Inquiry. There are maybe five or six people who were in on the ground floor and then there were a small group of consultants that helped Dave shape his original ideas for organizational work and now it's out in the world.

Joe: When you think about the subject, it seems odd that it's just surfacing now and becoming popular. Is it new? Is it really that new to take an appreciative look at the world versus what I talk about from the problem solving side?

Sarah: It's really not new. In fact, I was looking at a discussion thread in my school's discussion, which is mostly populated by students, an initial posting about we should have a certification for learning this new positive psychology and one of the people in the psychology department responded and said this is not new. What I think is different here, Joe, is the organizations still work from a problem solving angle or perspective when something goes wrong in an organization. Where Appreciative Inquiry starts, we may end up in the same place, but where it starts is not hunting for what's wrong but hunting for what's right.

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It's not that that's never been done before but I think there are three or four branches or methods that come out of or that jumped off of Appreciative Inquiry in the last 25 years to really look at the world from a place of love, for lack of a better word. I know that's a big no-no in organizations, but to look at the world with gratitude, to look at organizations with gratitude, to look at issues with real curiosity I think is the word that I often fall back on.

I think if you're genuinely curious about the world that is a very open way of being and discovery whereas if you're in a problem solving way of thinking you're looking for the thing that is wrong. Curiosity may uncover something that doesn't work very well but it may just as often discover something that's really, really exceptional.

Joe: I think it's a great word. Curious is a great word to look at it.

Sarah: It invites a different way of thinking, I think. That's all.

Joe: I had someone when I was talking about Appreciating Inquiry say, "Well, to me it sounds like sitting there playing a soccer game and not keeping score." Do you look at it that way? Is there's teeth to it?

Sarah: I think that there are wonderful skeptics and I am as grateful for the skeptics as I am for the people who clap their hands and want to come along immediately. I've got lots of those skeptics in my course room because I teach in the Masters in Business Administration and the Doctoral program in business. I get guys who are Six Sigma people. I get mostly men but not exclusively, women too, who are in some sort of quality process and they're very used to doing things in a particular way and believe that that's the best way.

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I have no doubt that it is the best way often. What I ask them to do is to have a particular scripted conversation with somebody in their organization with which they have some kind of tension.

Often it's an employee that they're really frustrated by and I ask them to have this conversation and very, very often the skeptics come back and they say, "I didn't know. I never knew this about the person that I talked to and amazingly we've solved this problem I've had with them in 15 minutes where I've been trying to solve it for four years."

I think it comes to a place of genuine curiosity people open up to it in a way that they don't open up to problem solving.

Joe: When you have that conversation with them what's the essence of it? How did you start?

Sarah: Well, there are four core questions and I tell them when they start this conversation to use whichever of the questions seems most appropriate in the conversation. You've read the four core questions in the reading that you've done. The first one is usually what gives life to you now? Well, for lots of people in organizations that doesn't mean anything. What do you mean what gives life? I can't relate to that question. Often I say, "Where do you get your energy?" When you come to work and you're going to go through an eight hour day what do you look forward to? What are the things that you really like to do? The second question is describe the peak experience.

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I often start with that question or that statement in a coaching situation because all of us have had a peak experience, all of us had something that really made us happy, made us proud, that we really thought we had some great achievement.

Then describe your values or the values of the organization if you're doing it within an organization. Finally, what one or two things do you want to be different? For most managers and employees they know what they want the other person to be different.

There's something different between telling and asking. If they start with that question, if they say, "What one or two things would you do differently or what would you like to do differently about X?" and X is usually the thing that's frustrated them for four years.

The person opens up in a way that's quite different than being told for the 43rd time that they should do X in a certain way. It invites a completely different kind of conversation. I can then say, "This is not my best deal." I just had a performance evaluation at my university and my boss said, "Well, you could be a lot better at administration." I said, "Not getting any argument from me. I could be a lot better at administration."

He said, "Well, that's different. I expected you to be defensive about that." Well, because of the work that I do and the way I see the world there's no point in being defensive. I know that I'm not good at administration. I know that there are ways that I could be better. It's never going to be my strength. I think that's also part of Appreciative Inquiry is owning up to the things that you have to handle or have to get handled.

If you have to get them handled then maybe somebody else can do it. For whom administration is their gift, it's not mine.

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Joe: It's like saying you just need to be positive about everything. That's hard to do. Is that really realistic?

Sarah: It's not realistic. Barbara Fredrickson who has another book that you all might like. It's one of my very favorites. It's called "Positivity" and Barbara is a well known academic, a very highly respected academic. She says that we're hardwired for negativity and we were hardwired for that for a purpose and that was that there were lots of things in the world that were dangerous. Lions and tigers and bears. We lived in caves and there were wild animals and there were maybe not an ever present danger but there was an often present danger so we were wired to look for danger. The worrier in us will look for danger in the fact that we didn't get a raise or we'll look for danger in the fact that our significant other didn't say good morning to us. We are negative beings and to some degree that's also genetic. There are some of us who are more negative than others.

What positivity is about is intentionally raising the level of our positive interactions that we have in our life during our day, during our week, during our month. Barbara has done many clinical studies that show we're more creative, we're more open to ideas, and we do our best work when we're in this frame of positivity.

Joe: Can we do this on an organizational level? Can an organization embrace these concepts?

Sarah: Lots of organizations have and the one that may surprise you the most is the military. My adviser or one of my committee members and a peer person in my life is Frank Barrett, who was one of the graduate students along with Cooperrider who worked on this project. Frank worked with the naval leadership school in Monterrey and the armed

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forces have embraced Appreciative Inquiry and have been very, very active in using it to approach new projects and to take a solution focus to things that they want to be different.

One of those things has been the reduction in funding, the downsizing of our military presence in our own country and other countries, the loss or closing of bases. Those are all things that have been approached through Appreciative Inquiry.

Joe: What are some of the pushbacks that you get when this is first addressed? Is there or do you just approach it positively that it's really not a pushback?

Sarah: I would say that I get lots of pushback. When I first was Dr. Orem and I was doing some consulting for a person who had been my boss and I said that I wanted to introduce a new sales program that we were going to do in a bank and we introduced the same sales person in a bank where this person had been my boss. He moved to another bank. I described how I wanted to initiate it with Appreciative Inquiry and he looked at me with his face scrunched up and I didn't know what the scrunch meant but I knew something was coming that he didn't like. He said to me, "Could we use different words?" The words for the four or five stages depending on how you characterize the very beginning are define, which is to define your topic, then discover, next is dream, then design, and finally, destiny.

Well, "dream" and "destiny" are woo woo, you know, words that we don't use in organizations very much. Fortunately, I'd had a learner in one of my classes who was a consultant in Canada, and she dreamed up the four Is or four stages rather than discover, dream, design, and destiny, and I won't be able to recite those to you right now, but they

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were essentially had the same meanings. They were much harder-edged organizational words.

One of the areas of pushback is the language of Appreciative Inquiry. One of the things that Cooperrider says is that words are so important; the words we use have different... People have different reactions to two words that essentially mean the same thing. So I think I have to be careful when I change those four stages to different words, and believe that I'm honoring his original intentions.

Words are one thing. The second thing is, there are lots and lots and lots and lots of people in organizations who believe that you should find the culprit, beat the culprit to a pulp, go about something new.

I don't mean to be too cute about that, but what I'm saying is that the process is to really go looking for what's wrong, then do a root cause analysis, which is how did it go wrong, and what's really wrong, even though the presenting symptom may not be the whole thing, then design some sort of solution, or brainstorm about possible solutions, and then design an action plan.

When I tell people that there's another way to do that and that we may end up in a better place, some people just don't believe it. They don't want to consider it; they don't believe it, because they believe that problem-solving works for them. I don't doubt it. I mean, I would never say it didn't.

I just did a brief introduction to Appreciative Inquiry from my own website, and I said problem solving works if there's something very specific that's wrong, but if it's a negative

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culture, for instance, in an organization, where do you start? I mean, what do you fix? Appreciative Inquiry really, really is, I think, a better way to approach systemic issues.

Joe: I think it's the interesting approach, because even the epitome of Lean culture, is Toyota, and I've heard that they're starting to do work in Appreciative Inquiry as far as their policy deployment.

Sarah: Well, I think Toyota has been such a well-respected company until the last two years. And in the last two years, they've stumbled in important areas. So another piece of that Appreciative Inquiry is if you're running a company and running it the way you've been running it works for you, why should you change? But if you're running a company and there's a big "whoops", most of us then are willing to look at everything that might make the company... or, get the company back on track.

And I think Appreciative Inquiry is one of those things that can do that when, as I say, when the issues are systemic. And I think in Toyota's case that may be a good description.

Joe: One thing you mentioned there that I thought was interesting is using appreciative work in sales.

Sarah: Yes.

Joe: Can you summarize that for me or talk a little bit about that for me?

Sarah: Sure. I have been a sales person, and I was a retail stockbroker for seven years, and I believe, and there are a couple of people that I know right now who are using either asset-based thinking, which is an aligned method to Appreciative Inquiry, or who are using

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Appreciative Inquiry or positive psychology in sales training and in sales coaching. I think the reason that it can work where other methods might not is that if you want to have an underperformer, usually that underperformer, because of the way sales is, you know, there are charts on all the walls, everybody knows who the underperformers are, and everybody knows who the high-performers are, because that's part of the competition of sales that most organizations set up.

If you've got an underperformer he or she knows that she's underperforming and to begin a sales coaching relationship with what do you do really well usually throws people off guard because they think they're there to be whipped into shape.

My feeling is if you build on what that person already does well they're much more likely to be high performers than if you say you have to make 35 cold calls a day and you have to go out and see seven people live every day and you have to use this "can" sales pitch.

Really good sales people are not all the same. I worked in an office where one of the most introverted people I ever knew was a really successful stockbroker because he figured out how to make his strengths, which were analysis and strategy, work.

He figured out how to get the kind of support he needed in an extrovert, which was usually his assistant, to bring in customers. If you figure out what you do really well and build on that you're much more likely to be a good sales person.

Joe: I think that is interesting, the way you put that, because I think two things that you hit upon there that I think are important in today's world is the one concept that I think we should always look at our customers being our teacher and learn from them. We shouldn't

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expect all these wonderful things with features and benefits to be the customer's aha moment. It's when we understand how to apply our product with the customer should be the aha moment. I think that lends itself to Appreciative Inquiry because you're seeking his input, what he's doing well, and how you can interact from that perspective. I think the other side of it is I look at Zappos as a good example.

In the short time they came through the process and got purchased by Amazon for a billion dollars it was more about not scripts, not how to handle people in the call centers, it was more about taking interest on who was on the other side of the phone.

Sarah: But then tailoring your advertising to their preferences. If I bought four pair of four inch stiletto heels Zappos is going to tell me when they have a sale on stilettos. The sales algorithms are so interesting. My son-in-law is working in that area at 3M. It's a little scary what organizations know about us. It's more than a little scary.

Joe: I know that. I've seen some of the back end of those systems. You know how many cats they own, how many dogs they own. It is scary.

In the sales perspective, it is a different approach to take an appreciative look. You're not the person with all the answers anymore. Your organization doesn't have all the answers. It's more of that community, that co-creation process. I go back to value in use and enabling use of your product. You have to work with your customer and in order to enable use you have to play to his strengths a little bit.

Sarah: You have to play to his strengths and you have to use your own strengths in the strategy of how to engage him. The reason I say that is I am in full agreement with you

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that it's all about the customer. The example I use, if I'm an extreme introvert and the idea of making a cold call makes me sweat or it makes me want to hide under the covers or whatever then I'm not going to do that kind of solicitation. I'm not going to build my business that way. I need somebody who loves to engage people in that way. On the other hand, I may be a really deep thinker and so when I have engaged the customer I'm willing to ask the right questions to really determine what that person needs or wants. All I'm saying is it's a combination of the sales person leveraging his or her best strengths with the necessary skill of listening for what the customer wants and being able to apply what you know to that need.

Joe: You have a couple things on your website. It's SaraOrem.com .

Sarah: Right.

Joe: Could you tell me a little bit about your DVDs and the Coaches Guide that you have available?

Sarah: Sure. I did the DVDs because when I would do teleclasses, which I haven't done in quite a while, I always would do a demonstration for the last class, and the people who came to my tele-classes were mostly coaches and many of them would say, "I really need to see what this looks like." One of the two DVDs is me with two very different kind of coaching clients going through a whole appreciative process so that people can look at that DVD and say, "Ah, now I see how it's done." It's a case of reading about something. You can read about how to do it in the book that I wrote with Jackie Binkert and Ann Clancy and both Jackie and Ann are masterful coaches. I think some of us, even really good

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coaches, if you're using a new method, you need to see what that looks like. So that's one of the two DVDs.

The other one is a more in-depth introduction to Appreciative Inquiry. I'm putting up today, I think - well, certainly within the next week - I'm putting up another presentation of a brief introduction to Appreciative Inquiry and that will probably replace my teleclasses. So the DVD is a much more in-depth introduction to Appreciative Inquiry. So those are the two DVDs. You can buy them separately or together.

The Coaches Handbook is available on Amazon - I think I looked yesterday - for \$96 and I'm offering it for \$15, so that's quite a reduction in price. I wrote that with another coach from the Kramer Institute. And Kathy Kramer writes about and created something called asset-based thinking. And asset-based thinking is the opposite of deficit-based thinking.

So it is a way, again, a way of looking at the world that's very aligned with Appreciative Inquiry, and that book is specifically for coaches. It's a workbook. So there's a brief introduction to asset-based thinking and a brief introduction to Appreciative Inquiry, and then lots of questions and short scenarios for coaches about how to use either or both of those processes in their coaching relationship.

Joe: Is there something I didn't ask that you would like to add to this conversation?

Sarah: In working with this topic that you and I have talked about this morning, so recently, in redeveloping this presentation for my website, Joe, I believe so strongly that this can help us to make - and make is a word that comes from a communications process, not from Appreciative Inquiry - but it helps us make different kinds of relationships. I think

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that that is significant in all of our lives. I think all of us want to have effective relationships. I mean relationships with our boss, I mean relationships with the processes that we do at work, I mean relationships with our children. And this is really a way of being in the world.

Cooperrider describes this as a philosophy, not a method. It really does guide us in a way of being. That's pretty grandiose of me to say, and I also believe it.

Joe: I would like to thank you very much for participation in this podcast. What's the best way to get a hold of you?

Sarah: Through my website, which is www.SaraOrem.com. I believe that there is a phone number on the website that is 510 459-0239, and there are other ways to connect which, again, are on my website.

Joe: All right. Well, thanks again. This podcast will be available on the Business901 blog site, and also the Business901 iTunes Store. So thanks again, Sara.

Sarah: Thank you so much.

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What others say: *In the past 20 years, Joe and I have collaborated on many difficult issues. Joe's ability to combine his expertise with "out of the box" thinking is unsurpassed. He has always delivered quickly, cost effectively and with ingenuity. A brilliant mind that is always a pleasure to work with." James R.*

Joe Dager is President of Business901, a progressive company providing direction in areas **such as Lean Marketing, Product Marketing, Product Launches and Re-Launches. As a Lean Six Sigma Black Belt**, Business901 provides and implements marketing, project and performance planning methodologies in small businesses. The simplicity of a single flexible model will create clarity for your staff and as a result better execution. My goal is to allow you spend your time on the **need versus the plan.**

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