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APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY IS AN EFFICIENT BET TO BOOST PRODUCTIVITY AND, AT THE SAME TIME, MAKE THE CORPORATE ENVIRONMENT APPROPRIATE FOR ALL EMPLOYEES

Organizational restructuring has been a recurring strategy adopted by companies looking to overcome the many challenges caused by the current economic scenario in Brazil. But, if on one hand, the alternative can be efficient to reduce costs without impacting the quality of services or products offered, on the other hand, it makes the corporate environment more stressful.

A methodology called *Appreciative Inquiry*, created in the late 1980s by American professor David Cooperrider, promises to put an end to this current crossroads, presenting itself as an efficient method for valuing the attributes of organizations and promoting a collective change in favor of goals beneficial to all. "Even though in Brazil the word 'inquiry' carries a negative connotation, the term here refers to the pursuit of data and more in-depth knowledge. In turn, the adjective 'appreciative' points to the idea of looking at certain aspects from different perspectives, giving them more value," says organizational consultant Heide Castro, a psychologist specialized in *Organizational Psychology, Cognitive Intervention and Positive Coaching*, as well as certified in *Appreciative Inquiry* by Case Western Reserve University, in the United States.

In this month's Interview, she provides details about *Appreciative Inquiry*, how it can help boost productivity of companies and emphasizes why she considers the method even more relevant today.

O Papel – What is and what does the Appreciative Inquiry methodology propose?

Heide Castro – The Appreciative Inquiry methodology developed by David Cooperrider in 1987, aims to identify the best things in organizations, taking into consideration the positive resources already existent. In other words, the methodology focuses on solving issues based on the objective of recognizing the best things there are in companies and what is the best way to intensify these qualities in their management processes. This occurs because at the core of the methodology, according to its author, is Positive Psychology, which involves the art and practice of asking questions that target psychological and emotional aspects of participants, arousing in them their creative potential, self-confidence and commitment to proposals established.

O Papel – How is the methodology applied?

Heide – Appreciative Inquiry is composed of four key stages that can be summarized as the 4D Cycle: Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny. In the first D, Discovery, we list what the company, school or any other institution has that's positive. The instruction for participants involved is simple: regardless of the problems or pain points in the

organization, focus solely on the positive aspects. This first part of the process is of extreme importance, as it provides participants a sense of belonging and much gratitude. It is a process that makes people perceive that, even though there are bottlenecks or negative situations, there's a whole bunch of good things too. The second D, Dream, comes into play to maintain or expand the aspects that were listed as positive. The idea is to get participants to reveal what they envision for the organization within a specific timeframe and present these visions to everyone. The third stage of the cycle, Design, defines what should be put into practice to reach the aspired targets. It is the moment to define the entire plan for achieving the objectives defined and, based on them, reach the last D, Destiny. In this stage, we utilize the indicators listed to check whether what was initially planned was executed. This means that, on a given date established in advance, we will bring back all the participants to verify whether everything that was dreamt and planned actually came true. We verify what was defined in the beginning and the current status of the targets. The average time for the group to execute this final get-together depends on the dream that was defined. If the goal is to realize the dream in two years, for example, some smaller interim meetings are promoted with the teams responsible for the implementation process, but only at the end of the

two years will the final meeting be held with all those involved to assess the journey and produce other points for subsequent years. It's a circular process.

O Papel – What benefits does Appreciative Inquiry propose in terms of productivity and competitiveness for organizations?

Heide – The main idea of the methodology is to focus on the positive aspects of an organization. Rather than direct energy at problems vs solutions, paying attention to what may be an obstacle in the future or something that can threaten the business in the long-term, the goal is to encourage employees to focus on what they aspire for a more positive future and teach them to pursue this trajectory. By focusing on opportunities and strengths that are proposed, it is also possible to identify potential adversities and threats that may interfere in what was outlined as a positive future. However, the energy of a job that's done based on positive factors is quite different than one that has a negative focus. Productivity increases as people come together in favor of a joint cause. The Millennials, youngsters born 1982 onwards, are an example of professionals who tend to value much more causes than specifically a job position or salary, precisely on account of focusing on the positive. Appreciative Inquiry, therefore, helps organizations focus on their own causes from the perspective of positive psychology.

O Papel – How can the methodology's results be measured?

Heide – When applied in organizations, Appreciative Inquiry can be evaluated by several indicators, such as internal communication indicator, management quality indicator, and level of people satisfaction and engagement in the company. It is important to point out, however, that the methodology needs to undergo the 4D cycle in order to have its potential truly explored. A difficulty that is commonly found in Brazil in organizations, for example, refers to planning. If this stage is not well executed, it can lead to another difficulty: giving continuity to a process and not achieve the results. The method's efficacy resides in correctly passing through all stages of the cycle, in addition to also being linked to the qualification of who conducts the process.

O Papel – Does the method also create individual benefits? How can professionals, in the midst of an increasingly more demanding scenario, that requires even more results and delegates more attributions to

increasingly more streamlined staffs, extract advantages from Appreciative Inquiry?

Heide – Since Appreciative Inquiry foresees a change in culture, all employees in an organization can benefit from it, from operational personnel to CEO. It is necessary to begin working at the highest level in an organization, so that they can experience the methodology and then implement a new work philosophy.

O Papel – Do you consider this type of methodology even more important today? Why?

Heide – Yes. As part of the method, positive psychology has significant importance today, as it acts as a way to give meaning to this difficult journey we are experiencing. The positive emotions we have of the past help anchor what we are living in the present. It's as if the experiences we already had help manage life and face challenges of today. In turn, positive future emotions, associated to what we would like to live down the road, are currently in a lull in Brazil for a series of reasons. This negative scenario ends up impacting our longer-term vision. Working this bottleneck, bringing motivation and hope to inside today's reality, makes a huge difference. It is a broad change process, but without a doubt extremely pertinent for the current moment.

O Papel – Considering this more challenging scenario as parameter, do you believe that it's the responsibility of companies to focus on the quality of life of its professionals?

Heide – Yes, it should be a company's role, even though many executives are still reticent about the effects of positive psychology. On the other hand, I don't think it's a company's obligation to offer happiness to its employees. Correlating happiness and satisfaction is still a common mistake in society. I believe that Appreciative Inquiry is an efficient path for making companies be fair and adequate with all their employees. Conducting internal selection processes to promote employees and providing authentic and genuine feedback are successful examples of practical results of this methodology. In summary, I believe it's a company's obligation to put into practice actions that make the work environment be the best possible. We spend most of the hours from the best years of our lives inside companies, even though this format of only working in offices is progressively changing. It's an illusion to think that everything will be perfect, but it has to be worthwhile. And it's completely possible for people to be happy and engaged most of the time. ■

Heide: "The more we focus on problems, the more life we will be giving them. The more we concentrate on strengths and aspirations, more life they will have"