

Why

Because the open exploration of key topics is crucial. This cannot be fragmented and you can gain a lot of support by involving everyone in a more or less open discussion. Bringing everyone together during the same intervention has proven to be a very effective way of tackling core issues.

What

A meeting in which small groups but also very large groups (a few hundred) can participate to explore a core topic, find solutions and engage people in taking ownership to realize these solutions. The appreciative inquiry method uses past positive experiences to create the future! So, it is a very positive and constructive approach.

How

Step 1:

First, choose a topic, e.g. how can we give our customers the experience of a lifetime.

Step 2:

Next, divide participants into groups of about 8 to 10 people and ask them to interview each other in pairs asking questions about relevant positive experiences, e.g. when did you have the experience of a lifetime when purchasing a product or a service, tell me about it, how did you feel, what happened, what exactly made this experience what it was?

After the interview participants share key experiences within the group of 8 to 10 people. Someone with a microphone then collects the key experiences and particularly interesting stories from the different groups. You will get a lot of zooming in on, storytelling about and reflecting on what makes a great customer experience.

Step 3:

The groups return to the last question in the interview (what exactly made this experience so great?) and try to establish a list of characteristics of the situation. Again, go around with the microphone to collect characteristics and factors. It is always fun and efficient if you, for example, have an artist that can sketch a situation on the spot (perhaps you have someone within the company who can do this!). You can also type the characteristics up and display them on a big screen.

Step 4:

The groups go back to work with the following topic: imagine you have slept for 5 years and now you are suddenly awakened ... what do you see, experience, feel and smell concerning the way customers are treated within the company? Groups discuss this in detail and then find a way to communicate their conclusions to the whole group (this can be in the form of a drawing, a role play etc.). The groups then present their vision to the public.

Step 5:

Ask each group to specify 2 to 3 initiatives that could turn their vision/dream into reality. List all the initiatives then give each participant two sticky dots and ask them to choose the two initiatives they think will produce the best results and which are most feasible. The initiatives that receive the most dots should be grouped according to theme, e.g. ideas on how to present our product in a better way, ideas on how to add unexpected value to our product etc.

Step 6:

During the break put flipcharts listing the different themes in the room and (after the break) ask people to stand next to the theme they feel they have the energy and passion to work on.

Then, put the teams quickly to work: they have to come up with a bold/provocative statement of what they want to achieve in relation to their theme. This must be written in present tense, using everyday language.

Each team then presents their statement to two other groups to get feedback. They then integrate the feedback and start working on an action plan and role allocation. Teams interact with the two other groups a few more times to get feedback. Finally, teams prepare a statement concerning the promise they are making and the level of engagement they will commit to regarding what they want to achieve: this is what we commit to do, this and this is what you can expect to happen in the office during the coming weeks/months.

Step 7:

Each group presents its statement to the larger group.

Step 8:

Closing: a few words to thank everybody.

When

When you want small or very big groups to build the future together based on positivism.

Skills and necessary training

Find additional information on the appreciative inquiry method.

Consider asking a more experienced facilitator, perhaps someone from HR or an external coach.

Possible workshop exercise

You can practice a mini version of the method. Pick a topic, get people to explore a positive experience from the past related to this topic, get them to then define the element that made it successful and apply it to their own future.

Critical success factors

The topic must be of relevance to the people present.

There must be enough time to go through the full process (at least one full day + evening).

Good preparation is a must to ensure the space is appropriate and facilitators have a clear understanding of the approach and the agenda.