

Storytelling an Unparalleled Method to Convey Meaning: Mohr

Organization designer shares how stories can lead to change

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. - In a world of complexity and nuance, it's the time-honoured tradition of storytelling that provides an unparalleled method to convey meaning, says Bernard Mohr.

Mohr, an organization designer with [Innovation Partners International](#), shared this idea as part of his presentation on Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to health-care delegates during the third International Innovation Expedition in Health Care.

The two-day workshop convened health-care leaders who are all grappling with the challenge of change and are using AI — a constructive approach to organizational development that builds on strengths and what's working — to foster innovation and culture transformation.

A major focus of the conference was asking delegates to share their stories of using AI to learn from each other.

According to Mohr, learning from stories is a critical part of the AI process. While many people tend to focus on the Appreciative part of AI, Mohr suggests the second half the name, Inquiry, deserves equal footing.

AI asks people to share stories of what's working but it's the inquiry into why these things are successful that provides people with greater understanding of their strengths, resources, core values and opportunities for innovation, says Mohr.

"It's living in the world of the question and living in the world of being curious," he explains. "It's presuming that there is something that we can learn from other people that we don't know."

Storytelling is the most effective way to convey actions, meanings, emotions and the connections people experience every day, adds Mohr.

“In health care, even very focused challenges like limiting patient falls, are very, very complex,” he says.

“The value of the story is that it can capture some of the nuance and complexity that we simply can’t articulate with traditional quality improvement methods. Without that nuance and complexity we run the risk of continually acting at a superficial level.”

While stories represent a narrative of an organization, people still need to ask what does it all mean?

Mohr says this is the discovery phase of AI, when people share their stories and “make sense of them” to co-construct a new social reality.

He says he’s come to understand that talk and language is not just talk and semantics but rather the essential way human beings translate the world into collective action.

“It’s the process of taking other peoples truths and creating a collective truth in which we can then move forward together,” says Mohr. “This becomes the basis for action.”

Mohr gives the example of when people view a war as no longer worth fighting. The conflict is still real, but people have attached a different meaning to the reality, which leads to new action.

“I suspect that everyone in here knows in their hearts that when they have listened to people who they have considered to be great leaders they have been listening to people who are also great storytellers,” concludes Mohr.

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