

Appreciative Inquiry a ‘Game-Changer’ for U.S. Dairy Industry

AI linked with sustainability drives innovation, creates business value

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is the transformative element in the seismic shift occurring in the U.S. dairy industry as leaders of more than 30 key dairy organizations blaze the way towards a vision of reducing greenhouse gas emissions from fluid milk 25 per cent by the year 2010.

Ten projects worth a quarter of a billion dollars in business opportunity are in the process of being activated which will begin the realization of the vision.

“I definitely think (AI) has been a game-changer in our industry,” says director of social and environmental innovation for [Dairy Management Inc.](#) Erin Fitzgerald.

Pointing to the volunteer army of plus 400 who have supported the dairy industry’s sustainability commitment to date, the CEO leadership heading up the projects and an additional 600 stakeholders who have lent their support and expertise to the vision, Fitzgerald says AI “was the only thing that made it happen.”

In 2008, a group of 250 participants met with pioneer of the AI methodology David Cooperrider to consider how AI and sustainability could drive innovation and business value for the industry.

Fitzgerald says two of their activities were particularly instrumental in triggering change. One was establishing an aligning vision for the industry.

Because the dairy industry is already “constantly committed” to stewardship, the visioning process included “reaffirming their inherent cultural beliefs” and then asking participants to consider their commitment from a different perspective.

“What we were saying is, leverage those strengths. It’s something you’ve done all along. We’re just asking you to look at it from a different lens,” says Fitzgerald.

The summit also included providing an opportunity for what Cooperrider calls “maximum mixed dialogue,” where players from all parts of the dairy industry, such as retailers, government representatives and academics, sat together and discussed how to reduce greenhouse gases and create business value for the entire value chain. As a result some “incredible and very powerful conversations about the possibilities” took place, according to Fitzgerald.

That event culminated in the creation of a greenhouse gas reduction roadmap for the industry, which is in the process of being activated.

In October 2009 another summit took place in New York where a broad cross-section of industry stakeholders rallied around a shared vision of a future with a technology that transforms cow manure into a source of renewable energy as a central part of the community.

At the summit, attendees set a goal for 40 per cent of all manure from New York dairy farms to go through this process by 2020, and developed innovative ways to work together to accomplish this goal.

AI was also the operational methodology in this event, says Fitzgerald.

She adds AI is used on an ongoing basis at meetings and in communications with the various players involved with the dairy industry sustainability commitment.

The AI approach is crucial in this work because it engages a broad cross-section of stakeholders not under the direct management of a particular organization, such as Dairy Management Inc.

“We are just trying to enable people to do sustainability,” says Fitzgerald. “We aren’t the doers, so it’s about creating a process to allow the change.”

For more information about the U.S. dairy industry’s commitment to sustainability visit this [link](#).

If you have feedback on this article please contact michelle(at)axiomnews.ca, or call the newsroom at 800-294-0051.

