

Community Innovation Network

Innovation in Action

The Achievement Center of Erie, Pennsylvania



Charlotte Rerko, Executive Director

A Longstanding Organization and the Perils of the Nonprofit

The Achievement Center of Erie, Pennsylvania, is a 95-year old organization dedicated to providing family and behavioral therapy to those in need, with special attention to families with children under five years old. Their staff of two-hundred serve over three thousand children across six counties. With the expansion to a new facility and stagnant reimbursement rates for their services, the Achievement Center found itself in financial difficulties. In order to maintain its commitment to quality services for children, they chose to implement a workforce reduction strictly among administrative staff. Those who remained took on loads of more work in order to keep their clients cared for and safe. In the disarray, different Achievement Center programs became more and more disjointed. The workload added stress and the loss of their community members through layoffs affected staff morale.

A new executive director, Charlotte Rerko, saw the troubles brewing among the staff of the Achievement Center. She developed a three-plank platform for managing the Achievement Center in the first years of her leadership. First, the staff must be taken care of. Second, interoffice drama must be done away with. Lastly, but only after the first two goals were met, Charlotte wanted to get the Achievement Centers of Erie fiscally viable again. This last goal, their ultimate goal, could not be accomplished if the first two lingered on. In searching for methods to solve the first two objectives, consultant Leslie Yerkes referred her to an engagement method called Appreciative Inquiry and a workshop in Cleveland that would teach it.

They Reached Out to The Network

In 2018, Charlotte sent a team made up of Bob Gulick, Evan Tucker and Laura Plasczynski, to Cleveland, Ohio, to take part in an Appreciative Inquiry workshop led by Dr. Mark Chupp, founding director of the Community Innovation Network at Case Western Reserve University. Three of Achievement Center's remarkable staff came to Case Western Reserve University to learn about AI Process and framework. They learned about the difference between traditional problem solving and a participatory process that identified and unleashed an organization's core strengths.

They learned about celebrating what is right, as opposed to stagnating on what is wrong. They learned of the philosophy of Appreciative Inquiry, and how defining and discovering common strengths in a group can help design and deliver a shared vision and plan for their organization. As the training continued, Bob would look to his colleagues and say, "I think we can do this!"

In the workshop they actively participated, absorbing critical information that began informing them and changing the way they saw their organization, the Achievement Center. Throughout the workshop the three of them kept planning different ways they could use Appreciative Inquiry back home and driving back to Pennsylvania, they discussed how to go about sharing what they had just learned in order to make Achievement Center the pride of its staff once again.



Evan Tucker, Bob Gulick and Laura Plasczynski

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They used what was learned and applied it to themselves

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AI is not a method or formula, it is a philosophy.

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“Start with the leadership team,” they decided. Together, Bob, Evan, and Laura put together a presentation to the leadership team in Erie, condensing a 3-day workshop into an afternoon meeting. Though they replicated some of the AI workshop as best they could, follow up meetings with their leadership team uncovered resistance to the idea. There were fears that Appreciative Inquiry would not be effective, that they (Bob, Evan, and Laura) were not experts and could not appropriately facilitate AI-based changes, and they also feared that changes in organizational structure would interfere with the regular operations.

Meeting resistance did not dissuade them. Bob, Evan, and Laura recalled: AI is not a method or formula, it is a philosophy, and so they brought the AI philosophy to the conversations they had with their coworkers. They changed their presentation style to reflect AI better and returned to the management and leadership teams with renewed vigor set on sharing the AI experience. Instead of proselytizing its merits, they decided to talk about the Achievement Center through the lens of Appreciative Inquiry. This time it was well received; the Achievement Center organized a Discovery Session that was held during their annual staff meeting. Following the AI principle of improbable pairs, the organizers matched each employee to one of 21 small groups made up of staff members who usually do not have much interaction with each other. The 21 groups would each give themselves a name, compile a list of common themes their members saw in or felt about the organization, as well as a wish list for the Achievement Center. One of the 21 groups, who called themselves The Collaborators, found commonality in empowering staff through supervisor support and respect and wished for developing a means for different branches to communicate and coordinate more effectively. Another group, called Team Dream, found a common theme of schedule flexibility, a better work-life balance, and wished for the organization to provide more learning opportunities for the staff to better understand the services offered by the Achievement Center.



The Results Were Clear

With information being analyzed by Bob and Evan, Executive Assistant Heather Salter, Executive Assistant at the Achievement Center, went ahead to plan a summit meeting for a staff appreciation day. Using the philosophies of Appreciative Inquiry, Heather turned what once was formal doldrum of a work meeting into an engaging, fun, and interactive experience for all the employees of the Achievement Center.

At the summit, members of Achievement Center’s leadership team provided yoga classes; a game room with pool tables, putting greens and corn-hole; local artists came in and led painting classes; local cosmetology school students performed free manicures; specialists led a meditative drumming circle; and the whole event was documented with video and pictures. It is not every day that employees of an organization can just relax and enjoy time with their coworkers, but that day would be documented for all time - a reminder of the life and joy within an organization is sometimes as important as the work they do.



The summit changed the perceptions of the staff. It was clear that the management and leadership of the Achievement Center were valuing their own and listening to their desires. Though their adoption of the Appreciative Inquiry is relatively new, Bob Gulick is confident that their continued use of AI philosophy will ultimately make them a better organization to their staff and in turn, a better organization to the people the Achievement Center of Erie serves. It was because of the Community Innovation Network’s Appreciative Inquiry workshop that they were able to apply tools for success.

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