Appreciative Inquiry Student's Blog

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Andrew Lynch is currently a student in the Masters–track OD program at Case Western Reserve University. He has contributed a blog related to the results of his research for his final "mastery project" of the program. He is grateful for the mentorship and guidance he received from Ron Fry, who was the faculty advisor for his project.

Using AI Tools and Methods to Successfully Transition a Company to a Divisional OrganizationApprec Structure

Much has been written about the "Five (5) Ws" – the who, what, where, when, and why – in regards to companies transitioning to a divisional org structure. The how is significantly under-addressed, however. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) tools and methods were leveraged to create one potential "playbook" for how to lead a company through this process.

What did I do?

Whereas many corporate org structure transitions follow more abrupt executive mandates, I was recently fortunate to be able to help lead my company's structural transition through a ~6 month, multi-phase, co-creation endeavor.

A full and detailed description of the overall approach would warrant a full article, but for the abbreviated purpose of this blog post, here were some key interventional tools that were used to very positive effect:

- A formal org-wide announcement of the evolutionary need, reasons, and benefits for transitioning to a divisional structure at this time, and that we would be launching a formal project to undertake this effort.

- Careful identification and recruitment of a highly diverse project team, ensuring representation from all levels of the org (Front-line, management, senior leadership, executive), all functional/departmental groups, and all country sites / cultures. Sought out project team members generally shared the qualities of being hard-working, self-motivated, team-oriented, flexibly-minded, and subject-matter experts within and adjacent to their domains.

- A "best teams inquiry" exercise was completed, modeled after Gervase Bushe's Meaning Making in Teams (2002), where we agreed upon the team's shared values.

- A "pre-mortem" exercise, where we preemptively identified reasons the project could potentially fail, for the purpose of then creating mitigating tasks to address them.

- A nested SOAR Summit, leveraging Jackie Stavros and Gina Hinrichs SOAR methodology, where we created vision, mission, and purpose statements and SOAR tables – for the company as a whole and separately for each of the new divisions.

- Recreation of the major processes of the company, re-tooled for each unique division (e.g. idea-to-product, engage-to-order, order-to cash, etc.).

- Numerous communication tools were used throughout the project, such as weekly org-wide update emails, semi-regular (every 6-8 weeks) town hall sessions with more detailed updates and live Q&A, anonymous feedback channels, pulse surveys, various 1-on-1 conversations as warranted, and more.

What was the impact?

An early pre-launch survey to the entire org exceeded 65% favorability and 27% neutrality for moving to divisions based on the planning and build-out work of the project team, suggesting strong likelihood for org-wide support and success after "go live".

The new divisions had several markers for success, in no particular order:

- Enhanced the customer experience

- Allowed for seamless transition to the various stakeholders

- Enabled separate and focused profit and loss statements (with all new divisions being profitable)

- Included measurable KPIs and dashboards for the new divisions

- Resulted in detailed process maps (value stream maps) for all major processes

- Coexisted within the existing IS/IT structure with minimal retooling

- Refreshed clear and referable org charts for the new divisions

- Explained clearly to – and bought in by – the entire org

- Developed a process to use as a guideline for the creation of new additional divisions in the future

Note that a post-launch survey and project post-mortem activity is planned for mid-2025 (a few months after this blog post was submitted), where we hope to learn even more about the overall impact of the project.

What did I learn?

I had three key learnings on this project:

1. Important changes – like transitioning org structures – deserve the extra time and effort. Spend the time and energy to maximize supporters (and neutrals) and minimize detractors. Allow the space

and embrace the risk reward of co-creation by a diverse group – it can be incredibly powerful!

2. Communicate, communicate, communicate. Early, often, across all levels, and via different means (regular status updates, town halls, 1-on-1s, anonymous surveys, etc.).

3. SOAR Summits sometimes require detours of complementary work. Beyond "SOARing" at 30,000 feet, consider if you also need to spend time at 10,000 feet (e.g. process flows) and/or 1,000 feet (e.g. task-level assignments). Those extra insights might be key for untangling things, and/or for putting certain personality types at ease!

How will I apply this learning moving forward?

As a current student in a Masters-track OD program, I was thrilled to leverage AI tools and methods to help my company out with an ambitious project like this. I look forward to continuing to use AI for a whole host of change management needs that my company will have in the future!