

## APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AS AN IMPROVEMENT OPPORTUNITY FOR LINK GERENCIAL CONSULTORES

CARMEN ROSA ARZOLA<sup>1</sup>

[carzola@unimet.edu.ve](mailto:carzola@unimet.edu.ve)

Universidad Metropolitana de Caracas (Venezuela)

MARÍA HELENA ALFONZO<sup>2</sup>

[mariahelena.alfonzo@gmail.com](mailto:mariahelena.alfonzo@gmail.com)

Universidad Metropolitana de Caracas (Venezuela)

BLAS ATENCIO<sup>3</sup>

[blas.atencio@gmail.com](mailto:blas.atencio@gmail.com)

Universidad Metropolitana de Caracas (Venezuela)

### SUMMARY

This research was carried out under the modality of a feasible project. It consisted of the intervention with the Appreciative Inquiry (A.I.) methodology in Link Gerencial Consultores, a consulting and training company that seeks to enhance the competitiveness of its clients through the design of innovative proposals tailored to excellence. As a service, they considered it essential to train their members in activities that promote well-being, self-knowledge and teamwork. The investigation had as General Objective: To implement the Appreciative Inquiry model in Link Gerencial Consultores (Venezuela headquarters) as a strategy for the construction of a vision of the business future based on its personal and group strengths. The intervention counted with the participation of 18 members; executing the five phases that make up the model of the AI, and fulfilling the specific objectives designed for each stage: 1) "Define": in which the successful narratives of the organization were identified through appreciative dialogues. 2) "Discover": where the strengths and positive individual and group aspects that make up Link's Positive Core could be appreciated. 3) "Dream": in which the aspirations and desires of the participants with respect to the future of the company were contrasted. 4) "Design": where the participants built a detailed action plan to achieve the Dream. 5) "Destination": Detecting the progress achieved according to the proposal in the Design phase. The results of the intervention were positive, it was possible to implement the model, increase the level of self-knowledge of the members, and promote integration among the different work teams.

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1 Specialist in Organizational Development (UCAB), Bachelor's Degree in Psychology (UCV). External consultant in organizational processes. Lecturer in the Department of Behavioral Sciences of the Universidad Metropolitana and in the CENDECO-UNIMET Diploma: Positive Psychology, basis of well-being.

2 B.A. in Psychology. Metropolitan University

3 School of Psychology. Dept. Behavioral Sciences. Universidad Metropolitana.



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## ARTICLE

The present research was born in 2017 as a thesis work for the degree: Bachelor in Psychology, from the Metropolitan University. Its purpose was to implement an organizational intervention based on the methodology of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in Link Gerencial Consultores; in this sense, the 5D's Model proposed by David Cooperrider was used, based on five phases: Define, Discover, Dream, Design and Destination (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005).

## THE COMPANY LINK GERENCIAL CONSULTORES

Link Gerencial Consultores is a Venezuelan consulting and training company founded in 1998, with international trajectory, and whose main office is located in Caracas. It is made up of a team of multidisciplinary professionals, which are in permanent search of innovative and custom-designed solutions, to respond to the needs and expectations of its clients, while enhancing their competitiveness (Link Gerencial, 2018).

In order to become a consulting and training company that is recognized in Latin America for its management solutions, innovative, and appropriate to its users, Link is mainly governed by the following values: Flexibility, Innovation, Quality, Respect for talent and Service (Link Gerencial, 2018, p. 3).

For the General Management of the company, the growth and training of its employees is essential, so that they can offer a better service and ensure that the projects they provide to their customers are updated, are optimal, and allow them to face the conditions of the environment in a favorable way; and that is why its directors decided to promote the development and improve the performance of its employees using Appreciative Inquiry as a tool that provides elements to meet the needs outlined above.

## OBJECTIVES THAT DIRECTED THE RESEARCH

### General Objective:

Implementing the Appreciative Inquiry model in the workers of Link Gerencial Consultores (Venezuela headquarters) as a strategy for the construction of a business future vision based on their personal and group strengths (Alfonzo and Atencio, 2018; p. 10).

## Specific Objectives:

1. Identify the successful narratives of Link Gerencial employees through appreciative dialogues.
2. Appreciate the strengths and positive individual and group aspects that make up the company's Positive Core.
3. To compare the aspirations and desires of the participants with respect to the future of the company.
4. Compose, together with the participants, a detailed action plan to achieve the company's desired future.
5. Detect, together with the participants, the progress achieved in accordance with what was proposed in the action plan (Alfonzo and Atencio, 2018; p. 10).

## THEORETICAL BASIS FOR THE INTERVENTION

**On the one hand, the fundamentals of Positive Psychology were taken.** Positive psychology is a branch of psychology that seeks to understand, through scientific research, the processes underlying the positive qualities and emotions of human beings, which for a long time were ignored by general psychology (Vera, 2006).

Additionally, Seligman (2011) reinforced the innovative character of Positive Psychology (PP) with strategies that allow the development of positive emotions, strengths and virtues of the human being; boost interpersonal bonds; enhance the commitment, purpose and achievements of both individuals and the groups and systems with which they are linked. These elements allow, among other things, to strengthen institutions such as the family, the community, the school and organizations.

Despite being recent, PP has generated a great impact at the work level, and that is the origin of **Positive Organizational Psychology** (Salanova, 2008), which has shown that it is from the positive elements (instead of leveraging on those that generate problems), that greater influence is achieved, aligned with the achievement of objectives.

Starting the intervention by empowering the participants from the beginning, valuing what each one has to contribute to the optimal functioning of the system where they are (instead of starting from the shortcomings or what does not work), increases their capacity and motivation to improve situations that drives them towards the path of healthy organizations (Seligman, 2011; Vera, 2006 and Seligman 1996).

**And, on the other hand, the research focused on Appreciative Inquiry**, which is a methodology based on the collaborative process that "Seeks to connect people and the organization with their competencies, skills, talents and with their best achievements and practices" (Subirana and Cooperrider, 2013; p. 27).

In the 80's, its creator David Cooperrider (Subirana and Cooperrider, 2013), together with other researchers were dedicated to implement the IA model in the United States and Canada in order to evaluate its performance and applicability in the organizational area, and it is not until around 2005 when it had a greater boom in European countries, together with Latin nations such as Uruguay, Costa Rica, Argentina and Chile, among others; diversifying, in turn to environments such as personal, social, health, education, culture, government, etc.

At the national level the application of AI as a methodology has had a limited scope, or at least there is little documentation about it; however, since 2013 the Metropolitan University has been in charge, hand in hand with Professor Carmen Rosa Arzola, of promoting the implementation of AI as an intervention tool through the application of feasible projects in several institutions: Non-Governmental Organizations and, in private and public companies.

This intervention approach started being used as the 4D model, because of its four phases: Discover, *Dream*, Design and Destine (Subirana and Cooperrider, 2013). Cooperrider later included a previous phase, which would become the first (Define) to turn it into the 5D's model (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005).

The following is a brief description of each of the five stages that make up the AI learning cycle:

1. DEFINE Phase (called Preliminary Phase in some research): this is the first step of the intervention and determines the commitment of the main actors, its scope and the logistics necessary to meet the intervention's objectives.
2. DISCOVER phase: allows to determine and recognize the strengths and tools that the group has. To do this, the best practices of the company are investigated, the positive elements that the team has and who is or are more skilled in each of the tasks to be performed. The technique used to discover the best of the organization is the Appreciative Interview, based on its results, the group content analysis is performed, which allows identifying the topic(s) to be addressed during the intervention. This stage culminates with the construction of the Positive Nucleus (PN) of the group, around which the rest of the phases of the intervention will revolve.

The positive core is identified in the Define and Discover phases, mobilizing a dialogue of the entire organizational system. It is expanded throughout the Dreams phase, in which we generate a clear results-oriented vision in relation to the discovered potential. In the Design and Destination phases, the future is built based on the strengths of the positive core of the organization (Subirana and Cooperrider, 2013; p. 220).

3. *DREAM* phase: articulates desires, hopes, and aspirations for the future. The objective of this stage is to formulate inspiring proposals that lead the participants to remember the best that the organization has and to imagine what it can become in the future. The Dream to be built is shared by all members, based on a review of their NP.
4. DESIGN Phase: here decisions must be made regarding the procedure for achieving the Dream. It is essential to determine what are the most important elements required to achieve it and how people can ensure that they enjoy and learn throughout the experience. At this point, visionary or provocative proposals are generated (which must be innovative and realistic), allowing the design of a vision of the organization as

an excellent place to work. It is a kind of Action Plan in which the participants decide which propositions will be executed and how; it is characterized by expanding the *status quo*, challenging common beliefs and established routines, and suggesting desired possibilities for the company and its collaborators.

5. DESTINATION Phase: includes the implementation of the actions designed to achieve the Shared Dream. Here the execution of actions and their maintenance through continuous follow-up activities is emphasized.

## Importance of Appreciative Intervention.

At present, AI as an intervention is fundamental since it has been proven, throughout the different studies carried out, that the use of good practices and the promotion of positive postures in the construction of healthy organizations is more effective than the mere solution of problems. The search for quality over negative elements allows growth to be generated and empowered, both the members of the organization and its processes and policies, multiplying improvements and motivating employees to grow together with the company (Glenn, Saretsky and Stetson, 2014).

In addition, AI promotes well-being at work, which fosters a better work environment where all team members are committed to achieving the goals, since they themselves have been part of the definition of these goals and the whole process involved in achieving them. By actively participating, they have a greater commitment to themselves and to the organization.

Finally, the use of this intervention strategy results in the generation of positive shared visions, causing a culture of appreciation and constant learning, which in turn contributes favorably to the organizational climate, stimulates creativity, personal commitment in workers and integrates the participants, directing the work towards the mission and vision of the same (Factor Humá Foundation 2011).

## METHODOLOGY USED

The research is qualitative and was carried out under the Feasible Project modality. The latter seeks to respond to proposals made by a group of people, an organization or social groups , in order to satisfy situations that are part of their priorities (Dubs de Moya, 2002; Universidad Pedagógica Experimental Libertador. 2006).

The 5D's model proposed by Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) was applied, which comprises the five phases described above: Define, Discover, *Dream*, Design and Destination. And the number of participants were the 18 employees of the company working in Caracas at that time.

Since the collaboration of each of the members was essential for the proper development of this research, the work sessions were planned and carried out during their working day, thus facilitating attendance, which, in turn, enhanced the participation in the activities by each of the members of the organization.



## Techniques for data collection and data analysis

The following resources and techniques were used to help achieve the objectives and collect the information required for the development of activities tailored to the client's needs:

- Diagnostic interview with the General Manager to determine the client's needs.
- Appreciative Dialogues. This refers to the narratives developed in the team, which allowed to systematically value the positive elements of the members and the organization, in order to establish a collective reality through the exchange and construction of common meanings (Subirana and Cooperrider, 2013).
- Direct observation, recording of notes, photographic and audio-recordings, minutes and field diaries. They facilitated the documentation of important elements that would later form part of the analysis of results.
- Script of Appreciative Interviews applied through Focus Groups, understanding the latter from an appreciative point of view.
- Instructional Design and Group Dynamics. Work sessions were planned through experiential exercises that fostered interaction and strengthened participants' bonds for personal and group growth in the organization (Shaw, 1979).
- *Feedback* instruments. These consisted of a simple written evaluation provided to the participants at the end of each phase. These instruments made it possible to ascertain the different opinions regarding the activities carried out and to evaluate whether the objectives set were being met in accordance with the planning stipulated at the beginning of the intervention, and/or whether it was necessary to readjust some element of the intervention.

## Group content analysis of the appreciative interviews

In the Discovery phase of the IA, the Positive Core of the organization is constructed, which is based on the information gathered through the Appreciative Interviews which, as mentioned above, were conducted using Appreciative Focus Groups; their results were processed through the Group Content Analysis of the Appreciative Interviews (Varona, 2009), which made it possible to examine the data obtained and to evaluate the assessments of each participant with respect to the intervention carried out. In order to carry out this technique effectively, a series of steps proposed by Federico Varona were exhaustively followed, which we suggest those interested to consult in the text Varona, F. (2009): *Appreciative Intervention: A new, provocative and effective way to build organizations in the 21st century.*

## RESULTS THAT CAN BE HIGHLIGHTED FROM THE RESEARCH

Beyond the fulfillment of the objectives that framed this intervention, we highlight the following elements achieved at each stage of the IA:

- ❖ DEFINE phase: The visible commitment on the part of management and workers made it possible to carry out the intervention in an organized manner and within the established time frame. The topics to be addressed, chosen by consensus, were: communication, empathy and tolerance among members.
  
- ❖ DISCOVER phase: The Positive Core (PN) statements in the Discover phase were grouped as follows:
  - ✓ **Family and Closeness:** We are close and supportive. We feel like a family
  - ✓ **Commitment and challenge:** Our work always comes out. We take on challenges with commitment.
  - ✓ **Teamwork and support:** All areas depend on each other. We always have excellent people, both personally and professionally.
  - ✓ **Professionalism, talent, growth, research, learning and training:** We generate spaces for mutual learning. In this company we can grow professionally, conquering new goals and facing challenges with the best tools.
  - ✓ **Tolerance and flexibility:** Management is flexible and tolerant. We are a friendly and outgoing team.
  - ✓ **Human quality, harmony and achievements:** Link Gerencial Consultores is a company with many expectations for 2018 (Alfonzo and Atencio, 2018; p. 83).
  
- ❖ DREAM Phase: The shared dream was worded as follows:

We dream of improving communication to be all aligned with the objectives, allowing good planning, recognizing the successes of all, to position ourselves as the number 1 company in the region (Alfonzo and Atencio, 2018; p. 87).
  
- ❖ DESIGN Phase: Regarding the action plan, the participants focused on three fundamental pillars that served as a guide to develop the details of the innovative proposals to be implemented in the short, medium and long term. These pillars were as follows:
  1. Improve communication to align objectives, challenges and goals. If we are all aware of what we want to achieve, nothing is impossible.

2. Work on the positioning of Link Gerencial as an international reference. Grow together and celebrate it.
  3. Formalize processes, work with more order and planning Alfonzo and Atencio, 2018; p. 91).
- ❖ DESTINATION Phase: After the implementation of the actions designed in the Design phase, the researchers made 4 follow-up visits and were able to evaluate the team's progress with respect to the proposals. According to the workers' reports, some teams had started with their assigned tasks while others were in the preparation phase. They commented that the situation in the country

## CONCLUSIONS

In general terms, with the intervention with the AI methodology, benefits were achieved in terms of the way of relating and functioning administratively, which enhanced the well-being of Link Gerencial Consultores at three levels: personal, group and as an organizational system.

As indicated by Varona (2009), they were able to develop Appreciative Intelligence, which allowed them to perceive each other's positive potential and recognize their strengths and attributes both at a personal and group level, to later build together the Positive Nucleus of the organization, which can serve as a support to face contingencies in an adaptive manner, with flexibility in the face of changes and with collective awareness.

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