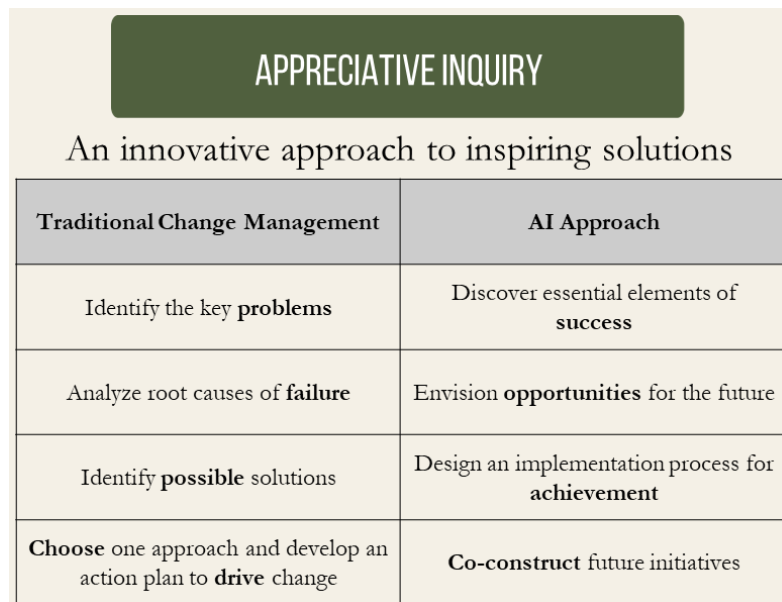**An Appreciative Approach to Inspiring Solutions**

By Brian "BK" Koehler, CPSI, CPRP – Director, Park Maintenance Institute

Research across industries suggest negativity often leads toward negative outcomes, and costs money in the long-term. In an effort to improve operational efficiencies, perhaps traditional problem-solving approaches may not be the best method to manage change. Effective change is not forced or coerced, and will not come from top-down. An essential step to organizational change is establishing a unified understanding of what change needs to happen, and why. Mutual respect and common priorities generate opportunities to work towards shared solutions, and it is valuable to build upon a foundation of success.
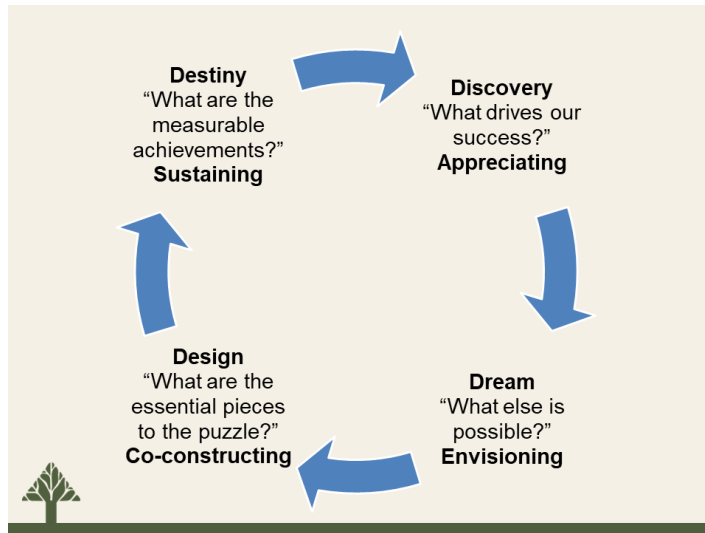
I have been conducting outreach by digging deeper into stories behind the scenes, from the perspective of facilities, grounds, maintenance, and operations crew members, staff directors, and municipal leaders alike. Stories from folks that often do not feel heard, even when they are invited to the boardroom table. I noticed the unfortunately consistent emphasis on limitations, restrictions, liabilities, overages, and short-falls, rather than innovations, achievements, and success. It seems like our industry leaders spend hundreds of hours each year **talking** about making changes to "fix problems." I suggest it is time for facilities and operations professionals to become more familiar with the concept of Appreciative Inquiry, so we can identify **actions** that will bring about positive change.

PositivePsychology.com defines Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as "a way to engage groups of people in self-determined change. It focuses on what's working, rather than what's not working, and leads to people co-designing their future." I believe this can be a solution to the negativity spiral often found in maintenance, operations, public works and land management industry culture. I believe these industries have collective knowledge, experience, and ingenuity that has yet to be harnessed. That is why I

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY
An innovative approach to inspiring solutions

Traditional Change Management	AI Approach
Identify the key **problems**	Discover essential elements of **success**
Analyze root causes of **failure**	Envision **opportunities** for the future
Identify **possible** solutions	Design an implementation process for **achievement**
Choose one approach and develop an action plan to **drive** change	**Co-construct** future initiatives

encourage others to highlight successful approaches to essential tasks. It is impossible to compare, without options – I don't know what I don't know until I know it.

AI methodology designed into discussion guides participants through the 4D phases – Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny. **Discovery** is focused on celebrating success, and sharing examples of what works currently. **Dream** phase involves brainstorming to imagine ideal scenarios, and share creative innovations. The challenge during the dream phase is to allow a flow of ideas, without placing weight on concepts or rationalizing. Many groups struggle with this phase, because they often slip back into a traditional problem-solving mindset – "That would never work, because..." Facilitation of this phase requires consistent reminding of participants to hold judgements until the next phase. **Design** is focused on prioritizing ideas based upon achievability, and detailing the essential knowledge, skills, and assets needed to achieve desired outcomes. **Destiny** focuses on next steps, and envisions a future once successful change has been implemented.

I had the opportunity to introduce AI methodology at the Pennsylvania Recreation & Park Society 2022 Annual Conference in a round table format, with small groups (5 – 7 people) comprised of park professionals, industry vendors, and recreation students. The objective for the session was to share innovative approaches to address staff recruitment and retention.

Lessons Learned

Facilities and operations staff are proud of the service they provide to communities; however, they do not feel their contributions are always recognized or appreciated. Recruitment and retention of essential staff will require changes in professional mindset. There is an opportunity for community and industry leaders alike, to become more inclusive of maintenance departments in planning, design, and strategic initiatives. Encourage shared contributions from the bottom-up. This effort will show an appreciation for the knowledge, experience, and expertise these professionals provide.

Administrative leaders and financial decision-makers can demonstrate recognition by budgeting for professional development and training for all staff, from boots-on-the-ground to management. Workforce development improves retention, enhances efficiency and performance, and influences positive culture. These elements help to provide a more productive work environment, and build public image.

Communication is essential to engage community. The public needs to be aware of the amount of capital investment that goes into community infrastructure, the importance of preventative maintenance, as well as the time and cost involved in proper schedules. This will help to build a better understanding of processes, and appreciation for the efforts and staff involved.

Resources

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