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Organizational Memories: Create Future Greatness by Remembering the Past

*Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.
George Santayana*

One of my great joys is scrap-booking – the hobby of documenting special memories through elements of color, textures and stories. When I am in the midst of laying out my photos, I find myself singing like a little girl and simply reveling in the creativity I feel welling up within me. For me, this is not just about placing pictures in a photo album but rather assembling a book that visually captures (to the best extent 2 dimensional formats can) the heart-felt emotion of the memory of when I took the picture in the first place. I find energy in re-living my experience. I am revitalized and filled with feelings of accomplishment each time I finish a layout. In addition to choosing main colors for the background, I embellish my pictures with fibers, buttons, charms, tags and whatever else I'm inspired to use to highlight the special-ness of the event. And most of my pages are accompanied by journaling which provides a written record of the story behind the event. When I go back and look at these photo pages in the future, they will motivate me to hold onto the best of my past and look for ways to create them again.

Organizations have memories too - memories to be captured and highlighted in order to build for their future greatness. The Appreciative Inquiry change approach is centered on the core philosophy that when organizations are leveraging what they already do well, growth and change can be implemented quicker because the best in individuals is built on and the focus is on the positive.

Without too much extra effort or money invested, your organization can start building its own future greatness by creating an organizational memory scrapbook. Here are some beginning steps:

Step 1: Select Your Stories

When I am building a scrapbook page, I look at all of my pictures about one event and then carefully choose those that most reflect the essence of what I want to remember about the event. I think about what I want future viewers to see, feel, experience and imagine when they look at my page. In your organization scrapbook, define the kind of organization you want to create and then find the stories to help others picture the essence of the memories you want to build. Create a conduit to allow the stories to be collected - conduct storytelling interviews, create story websites, ask for written and verbal submissions, pull together pictures of company events, etc. There are multiple ways to capture stories.

Step 2: Design Your Story Layouts

When all of my pictures are laid out, I scan them to see if there is a common theme threaded through the pictures. Is there a color that stands out more than another? How many pictures do I want on one page and what will my background color page be? Is there an individual doing something funny or extraordinary I want to highlight? With your organization's stories, review them for the common "fibers". Note the stories of individuals doing something extraordinary to which you want to call attention. Decide how many stories you want to share at once and what backdrop you want them against. If community involvement is an organizational objective, look for stories where employees changed the lives of local citizens. If you want to be known as creating delightful customer service, look for stories that relate a great customer service experience.

Step 3: Document Your Stories

There is a saying "a pictures can tell a thousand words" ,and while this is often true, my heart is always warmed to re-read my documented thoughts of the experience in my journaling block. It is here that I elaborate on the specifics of the event and more often, I write of the unseen that cement the memory in my mind. This includes ideas about what people were saying in the moment and what my reactions were; what I was thinking and how I wanted to remember it. Organizations have wonderful journaling opportunities in which to capture and share their memories. Websites, newsletters, pop up desktop emails, shared folders and established communities of practices provide fertile ground. Knowledge management systems are an extremely viable tool in which to capture stories about lessons learned. Utilizing this information means great cost savings in time and labor because individuals are not reinventing wheels but building on what has gone before them.

Step 4: Embellish Your Stories

For the finishing touch on my pages, I accent my pictures with charms, tags, buttons or chalk. These further define the theme of my page and help to draw the viewer's eye to selected pictures. The logos and symbols in your organization are the charms of your organization scrapbook. They are the embellishing icons that reflect the stories you want to tell. They relate the mission, vision, traditions, cultures and memories of your organization – memories of the past and memories in your future. They reflect what's important to your organization. Find ways to incorporate them into all the stories you document to further cement your organizational memories. These will inspire all of you to build great futures.

So the next time you think you don't have the time to listen to someone's story, you may stop and take pause. It may end up being a page in your organization's scrapbook!