Using Appreciative Inquiry Focus Groups to Engage Members in Planning for the National Network of Libraries of Medicine Middle Atlantic Region

Abstract

Project background: This paper will report on a focus group project conducted by a regional office of the National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NN/LM) that used an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach. Funded through the National Library of Medicine, NN/LM is a nationwide network of health sciences libraries and information centers (called "network members") with the goal of advancing the progress of medicine and improving public health through equal access to health information. The NN/LM regional offices support network members by offering training, funding, access to biomedical and consumer health information, and other services. The focus groups were conducted to gather input from representatives of the network members supported through the NN/LM Middle Atlantic Region (MAR) to serve the health information needs of a four-state region (Delaware, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania). This paper will highlight the process that was implemented and the advantages of the AI approach, including high levels of staff participation, efficient use of staff resources, and quality of the collected data.

Key Lessons:

- The approach was easily applied by staff without extensive evaluation experience and with minimal training.

  o Each staff person served as a recorder. Because all staff members were involved, they received immediate feedback from network members.
  o One drawback was that listening skill varied among staff, so some people were better recorders than others. However, we still would have used all staff as recorders so they could get feedback from network members. Having a skilled facilitator compensated for differences in recorder skill.

- Network members could provide direct feedback without fear of offending the NN/LM MAR staff who run the program.

  o The phrasing of AI questions allowed network members to provide feedback diplomatically. While phrased positively, they provided concrete information we could act on.
  o The sample was biased toward those who knew the NN/LM MAR and were motivated to participate. The limitation of time required we include only those network members who had experience with the NN/LM MAR program. Therefore, the evaluation project did not inform us as to why some network members have minimal involvement with the NN/LM MAR.

- There was some concern that network members would not talk about shortcomings in the NN/LM MAR program. However, we learned about some program shortcomings when participants expressed their "wishes."

- This approach to obtaining feedback from network members would yield data that were easier to analyze.
  - The data analysis was not as overwhelming as expected. The way the questions were framed helped to bring forth very specific themes.
  - There was consistency in feedback about the services that network members thought were essential and successful for their practice.

Conclusion

- Staff involvement and instant feedback are a plus.
- The approach created a nonthreatening environment for participants and staff.
- The questions yielded manageable data collection and analysis.

Resources:

Final report for this project is available, http://nnlm.gov/mar/about/pdf/focusgroupsfinal.pdf

Preskill, H.S., & Catsambas, T.T. (2006). *Reframing evaluation through appreciative inquiry.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Adobe Connect web conferencing software. We conducted focus groups online using Adobe Connect which has a built in audio recorder. Sound quality is good, and the playback and pause options made transcription fairly easy. Conducting the focus groups online was convenient for the facilitator and participants. Adobe Connect is not a free tool, but one can request a free trial to explore its many options. (http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobatconnectpro/)

Contact:

Sue Hunter
sue.hunter@med.nyu.edu
Ph: 212.263.4179
Planning & Evaluation Coordinator
National Network of Libraries of Medicine,
Middle Atlantic Region
New York University Langone Medical Center
423 E 23rd St., Floor 15S
New York, NY, 11106

Cindy Olney
olneyc@coevaluation.com
Ph: 678.682.3864
Evaluation Specialist
National Network of Libraries of Medicine,
Outreach Evaluation Resource Center
Health Sciences Libraries and Information Center
NN/LM Pacific Northwest Region Box 357155
University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195-7155