*Reframing Problems into Possibilities  
Guiding Principles for Engaging in Appreciative Conversations*

# Background

Why re-frame problems into possibilities? When we only focus on problems we tend to keep responding to crisis after crisis and we are constantly "putting out fires" or implementing one isolated strategy after another. This approach can sometimes lead to the "blame-game.” Instead of looking at what is not working, if we ask questions and encourage positive stories or experiences that highlight and explore "what works", the answers can point the way to greater success and growth. By focusing on what is right rather than what is wrong, Appreciative Inquiry generates enthusiasm and energy. It can help us find the confidence and commitment we need to achieve our best.

# Principles for Responding to Problem-based and Focused Responses

* Focus on what the issue is, not the person.
* Never dismiss the person or their ideas; instead validate what the person has said by letting them know that you heard them and understand their concerns.
* Listen. If a person has intensity about an issue let them get it out as you may not get any appreciative feedback until this has happened.
* Postpone. Make note of what the person has said and tell them that will we come back to it later.
* Respond with an appreciative question (e.g., a ‘what if’ question) (see below).
* Redirect. Find a way to guide them back to the positive.
* Use the negative and re-frame it. Everything that people find wrong with an organization represents an absence of something that they hold in their minds as ideal.
* Stay positive; maintain an appreciative, positive tone.
* Affirm common goals.
* Establish a safe and open space for dialogue.

# Appreciative Questions to Problem Based and Focused Responses

* What does that tell us about how things could be better?
* What changes do you recommend to make things better?
* How could we make this better?
* What would make this situation good?
* What would turn this situation around for you?
* What if we could do that? What if we could do better? What would need to be in place for that to happen?
* Based on what you just told me, what would an ideal situation look like for you?
* What do you need from me to make things better? How might you contribute to making things better?
* What can we learn from that experience?
* Our common goal is to X. How can we work together to reach this goal?

# Examples

*I hear what you are saying. That is a very legitimate concern. What do we need to do to make things better?*

*Thank you, I think I understand a little bit about your problem and now I would like to guide us back to looking at what was happening when things were working at their best.*

*When you say X is not good, it means you have an image in your mind about what good X would look like. Can you describe that for me?*

*I understand that has been difficult. Now I’m hoping we can focus on the positive aspects of your experience.*

## References:

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Watkins, J. M., & Mohr, B. J. (2001). *Appreciative inquiry: Change at the speed of imagination.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass/Pfieffer.