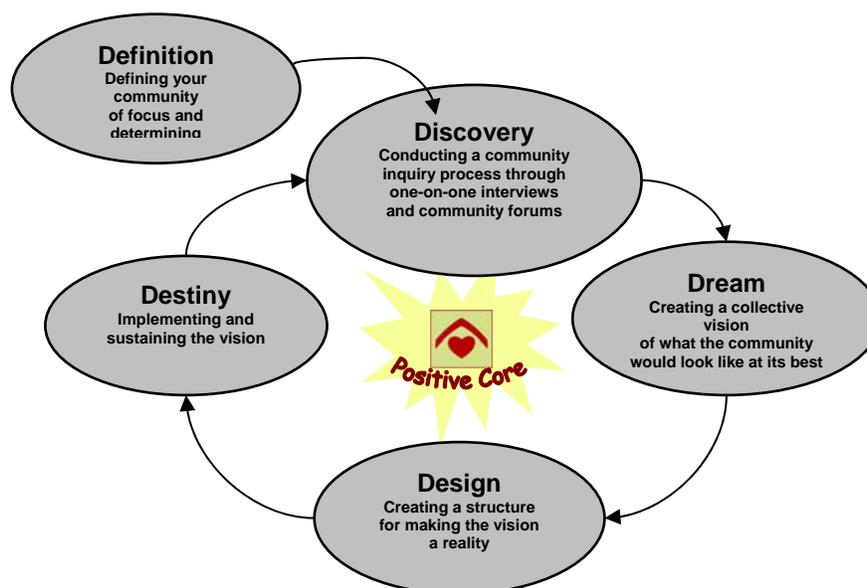


UNLOCKING THE STRENGTHS OF OUR COMMUNITIES

Neighborhood Centers Inc.'s Approach to Appreciative Community Building

Neighborhood Centers Inc.'s recent work in community building is focused on helping community members identify and leverage existing strengths and resources to make neighborhoods a place of renewed hope and opportunity. We use Appreciative Inquiry as a tool for identifying community assets and for guiding individuals and communities in focusing constructively on their capacities and opportunities while working toward systemic change.

The framework below illustrates the five phases of Appreciative Inquiry. Each phase is intended to deepen the level of understanding, engage the interest of participants, and arrive at actionable possibilities. The following pages describe each phase (each "D") relative to community engagement, with examples of our experiences.



Definition – Defining your community of focus and determining what you hope to learn.

The first step is to identify the community you seek to engage and to determine what new information about that community you hope to learn. Communities can be defined by geographic boundaries, cultural, or ethnic groups or any other characteristic trait relevant to your work. Once you have determined the community of focus, you can then begin to identify members and key stakeholders to be targeted in your engagement process.

Next, determine what you want to learn about the community you are seeking to engage; this will guide the questions you ask. At Neighborhood Centers, we have chosen to focus on discovering the current strengths of the communities in which we work, learning about effective practices for community engagement and discovering hopes that residents have for their communities' future. As such, our interview protocols are comprised of questions designed to draw out responses from residents and encourage new thinking and reflection.

Discovery – Conducting a community inquiry process through one-on-one interviews and larger community forums.

Once the community and topic of inquiry have been defined, the Discovery phase begins – engaging community members in conversations about the topic. The first step is to develop a set of questions that can be used as a guide for conducting interviews with community stakeholders. The selection of questions

is critical because these questions will begin to shape how the community members see themselves and their community.

One premise of Appreciative Inquiry is that people and/or organizations move in the direction of the questions that are asked. Therefore, it is important that the topic of investigation be well-defined and interview questions written so as to elicit positive responses focused on discovering and exploring times when people or the community have been at their very best and to identify the causes for those moments of success.

There is no magic number of interviews that “should” be conducted – inquiries can be as small as interviewing two people to as large as interviewing thousands. In our community building work at Neighborhood Centers, where our work has focused on communities of 50,000 and more, we strive to interview at least 125 people in each of the geographic communities in which we work. Because we seek to learn about the broader strengths our communities possess, we are purposeful about interviewing a wide cross-section of community members so that we capture many different perspectives.

Neighborhood Centers uses a two-pronged approach to the community discovery process: one-on-one interviews and large community forums. One-on-one interviews are an effective way to build relationships and gain initial understanding of individual and community strengths, hopes, and aspirations. Conducting interviews has proven to be an invaluable tool for our community-based staff, helping them strengthen and/or build new relationships with community stakeholders - relationships that are often vital to the success of their on-going community development work.

Once the initial round of interviews has been conducted, we organize a series of community forums whereby those previously interviewed are invited to participate alongside members of the community at large. These forums follow a more focused interview protocol to engage participants as a community in identifying collective strengths and developing a vision for what their community would look like at its best.

While one-on-one interviews are useful in developing a broader view of the community and for building individual relationships, community forums provide a mechanism for engaging a greater number of people in the process itself and allowing the creation of momentum around a shared vision of the future. The forums give everyone the opportunity to interview, to be interviewed, and to learn about each other, reinforcing relationships and connections across all sectors of the community.

During the forums, paired interviews are combined with small group work to identify the community’s collective strengths, the underlying causes of success, and its most valued characteristics – those elements that represent the true essence of the community – elements its members want to ensure continue to be an integral part of the community’s future (This step is referred to as the *positive core* in Appreciative Inquiry literature).

Dream – Creating a collective vision of what the community would look like at its best.

Once the community’s strengths and causes of success are identified, the next step is to begin to imagine or “dream” about what the future would look like at its very best. What makes Appreciative Inquiry unique is that these dreams are grounded in the reality of the best practices already identified by the group. So while a truly extraordinary vision might be developed, it is grounded and achievable because it is based on learning from the times when the community and its members were at their strongest.

Neighborhood Centers facilitates the creation of collective visions by integrating “dream” activities into our community forums. Participants are guided through an imaging exercise in which they individually begin to envision their community in new, different, and better ways.

Individuals then share their thoughts in small groups and work together on a creative representation of their collective vision (through collages, pictures, skits, songs, etc.). Once the activity is completed, each group shares its vision with the rest of the participants.

Design – Creating a structure for making the vision a reality.

In the Design phase, we take the images of the future that have been created during the Dream phase and put them into an actionable format and structure. We recruit a smaller group of volunteers (eight to 12) from the community forums to work as a “design team.” Together, the team analyzes the work produced during the dream activity, identifies areas of priority, and puts the visions for these priority areas into statements (also known as *provocative propositions* in Appreciative Inquiry language).

The team’s goal is to interpret the larger groups’ representations of the future and translate them into written vision statements that can be used as a guide for action planning. The team also must determine how many areas to prioritize based on the number of community members they expect to actively participate.

A vision statement should be created for each of the priority areas identified and be written in the present tense. The statement should leverage the community’s existing strengths and push beyond the status quo. As mentioned earlier, statements should be compelling and descriptive enough to serve as broad guides for community project implementation. An additional function of the design team is to brainstorm community action initiatives for each of the priority areas. These ideas are then presented to the larger group.

Destiny – Implementing and sustaining the vision.

With the design team’s work complete, it is time to make the community vision a reality. This can be done a number of different ways, depending on the level of engagement and the number of committed community participants. If you have a large group of experienced, committed community members, several action committees can be created (one for each priority area), with a steering committee coordinating efforts across all. However, if you are working with a smaller group, or if participants are new to community engagement work and need additional support, then a single action committee that develops and implements community initiatives from all priority areas may be more effective. Both organizational structures require regular community participant meetings to ensure projects stay on track and remain aligned with vision statements.

Appreciative Inquiry is designed to be a cyclical process. Arriving at the final “D” of destiny does not mean that the community engagement process has ended or been completed. Ideally, community action committees take each selected initiative through a similar process of definition, discovery, dreaming, and design. For example, if a priority area such as *Community Parks* is selected, an inquiry and interview protocol could be focused on times when community members have experienced parks as centers of their community. Members would detail what that looked like and what they valued most about it. Those interviews then could feed into a dream or visioning session that could imagine and then design specific initiatives to implement.

One of the ways in which Neighborhood Centers sustains community engagement is by continuing to cycle through the Appreciative Inquiry process. We hold annual check-ins or review sessions to share accomplishments, identify ways to take our achievements to greater heights, and engage new participants in the process. During these sessions, we revisit the continued relevance of our community visions by exploring the impact of new trends in our communities (and world) and capturing new insights into making our community engagement process even more effective.

Additional Resources

Appreciative Inquiry:

APA Consulting (Appreciative Planning and Action)

<http://macodell.com>

**An excellent simplified framework for implementing Appreciative Inquiry in grassroots communities. See the APA Materials link for sample workshops.*

Case Western Reserve University's Appreciative Inquiry Commons:

<http://appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu/>

**An incredible website with access to Appreciative Inquiry questions, case studies, etc. on many topics.*

Cooperrider, David, Whitney, Diana, and Stavros, Jacqueline (2008). *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: For Leaders of Change, 2nd Edition*. Brunswick, OH: Crown Custom Publishing, Inc.

**Comprehensive step-by-step resource guide for using Appreciative Inquiry.*

The AI Practitioner (online newsletter)

<http://www.aipractitioner.com/>

For back issues, visit www.aradford.co.uk.bookorder.htm

Neighborhood Centers Inc., (2010) *Unlocking the Strengths of Our Communities: A Step-by-Step Guide to Appreciative Community Building*.

Watkins, J.M., & Mohr, B.J., (2001). *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.

**Highly recommended: This book provides a great overview of the Appreciative Inquiry process and methodology.*

Asset-Based Community Development:

Kretzmann, John P., McKnight, John L. (1993). *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*. Skokie, IL: ACTA Publications.

**There are also a number of workbooks in this series that are worth checking out.*