

Part 1: Narrative summary—

The Newburgh Chandler Public Library knew going into the strategic planning process that we wanted to look internally at the library and ways to improve staffing, retention, and efficiency. Being a library with limited funds, we understood we do not offer competitive wages and while we are making a plan to address that, it will be a long process. We decided we wanted to work with staff to see if there were smaller things we could start doing to show staff appreciation on a regular basis. I thought appreciative inquiry would be a great framework for those conversations.

The stakeholders in this process are the administrative level staff at the library. The administrative team worked to define the affirmative topic and how that topic would be explored. They tasked me and two colleagues with creating an appreciative inquiry session to gather feedback from staff on ways they could feel more valued at work and report that information back to them so that they could work on implementing any that were feasible. Me and my two colleagues sat down and planned out two two hour sessions, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, to try to accommodate staff with different schedules. In each session we planned to spend about ten minutes giving a brief overview of the appreciative inquiry process, then 30 minutes for paired interviews, 30 minutes to share out any themes or life giving moments from the interviews, a brief break and then creating a plan or template in small groups for a benefit or perk that would be the most impactful for staff morale.

The participants at the sessions were asked to work through the discover phase, working in pairs to share stories of times at work where they felt valued. Both sessions had about ten participants. The participants seemed to really enjoy sharing their stories with each other and we got so much good feedback on what makes staff feel valued. We had each pair share briefly their partner's story about feeling valued and any themes or life-giving forces the story highlighted. Both groups had similar outcomes from this process.

The participants were then formed into small groups of either 3 or 4 to work through the dream and design phases. The groups were asked to pick one of the themes that had been pulled from the discover phase and explore what it would look like for the library to put things into place that would foster more of that particular theme around feeling valued. Each session had three groups. We gave them large pieces of paper and markers to either draw or write out their vision for what the library could implement that would be the most impactful for staff morale. The majority of the groups focused on creating better and more consistent training throughout the library and having some kind of staff appreciation event and/or a social event for staff.

I took the work done by the final small group to our monthly administrative team meeting to work on delivering these visions. The comments and suggestions from the staff sessions resonated with the administrative team. Many of us are aware of some of the topics that staff brought up as something to improve. The administrative team then designated our Circulation Supervisor to create and head up a training task force that will be comprised of both front-line staff and administration to create a standardized training for all departments. We also assigned planning a staff appreciation day to the sunshine committee (a previously formed committee that does staff birthdays and other staff celebrations). Overall, I think the sessions were fun, productive and led to positive change at the library.

Part II Practicum Report

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The organization I worked with for this practicum is the Newburgh Chandler Public Library. The library is a district library (meaning it has its own tax levy) and serves the Ohio Township portion of Warrick County in Southern Indiana. The library, when fully staffed, employs about 50 people but for the last several years we have been woefully understaffed.

The library staff are a mix of part-time and full-time staff, with most of the customer service type jobs being hourly and most of the administrative jobs being salaried. The administrative staff (10 employees total, including myself, our Finance Manager, our Technical Services Librarian, our IT Specialist, our Childrens Department Manager, our Adult Department Manager, our Teen Department Manager, our Circulation Supervisor and our two Building Managers) meet regularly to discuss different issues and work on plans to fix them. We recently employed an outside organization to prepare a strategic plan for us for the next few years and the issue of retaining library staff came up frequently in those conversations. We decided to have a group dedicated to looking at new, innovative ways to staff the library and possible ways to increase the wages new employees receive, but we also wanted to explore ways the library might supplement those things to improve staff morale and retention. While I felt like the other pieces of the strategic direction were better suited to research and exploration by the administrative team, I thought the topic of additional ways to make staff feel appreciated would fit nicely with an appreciative inquiry session, so I proposed to the administrative team that myself and two other administrative team members (our Finance Manager and our Technical Services Librarian) work to create the appreciative inquiry sessions for that particular topic.

The positive topic identified for the inquiry was times when staff felt valued at work. This seemed to flow naturally from the feedback we had gotten in the strategic planning sessions. We were also hopeful that this could result in the core group getting some ideas about perks that could be implemented more quickly than some of the things we would be exploring. The Finance Manager, Technical Services Librarian and I worked together to create a modified interview guide. We decided, because we have staff who work morning schedules as well as staff that work evening schedules, to do two sessions, each with different staff, depending upon which time worked best for them. We had about ten people in both sessions, and we choose to pair them face to face for the interviews. Once they had interviewed each other about a time when they felt valued at work (15 minutes for each person in the pair, 30 minutes total). We then allowed for 30 minutes for each pair group to share out what they had gotten from their partners' stories and any themes or life-giving forces they may have pulled out of the story. We then had the participants switch into different groups (we had them count out 1,2,3, and then put the 1s, 2s and 3s in each group ensuring we'd split up the pairs). Each group had 3-4 participants. We then asked them to choose a theme and create a provocative proposition from that theme to be given to the administrative team to consider.

The themes that came out of the two sessions were: appreciation from other staff, appreciation from patrons, supervisor feedback, being of service to the larger community, finding satisfaction in the work done, having work/life balance, appreciation from the larger community, longer breaks, training, serving the public, stability, flexibility in scheduling, safe/clean environment, diversity awareness, extended time off, coworker support/friendships, communication, follow through, extra hours, freedom in your position, making connections with both staff and patrons, optimism, safe haven at work, planning or creating in your work, food. The smaller groups focused on doing a staff appreciation event, having more consistent training to make staff feel supported, more training opportunities for staff to learn new skills, and ways to improve communication throughout the organization but specifically between departments.

The provocative propositions from the small groups was presented to the administrative team at their monthly meeting. From that discussion, a training task force was created and planning a staff appreciation event was delegated to our

Sunshine Committee. The administrative team will continue to monitor progress on these goals at our monthly meetings.

The impact on the organization will hopefully be ongoing. At the moment, it seems like staff has embraced the idea of having a voice in creating these changes. The two committees (Training Task Force and the Sunshine Committee) have already started working on their respective charges. The Training Task Force includes a few members from all levels of staff and will meet regularly to create standardized training and to ensure that training stays up to date. The Sunshine Committee is planning two staff social events for the year that will be held on a night when the library can close early to accommodate all staff attending. There is a lot of interest and excitement around the two initiatives from staff who participated in the sessions.

I will continue to support this excitement and success by attending the meetings of the two committees and making sure they have the resources necessary to successfully implement the things that fall within their purview. The administrative team will continue to solicit feedback from all levels of staff to ensure the things being implemented are being appreciated and celebrated.

The appreciative inquiry principle that seemed to stand out to me in this particular use of the framework was that of simultaneity. The sessions ended up (not planned at all!) being held during National Library Week, which for our organization has become a sort of fun week of spirit days and staff appreciation. I think this lent itself to staff feeling like participating in the sessions was, in itself, a form of staff appreciation. Just by framing the issue we were dealing with positively and encouraging all levels of staff to participate and give feedback, it was for some staff a method of appreciation. So truly, just asking the question in positive language led us in the direction we were looking to go.

My wish for the inquiry was truly just to get some honest feedback from the staff on what makes them feel valued. I think the process really taught me a lot about appreciative inquiry in general and how to utilize the process more effectively. There were some hiccups that I did not anticipate but will be sure to be proactive about in the future. I believe that my personal best in the process was delegating out some of the responsibilities, so I was better able to manage the sessions as they unfolded. In the past, it may have been something I would have tried to do alone but I wanted to get some of the administrative staff involved both for understanding the process and for buy-in from the administrative team. The two employees who helped seemed to genuinely enjoy the process and to learn a lot during the sessions. The one thing I wish I would have done better was communicate the appreciate inquiry principles to the actual participants in greater detail. While I feel I adequately explained it to the administrative team, I didn't see it as important for the participants to understand the framework behind what we were doing. This led, understandably, to some confusion and some pairs trying to skip the interview itself and just answer the questions on the summary sheet. I also think I would have put more detailed instructions on the interview guide and maybe changed or explained some of the more "jargony" type words used on those. Overall, I believe this will be a framework I use moving forward to engage with staff to get feedback about the library.

Materials:



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CHANDLER
PUBLIC LIBRARY

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4111 LAKESHORE DR.
NEWBURGH, IN 47630
(812) 853-5468

CHANDLER LIBRARY
402 ST JAYCEE ST., PO BOX 246
CHANDLER, IN 47610
(812) 925-7179

NEWBURGH LIBRARY
30 W. WATER ST.
NEWBURGH, IN 47630
(812) 858-1437

Staff Benefits Interview Guide

1. **Best Experience:** Tell me a story about the time you felt most valued at work, either here at the library or in another job. What made you feel valued? Who was involved? Describe the event in detail.

2. **Values:** Let's talk for a moment about some things you value deeply; specifically, the things you value about yourself and about working here at the library.
 - a. Without being humble, what do you value most about yourself—as a person and as a member of this organization?

 - b. When you are feeling best about work, what about the task itself do you value?

 - c. What do you value about working at the library?

 - d. What is the single most important thing that your organization has contributed to your life?

3. **Core Value:** What do you value most about working at the library? Give some examples of how you experience those values?

4. **Three Wishes:** If you could have any three benefits as a library employee, what would they be (dream big here!)?

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VAIFT March 2021—Kathy Becker and Cheri Torres
Library



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Staff Benefits Interview Summary Sheet

1. What was the most appreciative quotable quote that came out of your interview?
2. What was the most compelling story that came out of your interview?
3. What was the most “life-giving” moment of the interview for you as a listener?
4. Describe a particularly creative and/or innovative example of staff recognition.
5. What three themes stood out the most for you during the interview?

- Staff Appreciation Day
Park picnic

- consistent blueprint for ^{in depth} training (each Dept)

- extending time off (Health, mental Health)

- flexibility in scheduling based off of each individual





