

# HeartWood

*Centre for Community Youth Development*

## Appreciative Concepts, Principles, & Tools

# Appreciative Approach

- HeartWood uses an appreciative approach for its work in youth development and community building, which altogether we refer to as community youth development.

An appreciative approach focuses attention on strengths, potential, and possibilities. It increases capacity in individuals, organizations, and communities by identifying resources they already have - including their own knowledge and life experience - and building on that. Everyone has some kind of gift they can contribute. In a community development context, it means using all our assets, local skills, and existing resources first to create solutions, before seeking additional resources or relying on outside “expertise” to fix problems.

In fact, an appreciative approach is quite different than traditional problem-solving methodology. Many of us have been conditioned to use a negative focus – what’s wrong, what’s not working, reasons why a new idea won’t work, etc. Conventional problem solving tends to limit outlook, stifle creativity, and sap energy and enthusiasm. We often end up looking for someone to blame, which causes people to feel defensive. Worst of all, we tend to stay stuck in the ways we’ve always done things.

If, instead, we focus our attention on getting the results we want, then we put a spotlight on what is already working. We look for and create possibility, we cultivate involvement, and we generate energy and enthusiasm as we naturally move towards our goal. In the process, we create the best thinking environment for coming up with innovative ideas and solutions, while viewing obstacles in our path as opportunities for personal and organizational transformation. When given the opportunity to do so, people are naturally inclined to envision (i.e., imagine) what could be and are then inspired to take action to make that happen. This is a form of energy and vision that can be tapped.

This does not mean that we ignore problems, pretending that they do not exist. Rather, by starting with what is working well and what we have going for us, it creates a different perspective, a different stance. When we do address our problems, we see more possibility for solutions than we could ever see before, and we are more able to leverage all our resources

towards the resolution of the problem. Even better, we rise above the problem to see all the possibilities and benefits that lie beyond!

This approach is more likely to nurture the conditions for a healthy, strong, vitally active, inclusive, and sustainable community to grow and develop.

In the context of youth development, this approach means that we view young people not as dependents, service recipients, or problems, but as competent innovators who contribute to the community, and as energized participants and leaders in social change initiatives.

Some steps you can take as an individual that will change your thinking, your conversations with people, and the kinds of action you are willing to take.

Change your perspective - view your community with new eyes:

- What's working well, rather than what's wrong.
- How something could happen, rather than all the reasons why it won't.
- What we want to have happen, rather than what we want to avoid.

Have conversations that matter. Allow these to ripple through the web of networks and interconnecting relationships that is the natural structure in your community.

- Talk to people and groups with whom you would not normally connect.
- Talk to those in your usual circles, but in new ways.
- Mostly listen. Ask powerful questions. Tell and share your stories.

Take action! Small steps that are possible right now with the resources you already have!

Some steps you can take with others that will generate action, connection, and innovation, while energizing existing relationships and processes in the community.

Discover all your assets. Ask, "Who could contribute? Who should be involved?"

- Those that are hidden to your eyes, such as people who have been marginalized and who are not normally asked to join in (like seniors, youth, visible minorities, persons with disabilities, low income families, etc.).
- Those who are attracting energy in their own communities - the bright lights, the innovators, the informal leaders, the natural connectors who cause ripples to grow into waves.

Connect people in new ways. We can achieve more together than we can working alone.

- People who don't normally meet and talk to one another about shared interests.
- Connecting diverse groups "re-wires" the community so that it works better.

Find out what's going on:

- What's working well, what are we doing to make it work so well, how can we build on that, what else could we do that would move us forward?
- What is inspiring people, what are their dreams, what are they willing to work for?
- What can they imagine/envision as a healthier and more inclusive community?
- Find out what's not working well and what would we like to have happen instead?

Take action! Mobilize, energize, and leverage all our assets around tasks that inspire us!