The Positive Core: Using the Best of What We Do to Solve Problems We Face

Ginny Carroll, inGiNuity
Holly Grunn Beckwith, University of Michigan
Carson Lance, Northeastern University

"If you truly wish to change your world, you must change the way of asking questions. It could be that the moment you do so, a totally different world will take shape around you."
- Anonymous

The realities we face as fraternity/sorority professionals are daunting. We are called upon to be change agents and solve complex problems, yet often find ourselves stuck tackling the same issues year to year. Our method of problem solving often includes the identification of a problem and the quick creation of solutions to fix said problem. Although effective in addressing some of the challenges we face, we cannot rely solely on that method if we are truly invested in enacting sustainable change in our chapters, communities, departments, and even within ourselves as individuals.

So what would a different method look like?

A theory and methodology of human development we have all chosen to prescribe in our work is called appreciative inquiry (AI). AI is a well-documented, strength-based method that purposefully shifts conversations toward moments when people and organizations are at their best. Stories told through these conversations are the basis for analyzing and discovering factors that lead to success. Conversations then shift more easily towards dreaming about an ideal future. Simply put, by using AI, we focus on what is working rather than focusing on the problem(s).

Followers of AI work to establish a clear understanding of the positive core of their organization. The positive core – moments when people are the most proud AND when the organization is at its best – exists in individuals and organizations. When working from the positive core rather than the problem itself, people and organizations will more easily and eagerly search for ways to continuously move toward an identified ideal.

In a nutshell, AI occurs using a three-part interview:
1. **Describe when one is most proud**
   Identify a time when you had an amazing advising conversation or when you successfully implemented a new initiative. What was happening that contributed to your success or feeling of pride? When answering those questions, you are talking about your positive core.
2. **Determine what one values in those moments**
   What about that advising conversation or new initiative did you value? What do you love and value about working with fraternity and/or sorority members? Again, your answers are the positive core of why you have chosen this profession and describe how you feel at your best and what you value most.
3. **Dream of how the future would look if these feelings and values were replicated**
   How can you apply what you've discovered about these moments of pride to current problems you face? Of the components that led to your success, what can be replicated?

By identifying what has contributed to past success or value, you can then identify how to replicate those components to address current problem(s).

Here are some examples of utilizing the appreciative three-part approach:

Problem	Appreciative Three-Part Approach
I am so tired of putting out fires.	1. Describe a time when you were not putting out fires. What made the situation possible? How did you feel? 2. What do you value about work without crisis? Why is it important? 3. What can you do to have more fire free time in your year?
How can the Vice President expect our staff to magically change the culture?	1. Describe the kind of culture the Vice President wishes for (if necessary, have the Vice President describe it in detail). What has made that kind of culture possible in the past? 2. Why would it be valuable to the Vice President and to us to create and sustain that culture in our office? 3. How can we achieve that culture? What do we need to change?
My board of directors is focused on the wrong issues.	1. Describe a time when your board was focused on the right issues. What made that a reality? 2. Why is it important for the board to be focused on issues you have in mind? 3. How can you ensure the board realizes these are the appropriate issues for the organization to focus resources?
Why am I even doing this work anymore?	1. Describe, in detail, your proudest moment in this job. What made that situation possible? 2. What did you value about the experience? Why was it so important? 3. How can you make those types of experiences a reality more often in your work?

Ultimately, AI is about choosing to pull ourselves out of the problems we face. It takes time, focused thought, and effort but when done regularly, this approach can become second nature and can drastically change the trajectory of the work you and those around you are doing. In addition to traditional problem-solving methods, the change we aspire to create in the fraternity/sorority movement *can* be managed through the identification of what works and doing more of what works. We, the authors, are calling on our field to be bold by shifting the way we approach problems and to remember that in every organization, things do work. We just need to do the work to find them.

"The task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths, making our weaknesses irrelevant." - Peter Drucker

References

Hammond, S. (1996). *The thin book of appreciative inquiry* (2nd. ed.). Bend, OR: Thin Book Publishing Co.