Business Alignment
STRATEGIES, INC.

An Appreciative Approach to Problem-solving

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People usually know when they've made a mistake. Generally they even know how they messed up; they don't need others to tell them. Re-creating and/or belaboring that failure isn't productive because it doesn't change the past. What *is* productive is focusing on the future in a way that helps people identify what to *do* vs. what *not* to do.

In contrast to the traditional problem-solving framework, which analyzes what went wrong and who was to blame, an appreciative approach highlights what went *well* and how past successes can be replicated to create the desired outcomes in the future. Here's how you can set the stage for positive – and often superior – outcomes using this alternative problem-solving model.

Adopt a positive mindset

How you view the world – i.e., whether you see the proverbial glass as half empty or half full – will color your perceptions of any given situation. You get to choose: do you want to see problems as opportunities for improvement or as obstacles to success?

Create a clear and compelling picture of success

Have your employees describe what success looks like in a given situation by asking them to recall a similar instance in which they achieved the desired outcome. Help them re-live that positive experience by asking them to describe very specifically what it looked, felt, and sounded like. Have them identify the people and elements that

enabled that success. Ask them how they will replicate that positive experience in the future.

Ask purposeful questions

The questions we ask send people in the directions in which they seek answers. This is important because they will find the type of responses for which they search. Asking negative questions (e.g., "What went wrong here?") puts people on the defensive and seldom elicits constructive responses. Searching for answers to positive questions (e.g., "What enabled us to be successful?"), however, both energizes people and enables them to identify specifically what they must do to replicate those successes in the future. They are inspired to re-capture those positive experiences.

Focus on what people WANT vs. on what they don't want

Spending time criticizing others' missteps or complaining about what didn't go right is unproductive because nothing changes. Instead, after articulating clearly the outcome people want, identify the specific behaviors and/or tasks required to make that outcome a reality. This step is challenging for most people: while finding fault is easy, describing the ideal result requires thoughtful reflection and the ability to articulate a level of detail that seldom is considered. One way to prompt such reflection is to use a "compare and contrast" technique.

For example, thinking about the undesirable outcome, ask them to state how specific elements and/or behaviors would be different in a desired scenario.

Focus on what you CAN do vs. on what you can't

Trying to change things that you can't adjust or influence is an energy waster. Instead, identify clearly those behaviors/elements over which you DO have control, and concentrate your energy on moving them forward. For example, budget constraints have resulted in fewer available resources for most organizations. Rather than complain about what can't be done, pose this question: "Given the resources we have, *how can we* achieve our desired outcome?"

Be patient

Because the traditional problem-solving model is ingrained in us, even when asked positive questions, our tendency is to fall back on the negative. When that happens (and it will), re-focus the conversation on the positive. For example, when the discussion reverts to what people don't want or like about a given situation, ask them to help you understand their preferred outcome by telling you what it must look, sound, and feel like for them personally. To answer this question, people necessarily must think carefully about the details of the ideal situation. By default, they will omit the negative elements.

Adopting the above steps will open the door to more productive, creative, collaborative, and effective solutions to problems. The appreciative approach has been used

successfully for decades by individuals, teams, organizations, and societies to solve problems ranging from minor to very complex. Adding an appreciative approach to your toolbox will help you and your employees people elevate your individual and collective problem-solving skills significantly. ➡

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