

One of the great features of the Kansas landscape is the sunflower field, the bright yellow color bursting from a late summer landscape that is otherwise dry and brown. When the flowers are in the early stages of development, they follow the sun. Drive by the field in the morning, and the flowers will be facing east. Drive by in the afternoon, the flowers will face west. This is the heliotrope phenomenon: sunflowers turn to face the sun, the source of light and energy. As they finish their growing cycle, the sunflowers will face to the east, no longer following the sun.

Human beings function much like sunflowers, we move in the direction where our attention is focused. If we focus in one direction for a long period of time, we will remain facing that direction, with unchanging ideas and attitudes. The same is true of our organizations: they move in the direction where time, energy, and money are invested. How can we and the organizations where we spend our time, move in a direction that allows us to thrive?

Problems are a part of life. From our earliest school days we are trained to study the problem, search for the root cause, and fix it. Research in the last 10 years has shown that if people and organizations focus on problems and trying to fix what is wrong, they will get more of the same kind of problems. But, problems are not the only feature that is present in life or organizations. Along with problems, there are successes, dreams, and hopes.

Every organization possesses positive things that work. One of the ways to begin to thrive is by shifting the direction of our focus from the problems to appreciating what works, what is best. Telling meaningful stories is a way of discovering what works. Here are three question sets that you can ask yourself or use to interview others in your organization:

- Tell me a story about a time when you felt fully engaged in your work. What was happening? What about it made you feel good?
- Who in this organization do you admire? Tell me a story that illustrates this person's integrity in action.
- Imagine it is ten years from today. What are the things that this organization is doing today that had a lasting impact? What are the most important things we carried into the future?

There is a saying, "stories have wings and they fly from mountain top to mountain top." The stories told when these questions are asked are powerful, organization changing

stories. The stories you hear will help you identify what is working, what is good, what is important and valued, what people dream about for the future. You will find a wealth of strengths and creative ideas.

Share the stories by repeating them in a staff meeting or publishing them in your newsletter. By telling the stories, the focus in your organization will shift to what is working, to what values are shared, and to dreaming about what can be.

Peter Drucker said that when an organization focuses on its strengths, its weaknesses become irrelevant. By focusing on the best of what is and what can be, we have the opportunity change direction – to shift our focus from weaknesses to strengths, from constantly fixing problems to building on our strengths, and to move our organizations from good to great.

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