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improving children's lives



Stepping up, stepping out:

learning about leadership
in discussion

NCSL's Leadership Network in conference

Stepping up, stepping out: learning about leadership in discussion

This booklet takes the three key themes emerging from the conference debate: strategic leadership; building leadership capacity and leadership for 21st century learning as the focus for exploring leadership practice in your own context. Designed as a discussion tool, it uses an appreciative inquiry framework to challenge your thinking, encourage dialogue and debate with others and promote collaborative action for future development.

Using this discussion tool

This booklet, which is designed as an interactive discussion tool, draws upon an appreciative inquiry approach to provide a framework for exploring leadership practice in your own context. It is designed for use with groups of people interested in collaboratively exploring school leadership practices through shared dialogue, discussion and debate.

Using this activity as tool to promote discussion with others provides a practical way to challenge thinking, explore current leadership practices in your context and promote collaborative action for future school or organisational development. It is designed to help you engage in a process of collaborative inquiry with colleagues towards a shared understanding of effective leadership practice and the ways in which this can be built upon in planning future development. It is a tried and tested way of facilitating focused, professional conversations between people as they discuss important issues and examine their thinking and practice collaboratively with each other.

About appreciative inquiry

Appreciative inquiry has evolved from work in the field of organisational change. It is a method for improving an organisation by inquiring into strengths, successes and values. Appreciative inquiry is distinctive in that, rather than taking a problem identification or problem-solving focus as the starting point, the inquiry process begins by recognising the best in people and their current practice (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2000)¹.

Appreciative inquiry offers the opportunity for colleagues to define what the future in their organisation ought to be in relation to the values and purposes they have identified as important. The process develops leadership and change management capacity, because it helps participants to move beyond talking about what hasn't worked in the past, to a focus on the best of 'what is' in the present, to a positive view of 'what might be' in the future and then to act upon this knowledge. It enables individuals to articulate a strategy for personal development as well as an agenda for organisational change and development.

The process involves five key stages of activity:

1. Defining a topic or theme for the inquiry.
2. Discovering the best of 'what is'. Participants make sense of their past and current achievements.
3. Dreaming of 'what might be' and envisioning an ideal future. Participants create future scenarios for themselves and their organisation.
4. Designing 'what should be' in an ideal future. Participants construct a strategic vision.
5. Delivering – underpinning and sustaining the changes undertaken. Participants realise and implement their dream.

¹ Cooperrider, D L, & Whitney, D, 2000, Collaborating for Change: Appreciative Inquiry, San Francisco, CA, Berrett-Koehler Communications Inc.

Activity guidance

Organise participants in groups of either three or six and give each group a baseboard which can either be folded out or copied from the template given at the centre of this booklet.



Stage 1: Define your focus

- Start by inviting group members to define their focus from the bullet point list provided at the centre of the baseboard.
- Alternatively you may wish to choose your own focus for inquiry which can be inserted on a Post-it™ note over the bulleted list given.



Stage 2: Discover the best of what is

- Ask participants to work in three's.
- Give each person five minutes to tell the story of the most powerful example they can recall of leadership practice at its best in the chosen area of focus. This may be drawn from their current or past experience.
- Group members should capture the key points from each story on Post-it™ notes and place these on the baseboard.
- If working in groups of six, each triad should be given the opportunity to feedback their findings to each other.



Stage 3: Dream about what might be

- Encourage group members to think big and out of the box in identifying their dreams for an ideal future.
- Ask each person to describe to their group what leadership practice and school or organisational practices might look like in the context of this ideal future.
- Group members should then agree a shared vision for the future, capturing the key points from their discussion on Post-it™ notes and also placing these on the baseboard.
- Individual groups should then display their baseboards on tables or in a wall gallery and participants should make a tour of the displays.

- The whole group should then engage in a plenary feeding back key points which characterise their dream statements.
- The whole group should then agree a shared statement of vision which identifies their strategic intents.



Stage 4: Design for what should be

- Ask participants to return to their original groups, or rotate group membership if you think this will encourage more divergent thinking.
- At this stage of the activity group members are asked to translate their dreams and shared vision into actions.
- Ask the group to outline together the key action points of a development strategy which links the positive past identified at the discovery stage and the ideal future vision identified at the dream stage and agreed by the whole group.
- Each group should record on Post-it™ notes the key action points and intended outcomes of the strategy and place these on their baseboard.



Stage 5: Deliver what will be

- Bring the whole group back into a plenary session to feedback their action points and intended outcomes from the design stage.
- At this final stage of the activity, participants are asked to think about what it would mean to implement the proposed actions outlined in their appreciative design.
- This involves making decisions about what is needed to underpin and sustain the proposed development strategy eg about resource allocation, school-wide capacities, implications for staff and pupil involvement.
- The whole group should then agree a shared delivery statement which should be recorded on the baseboard.



Stage 2: Discover the best of what is



Stage 1 Define

- Strateg



Stage 3: Dream about what might be



**1:
your focus**

gic leadership

- Building
- Leading



Stage 5: Deliver what will be



ng leadership capacity
ng 21st century learning



Stage 4: Design what should be

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