

Orientation Leader Training: An Appreciative Advising Approach

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Orientation directors are continually searching for a strong conceptual framework to undergird and improve their training of orientation leaders (OLs). Instead of developing a series of random, discrete training exercises, it is preferable that orientation practitioners structure and develop training using an established, proven conceptual framework. Looking beyond traditional training methods such as meetings, retreats, and employee handbooks can produce unique perspectives to revamp OL training. The purpose of this article is to advocate the use of the six phases of Appreciative Advising to enhance the training and leadership development of orientation leaders.

Appreciative Advising Overview

Bloom and Martin (2002) were the first to write about how the principles of the organizational development theory of Appreciative Inquiry translate into an academic advising setting. According to Bloom (2008), Appreciative Advising is “the intentional collaborative practice of asking positive, open-ended questions that help students optimize their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials” (Bloom, 2008, p. 179). The six phases of Appreciative Advising are: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don’t Settle (Bloom et al., 2008).

In an ideal world, professional staff and graduate students working in orientation offices would set up a series of individual meetings with each OL to work through these six phases. Given today’s cutbacks in staff due to economic pressures and the increased responsibilities that orientation staff members must undertake, conducting several individual meetings with each new OL likely is not a realistic expectation. The good news is that orientation professional staff can use the Appreciative Advising model to create a hybrid training plan that involves just two individual meetings with each leader. The model also involves a group training plan that allows for intentional and effective student leader development and fosters bonding between the professional staff and students.

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Disarm Phase

The first phase, Disarm, involves establishing a positive, trusting relationship with the student (Bloom et al., 2009). The Disarm phase should begin well before new students arrive for orientation. Staff members would invite new OLs to come in for an initial one-on-one meeting soon after the selection process has been completed. These meetings would last no longer than 30 minutes each. There are a number of prerequisites before these initial meetings. For example, staff members must believe that each OL has the ability to succeed in this role. In addition, before the initial meeting, the staff member should ensure that his or her office space is welcoming for students.

On the day of these initial meetings, the staff member should warmly welcome students at the door and call them by their first names. The staff member will engage in some small talk and assure the student that this is not an interview but an opportunity for the student to learn more about the staff member and *vice versa*.

Discover Phase

The focus of the Discover phase is learning about the OLs' strengths, skills, and abilities (Bloom et al., 2009). The professional staff member asks the students positive, open-ended questions to accomplish this objective. For example, the staff member could ask the student about who their role models are and why they consider them role models, their proudest accomplishment, or their favorite memory from childhood. Questions like these allow the staff member to get a deeper sense of the student's real self and to affirm for the students what impresses the staff member about the student's stories. It also gives staff members ideas about assigning duties to individual OLs that play to their strengths.

Dream Phase

The Dream phase asks students to share their biggest and most powerful life and career goals (Bloom et al., 2009). The success of this phase is partially determined by the effectiveness of the Disarm and Discover phases because it requires that the student trust the staff member. The practitioner should be intentional about actively listening to the orientation leader and making connections between information shared in the Discover phase and what the student says now (Bloom et al., 2009).

One of the primary benefits of the Dream phase is that it allows for intense bonding between the OL and the staff member. Much like the Discover phase, questions asked by the professional staff member should be open-ended and encourage an honest response from the student. A sample Dream phase question frequently would be, "When you were eight years old, what did you want to be when you grew up?" (J. L. Bloom, personal communication, September 2, 2009). Questions like this allow the students to first recapture their greatest dreams from

childhood and then share the most current version of their dreams. Information gathered in the Dream phase allows for goal setting and facilitates more intentional questions during the Design phase. This also marks the point in which the training model switches from the initial individual meetings with orientation leaders to the group training format.

Shifting into the group training format will involve going through the Disarm, Discover, and Dream phases briefly in order to help group members bond with each other by learning about their respective strengths, skills, and dreams. Taking time for team-building icebreakers will be the first step in disarming the students in the first group meeting. The Dream phase can be implemented by having students pair up with a different partner and having them ask each other about their wildest hopes and dreams for their future.

Design Phase

During the Design phase, OLs will build concrete, attainable goals with the guidance of the professional staff member (Bloom et al., 2009). Much like the other steps, the staff member should ask the pairs that worked together on the Dream phase questions to spend three minutes brainstorming on little things that each partner needs to do to accomplish his or her goals. Then, the staff can prompt each pair to brainstorm on transferrable skills they will learn through being an OL and how those experiences may help them accomplish their dreams.

Next, OLs are instructed to develop a specific number of goals using the “SMART Goal” method. SMART goals have five distinct components—specific, measurable, attainable, results-based, and time-bound (Conzemius & O’Neill, 2005). Finally, students will select one SMART goal that they can accomplish by the next training session. Essentially, this process allows students to take ownership of their goals. By being spoken out loud to a partner, the goal becomes tangible and real, and it allows OLs and professional staff to hold each other accountable for the goals they set during the group Design session. It is also important that professional staff members ask students to submit their goals for their leadership experience in orientation so that the staff can intentionally relate tasks to students’ goals.

Deliver Phase

In an orientation setting, the Deliver phase would take place during subsequent training sessions as well as during summer orientation sessions. In addition, during orientation, staff members should encourage OLs to work towards meeting the goals they established during the Design phase. Professional staff should be there for OLs when they need guidance related to their goals, or if they should get off track.

By the midpoint of summer orientation programs, professional staff should again have one-on-one sessions with the OLs to check on how they are progress-

ing towards meeting their goals. Staff members need to energize their students by reiterating their belief in the orientation leaders' potential to meet their goals and to remind them that professional staff is there to help. This will allow the OLs not only to feel empowered, but also to know they have a support network.

Don't Settle Phase

During this mid-summer goal evaluation process, the professional staff should complete the final Don't Settle phase of Appreciative Advising. During this phase, the staff members encourage the leaders to continue to raise their internal bar of expectations for themselves (Bloom et al., 2009) and to set goals that will require a bit of a stretch. For example, if an orientation leader sets a goal to feel more comfortable speaking in public, the professional staff member could encourage the OL to get out of his or her comfort zone by volunteering to introduce speakers.

Conclusion

While Appreciative Advising holds many benefits for orientation leader training, there are a few limitations to the method that should be considered when deciding if Appreciative Advising is a good choice. The Appreciative Advising method allows for much stronger rapport between the OL and the practitioner. However, having two one-on-one meetings can be quite demanding for the professional staff.

Even after taking this limitation into consideration, the use of Appreciative Advising as a training model benefits orientation leaders, professional staff, and incoming students. OLs will have the opportunity to reflect on their own strengths and dreams while they develop meaningful, positive relationships with their supervisors, other OLs, and incoming students. They will also develop leadership, goal setting, and interpersonal communication skills. In addition, professional staff members will have a self-aware and energized orientation staff. Incoming students will also benefit by having an opportunity to interact with thoughtful and committed student leaders. The use of Appreciative Advising provides a powerful framework for building a strong staff who will ensure that all parties are successful.

References

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