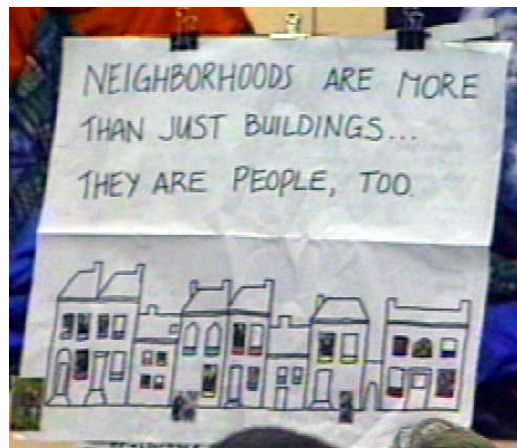


Sustaining Appreciative Inquiry in Local Government: A Challenge of Leadership

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David Harris, the Director of the City of Dubuque's Housing and Community Development Department, is a strong and committed leader who has been able to accomplish remarkable changes by forming collaborative partnerships that embrace Appreciative Inquiry (AI). This story presents a strong case for how an AI process has been sustained over time in local government through committed leadership and exceptional partnerships.



Introduction

The City of Dubuque has been recognized by national and state awards: a Best Practice Award from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 1999, a State of Iowa HUD Best Practice Award in 2000, and a National Merit Award from the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials in 2000. Laverne Webb, CEO of EnCompass^{LLC}, has been working with Harris since 1998, using AI as an intervention to transform his department's service delivery and relationships with its constituents. Darcy Simmons became involved with the City of Dubuque a year ago as she began work on her doctoral dissertation. She is exploring how leadership has sustained the spirit of Appreciative Inquiry through its practices, structures and systems and has subsequently created appreciative cultures.

Description of the Organization

The City of Dubuque Housing and Community Development Department's mission is to provide services, programs and leadership to build partnerships, improve neighborhoods and better living standards for all citizens. Its services include community development, assisted housing rental programs, rehabilitation loans, code enforcement and leveraging private investments. The Department has 21 employees and a \$5 million annual budget.

Client's Objectives

In 1998 the Housing and Community Development Department found itself the focus of a public battle between landlords and the city about its affordable housing policies and the city's inspections of over 1000 federally-subsidized rental properties. Harris noted, "Clearly we needed to do something significantly different to overcome the impasse in communication." He sought an AI process that would build on the past successes and current strengths of the Housing Department with the focus on promoting new collaboration and partnerships among the Department, landlords, and the larger community.

Description of the Process

A full description of the process is presented in the chart A Process Map: Housing Dubuque for the 21st Century on p 11.

The Inquiry Phase: Planning and Appreciative Interviews

In the fall of 1998 the city formed a Planning Committee to lead the AI process in collaboration with the Inter-congregational Housing project and a group of six local women's Catholic orders. The participation of the faith-based community served to bring a powerful moral voice to the equation that has continued over time to positively influence Dubuque's housing services and programs.

To launch the inquiry, 60 volunteers were trained in Appreciative Inquiry interviewing techniques. The Planning Committee identified a list of 300 diverse stakeholders and conducted 220 interviews. Interview questions focused on: 1) what people were most proud of about the housing and services the community provided 2) their most exceptional customer services from the Housing Department and 3) their values and wishes for the future.

The Imagine Phase: The Housing Summit

In February 1999 the two-day Housing Summit brought together 80 participants. This conference changed the landscape of the relationship between the City of Dubuque and the landlord community. As participants shared their stories, they began to sense a common ground holding them together as a community. When the group created images of the future and provocative propositions for their realization, old angers subsided and new alliances were formed. In the closing dialogue, one landlord said:

I felt maybe it was all for naught, but we were heard... There is and can be camaraderie between the different factions – landlords, tenants, housing providers... Coming together we can all work toward the same goal... And we'll do what our conscience and our hearts tell us to do, what is best for the community.

Harris saw the Summit Conference as a beginning and not a conclusion to his work, as many issues remained unresolved. The Housing Department supported the work of task force groups that had agreed to continue working on the provocative propositions after the Summit. Then he launched a major customer service initiative to engage landlords, tenants, and the business community with internal reforms. Following the Summit Conference, the AI process continued in the development of the Comprehensive Five-Year Plan. The city

expanded the planning committee to 22-members to guide the next steps in planning for the “Invest Yourself in Dubuque: A Housing Action Conference” to be held a year later, in February 2000. The Action Conference brought together 80 citizens who represented the whole system related to housing, and community and economic development. Together at this conference, these citizens determined the strategic directions and specific actions that have guided the city’s Consolidated Plan for Housing, Community and Economic Development, and the expenditure of some \$20 million for 2002-2005. Many participants continued working in task forces toward the realization of their shared visions for 2005, and the specific plans of action they created together.

I have been struck by the Appreciative Inquiry. Instead of getting bogged down in the negative like other communities, we focused on what has worked and how that can catapult us into envisioning the future. We focused on the positives instead of focusing on what is dysfunctional which actually creates conflict. (AI process participant)

The Implementation Phase: Outcomes and Impact

Community Results

Following the Action Conference, Harris established a “Continuum of Care Consortium” and captured a \$600,000 HUD award in 2001 for funding homeless initiatives. A transitional housing facility for homeless women and children was developed through the partnership of women’s religious groups, the city and funding from Iowa Department of Economic Development and Federal Home Loan Bank.

The City of Dubuque’s website states that a direct spin-off from the Action Conference was “Vision Downtown: A Future for the Heart of our City.” The City created a Downtown Comprehensive Plan Task Force with a shared vision and goal to revitalize the downtown area of Dubuque – a vision and goal that have been achieved with great success.

Organizational and Stakeholder Results

Through the AI process, Harris revolutionized the government’s customer service approach and its relationships with constituents; institutionalized frequent communication and customer feedback systems; and involved his staff, landlords and tenants in a collaboration to create and implement practice and policy changes. He and his staff constantly tested new policy results, quickly abandoning ideas that didn’t work and implementing practices and policies that proved effective. Harris made a “sea-change” in code interpretation and enforcement by empowering inspectors to make “common sense” code interpretations and by increasing support to ensure more consistent enforcement of codes. Collaboration between work units within the Housing Department supported coordination and new strategies for policymaking.

One of the most significant changes noted was the perception of the landlords. Instead of an “us against them” viewpoint, the department is seen as being in partnership with them. “Most landlords now assume that we understand and appreciate their business concerns and that we aren’t promoting the ‘evil empire’ agenda at the Housing Department.”

In December 2001 the city convened 30 community members who had been involved in the AI process to evaluate the results of the three-year AI effort to collaboratively improve the delivery of city housing services. There was unanimous agreement that almost none of

the accomplishments or activities they identified through the assessment process would have happened without the AI/customer service process. They greatly valued that groups who barely spoke to each other three years before had begun to understand and appreciate each others' perspectives and had learned to work together.

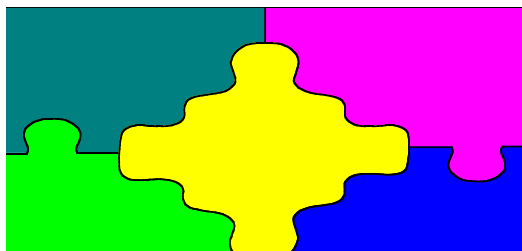
Harris continues his commitment to appreciative approaches in leading the Department of Housing and Community Development and its work in the city. He attributes trust as a major factor of success. More recently, as the department had to deal with funding cutbacks, they once again met with angry and frustrated landlords. Harris reported that the underlying premise of mutual respect and cooperation has helped to establish understanding.

Harris was rewarded by the city's leadership when the Housing Department was expanded to include the Community Development Department in 2000. Harris said, "We were entrusted with a much larger role (than just housing-related) in implementing city policies and for the improvement of our community. I'm not sure that would have happened if we hadn't figured out how to live with the landlords." In response to a question about how his leadership role had changed in the last five years, Harris notes, "I'm not sure I can relate big changes. I always believed in empowering staff. I probably do that more, or better, now." The AI approach served to complement Harris' management style – "It made my job easier."

Sustaining the Change

In discussing the most successful strategies for sustaining the AI work and philosophy in his department and in the community, Harris reported, "We actively solicit partnerships with our constituents. We make a point of asking to appear on agendas of boards of realtors and meetings of landlords. We want to keep them informed of what we're doing, and we want to make sure that we are making ourselves available to hear their concerns or questions. We recruit their representatives to serve on our boards and commissions. Again it's customer-responsiveness. That's the function of the business relationship we have established." He concludes, "It's not the big things we are doing. It's the everyday little things that sustain relationships and build the basis for resolving bigger issues when those occur."

The Dubuque story demonstrates that an AI process can be embedded successfully within a government structure and survive over time through committed leadership and exceptional partnerships. Harris' empowering leadership style enabled his staff to change the way things worked at the Housing Department and the democratic, inclusive nature of AI validated his leadership style. Community involvement, active listening and a shared focus on strengths and the promotion of new collaborations have enabled the Housing Department to make positive changes not only in the way they deal with landlords, tenants, and affordable housing needs, but in how an American city finds new ground in what it means to build and nurture community.



A PROCESS MAP: HOUSING DUBUQUE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

