

# Research News You Can Use

Commentary on research findings that have important applications for first responders

With Dr. Pat Lynch



## When Words are More Effective than Actions for Public Safety Professionals

The stories told by public safety professionals provide insights into the culture of their agencies and often set the tone for organizational performance. The nature of the internal dialogue is fateful: sharing accounts of organizational greatness creates a vastly different environment than telling tales that memorialize failure. The former results in members who feel committed and inspired to perform at high levels; the latter reduces morale and may decrease individual and agency performance.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a framework for transformational change that views the world from a positive perspective - i.e., the proverbial glass is half full, instead of half empty. By asking purposeful questions that seek to discover the life-affirming forces of their agency, members engage in a story-telling process through which they envision and create a desired future. This process generates the motivation and commitment needed to achieve the shared vision because it creates new ways of viewing and discussing the organization that focus on what *can* be.

Research<sup>1</sup> indicates that organizations that have experienced transformational change by using AI all focus on language, rather than on action. Specifically, these organizations concentrate on changing how people *think* instead of on what they *do*. Although this approach seems to contradict the familiar "Actions speak louder than words" axiom, it actually makes perfect sense. Here's why: behaviors are guided by thoughts, which are driven by language. AI's use of life-affirming language and positive questions enables members to evoke a much wider range of possibilities for agency success than they otherwise would. They become confident that, despite obstacles, they can achieve the desired future because it is grounded in their previous successes.

This newly generated knowledge enables inspirational stories that define the agency when it is at its best and its members feel most alive. Because organizations define themselves and socialize their members through these stories, changing the stories will change the nature of the group's internal dialogue. Even when circumstances are challenging, a continued focus on achieving the desired future will energize members. By seeking the opportunities in their present situation, they are sure to find them.

Here are three things you can do to guide employees' thoughts in positive directions:

1. Use affirmative language that enables members to see the great things that are possible when the agency is at its best.
2. If the stories told in your agency are energy-draining rather than energizing, develop other (true) anecdotes.
3. Focus on how people *think* rather than on what they *do*. Actions follow images, which follow language.

<sup>1</sup>Bushe, G.R. & Kassam, A.F. (2005). Meta analysis of appreciative inquiry cases: When is appreciative inquiry transformational? *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 41:2, 161-181.

*Pat Lynch, Ph.D., is President of Business Alignment Strategies, Inc., a consulting firm that helps first responders maximize their performance by removing or mitigating obstacles to achieving their mission. Pat can show you how to create immediate results in your organization by applying relevant research findings in practical ways. [Contact us](#) today to see how we can help you make a difference!*