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## Appreciative Organizing: Charting a Course for Community Engagement

Shelly A. Parini-Runge  
*Clackamas Community College*

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## APPRECIATIVE ORGANIZING: CHARTING A COURSE FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Shelly Parini-Runge, MAIS

### Abstract

This article provides a brief overview of Appreciative Organizing (AO), a term coined by the author in her graduate work to describe the roles that dialogue, listening, storytelling, community networks, social bonding, and leadership play in designing and leading meaningful community engagement initiatives that result in transformative partnerships. It offers constructive steps and a real-life example of how AO was used to strengthen relationships between an institution of higher learning and the community it serves. AO posits that in order to strengthen America's sense of community, public engagement practices must become more inclusive and innovative, and better networked. It illustrates how this community-centered method, grounded in the philosophical principles of partnership, appreciation, hope, and imagination, transformed an administration and built a culture of continuous engagement that helped the college meet and exceed its institutional goals. Further, through this example, the article's larger objective is to share ways in which this method, when broadly applied, can be used to build trust and strengthen working relationships within a community setting.

**Keywords:** Appreciative Inquiry; Appreciative Organizing; community engagement; partnership; Imagine Clackamas; Clackamas Community College

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### INTRODUCTION

The opinions of ordinary people matter when it comes to cultivating and sustaining transformative partnerships within communities. Our nation's vitriolic culture has

created paradoxical situations for organizers who depend on trust and collaboration among government officials, public agencies, citizens, and neighborhood stakeholders to create and sustain meaningful change initiatives that reflect the dreams and values of community members, not just the needs of public agencies. This is compounded by an increase in litigation and diminished confidence among community members in government, the public sector, and each other. The lack of trust in government is fueling divisive political movements that use words to tear down human systems and turn humankind against itself. Appreciative Organizing (AO) shifts the tone of public conversation from one of despair to one of hope by probing the life-giving force of stories as catalysts for communal transformation. AO illuminates the roles that dialogue, community networks, and leadership play in charting and navigating public engagement initiatives that are grounded in the philosophical principles of partnership, appreciation, hope, and imagination. AO is a strengths-based application designed to aid community organizers in achieving goals that meet the mutual needs of the public and the communities it serves.

In her book, *The Power of Partnership*, Eisler (2002) connects this vitriolic phenomenon to what she terms the domination model, which pits traditional economic gain over that of caring economics, a term used to give value to caregiving and the natural world. Other thought leaders, including Carter (2014), suggest that this phenomenon is created by social injustice and the degradation of our natural environment, and is compounded by the scars of war and mass destruction. This article offers constructive steps and a real-life example, Imagine Clackamas, to show how AO was used to build trust and strengthen relationships between an institution of higher learning and the community it serves. Through this example, the article shares ways in which AO, when broadly applied, can be used to build trust and strengthen working relationships within a community setting for the purpose of achieving goals that reflect both the needs of the public and the values and dreams of its community.

## **Appreciative Inquiry**

Appreciative Organizing was developed while exploring ways in which conversations and initiatives led through Appreciative Inquiry (AI), a democratic, inclusive, and affirmative method for fostering change, could help organizers improve current community engagement practices. While AI's roots are grounded in action research, a conventional action research model requires a diagnosis to determine what is wrong or broken (Bushe, 1995).

Appreciative Inquiry posits that diagnosing key problems and prescribing solutions does little to strengthen the collective body of an organization or community, making change initiatives that lead to transformative partnerships difficult to sustain. Cooperrider and Srivastva challenged the status quo of seeing organizations as problems to be solved, suggesting that instead they be viewed as miracles to be appreciated (Bushe, 1995). Reflecting on the wisdom of Carl Jung, Bushe (1999) suggests that AI provides a platform for organizational healing where traditional action research practices cannot. AI brings a compassionate approach to change initiatives that require facilitators to lead not only with their heads but also with their hearts. There is a real need for community organizers to create opportunities for dialogue that focus more on the strengths and capacities of a community, not solely on its weaknesses. AI, in part, speaks to this need, as it is a strengths-based research method designed to help communities and organizations create positive change by understanding the best of what was and the best of what is, while imagining the best of what could be.

## **Appreciative Organizing**

To accomplish greater positive change within a community setting, a new combination of organizational elements is needed in which community-based initiatives, led through a hybrid of Appreciative Inquiry, asset-based, and traditional planning methods, helps community organizers improve their effectiveness and current practices by using a method referred to as Appreciative Organizing. Developed during this author's work in graduate school, Appreciative Organizing (AO) offers an

alternative practice for engaging with the community in ways that problem-centric tools and methods may not. AO illuminates the role that dialogue, listening, storytelling, community networks, social bonding, and leadership play in community engagement.

AO is of value to organizers seeking appreciative-based methods to strengthen relationships and develop partnerships within their own communities. Partnerships are not a means to an end, but rather “a means to work toward a better life and a better world” (Carter, 2014). AO shines a light on the roles that partnership, hope, and imagination play in creating a shared vision that places the social, cultural, generational, and communal assets of the people before the problematic needs of the community. Throughout history, socialization and community organizing have been used to bring communities together through the fusion of unity and commonality. Putnam (2000) highlights the potential dangers to society when communal engagement diminishes. AO posits that in order to strengthen America’s sense of community, public engagement practices must become more inclusive, more innovative, and better networked.

AO further suggests that sustained partnership requires understanding what the community most values; documentation of its capacities; social bonding; a compelling shared vision; and a strong leadership team willing to navigate, measure, and manage the process long-term. AO can be practiced in a variety of community settings, including government, environmental, education, and private industry. Regardless of the use, there are five phases to AO: Inquest, Roadmap, Destination, Drivers, and Navigation. The steps described in Figure 1 are designed to move communities toward a set of goals intended to help build a shared vision through the lens of partnership.

<b>Figure 1. Appreciative Organizing: Five-Step Method to Community Engagement</b>		
<b>Phase</b>	<b>Step</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
Phase I: Inquest	<p>Identify project outcomes and set clear objectives to guide process.</p> <p>Create research tools: interview forms and surveys.</p> <p>Survey and interview a broad base of individuals, groups, and stakeholders from within the community.</p> <p>Interview and survey stakeholders including government agencies from outside the community, that can aid in building capacity.</p> <p>Ensure that the inquiry process is open and inclusive to the public.</p> <p>Incorporate storytelling sessions into the interview process.</p>	<p>Excavate and track data for asset mapping.</p> <p>Document compelling themes, quotes, and life-giving stories.</p> <p>Analyze community's strengths and dreams.</p> <p>Measure what community most values and appreciates.</p>
Phase II: Roadmap	<p>Develop map of community's unique strengths and self-perceived assets, and plot intersections for further exploration and analysis.</p>	<p>Ignite change in a manner that leverages strengths and addresses community's dreams, values, hopes, and preferences.</p>
Phase III: Destination	<p>Create a shared vision and overarching goals for the change initiative, in partnership with the community stakeholders.</p>	<p>Establish a shared vision and strategic action plan for a desired future that is imagined by the collective community.</p>
Phase IV: Drivers	<p>Provide the community with a map of the assets that are shoring up their vision and goals.</p> <p>Chart whom, how, when, and with what resources the community is able to pursue and achieve their vision together.</p> <p>Identify gaps in the action plan that still need to be strengthened or addressed.</p>	<p>Inspire other organizations to get involved to build capacity.</p> <p>Leverage communal resources, and reduce waste and redundancy of services.</p> <p>Diminish conflict of interests.</p> <p>Attract new communal stakeholders and investors.</p>
Phase V: Navigation	<p>Assign leadership team to navigate, manage, evaluate, and communicate short and long-term course of action that allows for continuous input.</p>	<p>Ensure that goals are implemented, shared vision becomes a reality, and change initiative is sustained.</p>

## **PHASES OF APPRECIATIVE ORGANIZING**

The five steps outlined in Figure 1 demonstrate how AO uses affirmative interviews, surveys, focus groups, and storytelling techniques to help discover and map the best of what the community has been, currently is, and still could be. The research tools leverage traditional, asset-based, and AI models (Parini-Runge, 2012) and illustrate how AO could be used to create a collective vision that transforms the communal mindset from one of desperation to one of hope, through fully developed action plans and carefully cultivated partnership-based strategies.

### **Phase 1: Inquest**

The purpose of the first phase of the AO practice is to establish a clear direction for the community or organization through affirmative dialogue, inquiry, and action. This phase includes designing the community engagement process, developing the survey tools, and interviewing and surveying a broad base of individuals from within the community.

AO typically utilizes a variety of research tools, including interviews, surveys, and focus groups. The questions developed during the inquest phase are designed to uncover what the community most values in relation to its strengths and assets. The stories, a research subset, are designed to help the organizer understand a time when the participant felt really energized or connected to her or his community or organization. The stories and motivational quotes captured through carefully designed open-ended questions provide inspiration in a way that statics alone cannot.

In whole, the inquest phase is designed to reveal the community's strong points and set the stage for short-term change, innovation, action, and capacity building. Visible short-term actions are important ingredients in cultivating a partnership, as they provide participants an opportunity to witness their voice making a difference. As the Associate Vice President of College Relations and Marketing at Clackamas Community College, I used AO to help develop Imagine Clackamas, a public engagement initiative

designed to help the aging institution better understand what its students and community members most valued about the college. Imagine Clackamas shone a light on areas where the college should improve or adapt its educational and training services to better meet the needs of the community it serves, both today and in the future.

### **Phase II: Roadmap**

Phase II of the AO process is designed to assess, evaluate, and map the community's or organization's strengths and assets in a way that helps the organizer understand what the community most values and desires in relation to the subject of the survey. The survey subject could be a park, school, neighborhood, or other public entity. Good planning and strong goals ensure that the data and discoveries tracked and mapped in the roadmap phase identify clear intersections between assets that ultimately provide fuel for the community's dreams, values, hopes, and preferences for a better future.

This phase is akin to AI in that the information mapped is strengths-based, but also resembles more traditional community organizing models, which use standard strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threat analyses before commencing the visioning processes. The purpose of the roadmap phase, beyond data collection and analysis, is to inspire engagement and build capacity for moving the initiative forward.

### **Phase III: Destination**

Phase III of the AO process takes the work conducted and compiled in the inquest and roadmap phases and aids in the development of a shared vision, set of goals, and strategic direction. To be successful, the visioning process should include as many interviewees, survey participants, and focus group participants as reasonably possible. The shared vision and bold goals that emerge out of this process become blueprints for the community engagement initiative. The destination phase also offers opportunity for short-term action and involvement. It is not unusual for small changes



to happen immediately. Short-term action can be very empowering for the participants, as it demonstrates that their voices, opinions, and ideas matter.

#### **Phase IV: Drivers**

Phase IV of the AO process allows for both action and capacity building. The drivers are designed in partnership with key participants identified during the inquest phase. Drivers are the tactical actions behind the goals. They are where the rubber meets the road. Before an action can be identified as a driver, it must have a champion from the community. Together, the organizing agency and community decide how to best put the action into motion. In partnership, they must also determine who needs to be on the team and where the resources will come from to ensure that the goals are fully implemented, evaluated, and sustained. The drivers document with whom, how, when, and with what resources the community members can achieve their vision together.

This phase provides an opportunity for identifying barriers to success and potential gaps in the overall planning process. One way to reduce barriers is to leverage community networks and resources, and to listen to the solutions that emerge out of the community process itself. If community members enjoy ownership in the process, they are much more likely to identify and support mechanisms (funding or otherwise) to make it happen. The underlying purpose of this phase is to describe in vivid detail how the community will accomplish its goals and objectives and who will carry them forward.

#### **Phase V: Navigation**

Phase V of the AO process ensures that the shared vision described in Phase III becomes a reality. This is accomplished by assigning a leadership team to navigate, manage, communicate, and measure short and long-term courses of action. It is typically the organization leading the public engagement initiative that becomes responsible for shepherding the vision and ensuring the goals are met. To keep the

partnership with the community strong, the leadership team should appoint a citizen oversight committee to ensure that promises to the community are met.

The navigation phase requires that the leadership team work with the community to enact measurement systems, reporting mechanisms, and ongoing community engagement sessions. These systems need to be transparent and easily accessible. AO advocates that leaders who are able to place the greater good of the community before their own needs and remain hopeful even during the most challenging times are much more likely to cultivate, chart, and sustain the movement through the lens of a genuine partnership.

## **IMAGINE CLACKAMAS**

“CCC is the heart of the Community.”

- Foundation Board Member

In preparation for its 50<sup>th</sup> year of service, and after a bond measure was defeated in 2011, the leadership of Clackamas Community College (CCC) developed a public engagement process using AO called "Imagine Clackamas" to help understand what its students, businesses, and community members most valued about the college, and to shape the institution's future. The leadership wanted to understand how the college could be more responsive to the ever-changing economic climate. It wanted to know what it could do to make the college more accessible to the district it serves. Together, in partnership with the community, it thought long and hard about what a successful college would look like in the next fifty years. The college thought about its students and their shifting communication patterns, hectic lifestyles, and dreams of a better life. It thought about its mission and the very diverse community it is ethically bound to serve with responsive education and training needs.

To steer this journey the Board developed the following goals:

- strengthen relationships with the community;
- discover what the community most values as it relates to education and training;
- identify areas for removing student barriers to improve access and retention;
- create a new brand for the college that is reflective of the community it serves; and
- enhance the college's communication channels to be more accessible.

As the leadership listened, it began to understand what it would take to help the college strengthen its relationships with students, businesses, community members, and even itself as a college community. It is clear from the feedback received from the Imagine Clackamas community engagement process that the community appreciates and values the hard work of college faculty and staff.

As a long-time public employee, I was pleased to see such high approval ratings for Clackamas. An overwhelming portion of the population surveyed said that CCC was doing an excellent job. It was wonderful affirmation to know that community colleges are still viewed with such appreciation after all these years. On a personal level, it was heartening to hear the stories about how the college's collective hard work has impacted and transformed so many lives for the better. It was heartening to learn how essential the college's collective business and workforce development services are to local industry. It was heartening to witness the appreciation for the passion that college instructors have for teaching. With that said, the community also gave the college an earful about what it needed to do to strengthen its efforts to reduce barriers for both student access and success, and to improve its relationships with the business community at large.

The Imagine Clackamas process provided the college with a very innovative, yet practical way to facilitate community-centered conversations. It provided the college with a platform to listen and engage in ways that truly strengthened communal bonds

with its district and build trust. Imagine Clackamas helped the college tap into and spark the imagination of the very people it serves.

The Imagine Clackamas AO inquest phase utilized a variety of tools to gather input from the community, including:

- an online survey incorporating a series of multiple choice and open-ended questions, as well as a section for capturing stories;
- classroom surveys which were used to gather input from the district's Hispanic community;
- intercept surveys - impromptu mini-interviews conducted on location; and
- five business focus groups hosted around the college district.

In all, more than 1,500 CCC students, faculty, staff, and community members completed the surveys; approximately 750 high school students and community members participated in face-to-face intercept surveys; and more than 100 business professionals took part in focus groups. The entire community engagement process took one full year to complete.

The discoveries and dreams illuminated in the Imagine Clackamas initiative helped the Board prepare a bond measure that reflected the community's needs and desires. The bond measure passed in November 2014. It is one of the most visible outcomes of Imagine Clackamas. To ensure that all of the goals of Imagine Clackamas are fully implemented by the end of 2016, the administration of CCC embedded these goals into its institutional priorities. Imagine Clackamas shone a light on the roles that dreams and imagination play in creating a shared vision that places the values, needs and aspirations of its community before the problematic needs of the college. Imagine Clackamas helped the college become more inclusive, more innovative, and better connected with its community.

## **WORDS MATTER**

It is important to note the crucial role that language plays in Appreciative Organizing. Words can construct or demolish. Words can lift one up or tear one down. Eisler (2002) addresses this when describing the empowering role that positive and compassionate words play in constructing partnerships, and the equally destructive role that words can play in tearing down humans and communities through the domination model.

Carter (2014) suggests that we “be aware of the use of language and note how many terms perpetuate domination orientation. Think of alternative terms that further partnership orientation, and make a conscious effort to use them in conversation” (p. 7). AO places a strong emphasis on positive dialogue and the role words, stories, and language play in building healthy communities and in developing transformative partnerships. Gergen (1999) claims that words help us paint a picture of the world around us. They socially construct images that can empower or disempower communities. Words do matter, and community organizers, change agents, and leaders must use them wisely.

## **CONCLUSION**

Dialogue and partnership are at the heart of an AO community engagement process. Imagine Clackamas provided the space for students, community members, businesses, faculty, and staff to begin imagining the future of education at Clackamas Community College: A future that matters to them. It shone a light on the roles that dreams and imagination play in creating a shared vision that places the values and aspirations of its community before the problematic needs of the college. Imagine Clackamas helped the college become more inclusive, innovative, and better connected with its community. AO may be more time-intensive than traditional community organizing approaches, but is not necessarily more expensive. In fact, it can be less expensive, as it requires internal members (citizens and staff) to become facilitators, knowledge

keepers, leaders, and spokespersons, instead of relying solely on outside agencies. This in itself creates change and models partnership.

As illustrated by Imagine Clackamas, Appreciative Organizing, when used in its fullest capacity, can prove to be highly transformative. AO's carefully constructed five-step method has the potential to strengthen current public engagement practices by providing tools and techniques that help community organizers become more inclusive, more innovative, and better networked. It does this by focusing on strengths-based solutions that mirror the needs and dreams of the community.

Imagine Clackamas is evidence that AO, when broadly applied, can be highly effective at building trust and strengthening working relationships within a community setting. As a twenty-year community engagement professional, I can personally attest that using an appreciative-based method such as AO is not only extremely effective, it is more fulfilling and just feels better. The relationships developed through the Imagine Clackamas community engagement initiative not only helped transform the college, they also transformed me.

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Shelly Parini-Runge, MAIS, is the Associate Vice President of College Relations and Marketing at Clackamas Community College. Shelly is an experienced community engagement professional. Culminating 15 years of planning and applied research methods, she is the creator of Appreciative Organizing, an appreciative-based community engagement model. She has used Appreciative Organizing to develop fundraising campaigns, design community outreach initiatives, train teams, build organizational climate surveys, and even pass a bond measure. Strengthening communities through communication and engagement is something Shelly is very passionate about. Her career bridges the gap between government, private industry, and higher education. Shelly is illuminating the role online research, social media, community networks, and appreciative inquiry play in charting and navigating change initiatives. Shelly received her MAIS degree from Marylhurst University.

Correspondence about this article should be addressed to Shelly Parini-Runge, MAIS, at [pariniconnects@gmail.com](mailto:pariniconnects@gmail.com)