Title: Appreciative inquiry: A tool to encourage communication in developing academic leadership curriculum

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Context and setting: Academic leadership positions carry a high potential for bringing reforms and include department chairs, unit chiefs, medical directors of teaching hospitals, and Deans. Lack of formal leadership training leads to sub-optimal performances. Academic leadership training courses, though common in the West, are still a rarity in India and leadership is a culturally sensitive issue. Additionally, Indian workplaces have long had a strict hierarchical system that often makes it difficult to gather employees' opinion on sensitive matters such as leadership and governance and this has to be overcome to obtain valuable and culturally important input. We proposed to use Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a suitable tool for this.

Why the idea was necessary: It is believed that prior training would result in more effective functioning of academic leaders. Since there was no India-specific leadership curriculum we proposed to develop one building on competencies considered necessary by Indian faculty. We chose AI as the best model to seek the opinion of Indian faculty. AI model was preferred because it built on prior good experience of the participants and amplified on the good practices within the organization.

Therefore we reasoned that a positive atmosphere would be created encouraging input. Further, the AI process with its 4Ds—Discover, Dream, Design and Deliver—would engage all the participants in a clear direction.

What was done: Our overarching goal is to develop a well-researched, and structured academic leadership training program that reflects Indian reality and situation. As a first step, we wanted to do a needs assessment of the training program. Three sessions were conducted, one each for senior (n=46) and junior level faculty members (n=52), and students (n=60). A questionnaire with two prompts was administered. The prompts specifically asked the reader to recall the best leadership behavior that they have encountered along with a brief description of the situation, and also what could have made the leadership behavior better. This was followed by a personal discussion.

Evaluation of the results or impact: The impact of AI model on this process has been encouraging. We had 148 faculty members from various disciplines and students volunteering to take part in the process. They did not show any resistance or shying away when contacted. They wrote very rich comments (that are still being analyzed) indicating spontaneity and eagerness to share what their experiences held.

They felt that their prior experience, both within the organization and outside of it prior to joining our Institute, was respected. Further, they thought that the outcome of the process would be more workable since the focus was on amplifying what worked within the organization. Based on our prior experiences of obtaining input from employees, we found AI to be a good model for an organization-wide exercise of this kind. Given the enthusiasm the process generated, and the universal involvement of all stakeholders, we would say that AI is particularly suitable for cultures where communication is often not spontaneous and optimal.