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Faculty of Business Economics

Master of Management

Master's thesis

Leading Change Through Appreciative Inquiry: A Case Study from Lebanon

Wael El Khatib

Thesis presented in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management, specialization Strategy and Innovation Management

SUPERVISOR :

Prof. dr. dr. Frank LAMBRECHTS



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Wael El Khatib

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Executive Summary

Every firm in the twenty-first century must undergo constant organizational transformations in order to expand and survive in a dynamic and unpredictable environment. Leadership style is seen as an essential part in organizational transformation. The leader may impact the development and execution of innovative plans by articulating clear objectives and creating a favorable environment to change acceptance. The traditional deficit-based approach causes leaders to focus on their employees' weaknesses. To handle the change successfully, managers may need to develop employees' strengths and listen to what they need, rather than focusing on their deficiencies and flaws.

This paper focuses on the application of Appreciative Inquiry to one of the companies in Lebanon to facilitate an organizational change while answering the research question: What is the impact of Appreciative Inquiry on organizational change in Lebanon? Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is one of the strength-based approaches that invite members of an organization to first identify what is functioning very well and then imagine what it would be like if "the best of what is" happened more frequently. The firm's members develop and implement the desired changes based on their visions and desires.

Lebanon is a country in the Middle East characterized by an autocratic leadership style. Arab cultures are often submissive and resistant to change. In Lebanon, the employer's authority should be respected, and stakeholders must obey their leaders without question.

My aim was to investigate the impact of Appreciative Inquiry on organizational performance in one of the Middle Eastern companies, particularly in Lebanon. Also, I am writing to examine how Appreciative Inquiry would challenge or transform the current autocratic leadership style which is seemingly an opposite approach to AI in corporations that are largely governed by autocratic leaders. The article will contribute to the current literature in which AI was applied and used to create change in a developing country, as well as the consequences that this process had on the company and its stakeholders. This study will also address a gap in the use of AI in Middle Eastern countries by embedding strength and positivity in a community seeking alternatives from a crisis/deficit environment.

I selected 'Alfa', a Lebanese telecom company as an area of application for my study. Due to the explosion that happened in Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, Alfa had to terminate more than 500 employees in all its branches, followed by a sharp fall in the salaries of the employees as a result of the depreciation of the Lebanese lira against the dollar. Consequently, Alfa was subjected to employee absenteeism and strikes in exchange for salary adjustments and health insurance benefits. To address this organizational shift, I employed Appreciative Inquiry and its 5-D cycle on Alfa to fulfill the stakeholders' goals.

Findings showed that Appreciative Inquiry created mutual trust, appreciation, and understanding, and facilitated the achievement of a shared goal among participants. I found that AI can be employed to support organizational change in developing countries. Moreover, Appreciative Inquiry was found to be a successful tool for challenging authority in Lebanon through empowerment. The staff

identified the opportunities for change and worked together to achieve their joint objectives, regardless of their position in the company.

The researcher collected data from one branch of the company in Lebanon where AI was being applied. Future extensions can be carried out in line with studying the application of Appreciative Inquiry to include more branches around the country and to apply Appreciative Inquiry on a wider scale. Furthermore, the economic situation in Lebanon limited the desires of stakeholders while designing their action plan. Future research could be extended on assessing and evaluating the impact of Appreciative Inquiry on small businesses in other Middle Eastern countries, where the economy is stable.

Because of the prevalence of authority in developing countries, I advise researchers and academics to be aware of the existing hierarchy among stakeholders in the workplace, in a way to prevent the dominance of stories and ideas over another ones. Researchers must be aware of the local context where Appreciative Inquiry will be applied. Hence, researchers must make it clear from the start what the study project can and cannot offer to the stakeholders involved in the process; otherwise, the outcome may be negative if employees are dissatisfied as a result.

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Leading Change Through Appreciative Inquiry: A Case Study from Lebanon

Wael El Khatib

Under the supervision of Prof. dr. dr. Frank Lambrechts and drs. Phuong Anh Duong

Keywords

Appreciative Inquiry
Organizational performance
Middle East
Lebanon
Developing countries
Leadership style
5-D cycle
Authority
Empowerment

Abstract

The aim of this article is to investigate the impact of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) on organizational performance in Lebanon. It would be interesting to investigate how AI will challenge or transform the current autocratic leadership style which is seemingly an opposite approach to AI. Appreciative Inquiry was applied to Alfa, the Lebanese telecom company that was experiencing an internal organizational problem as a result of the Beirut explosion. The findings of this study demonstrate that AI can be employed to support and solve an organizational change in corporations that are largely governed by autocratic leaders. Furthermore, Appreciative Inquiry was found to be a successful tool for challenging authority via empowerment in the context of Lebanon. The study's key contribution is to shed the light on AI's impact on the Middle East area and how it may supersede authority and deal with any change that may occur. Because of the prevalence of authority in the Middle East region, we advise researchers and academics to be aware of the existing hierarchy among stakeholders in the workplace, in a way to prevent the dominance of stories and ideas over another ones. AI requires a participatory atmosphere for all the stakeholders involved, which supports the empowerment of participants in the process.

1. Introduction

Every firm in the twenty-first century must undergo constant and continual organizational transformations in order to expand and survive in a dynamic and unpredictable environment. Public and private organizations need a radical transformation to adapt with external event triggers, restructuring and cutbacks (Warrick, 2011). Leadership style is seen as a significant component in an organization's change (Chou, 2014; Yousef, 2000). Leaders may impact the development and execution of innovative plans by articulating clear objectives and creating a favorable environment to change acceptance (Sarros et al., 2008). This means that a leader is an agent who could step up to the plate and create change in a company (Senior & Fleming, 2006). If organizations do not plan for highly dynamic events and circumstances, they will have a huge risk of losing their reputation and brand image (Boston, 2000). The successful and ideal implementation of organizational change have emerged as a critical management challenge, as many modern businesses in developed countries are engaging in change activities to increase competitiveness and market survival (Higgs & Rowland, 2005).

Lebanon, formally known as the Republic of Lebanon, is a country in Western Asia, particularly in the Middle East. The country has a population of about six million people and an area of 10,452 square kilometers, making it one of the world's smallest countries (Sabeh, 1989). Lebanon is a developing country, which is ranked 92nd on the Human Development Index and ranking among the highest in the Arab world (HDI, 2020). It is classified as being one of the Middle East's higher middle-income countries. However, the

explosion that happened in Beirut has resulted in currency collapse, employee turnovers, severe shortages, high unemployment, and poverty (BBC News, 2020). The explosion damaged more than half of Beirut, at a cost of more than \$15 billion, with estimated damages of about \$3 billion (Hussain & Cohn, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the explosion, had a huge influence on the unpredictable business environment for many businesses in the country. Many businesses have seen a steady decrease in sales for their products and services, but also an increase in costs of production due to inflation (CARE, 2021). Due to economic conditions, firms were forced to increase the prices of their products and services, which was followed by a reduction in employees' wages (ILO, 2021).

In contrast to western management theories and conceptions that promote autonomy and independence as fundamental elements of good leadership behaviors, studies in Arab nations reveal broad recognition of more coercive and authoritarian leadership styles (Muna, 1980). In Lebanon, the employer's authority should always be respected, and stakeholders must obey their leaders without question (Barakat, 1991). According to Yucelt (1986), this might be because the traditions of politics and religions promote loyalty and respect.

Autocratic leadership has been heavily criticized in recent years, and some studies have found that firms with a large number of autocratic leaders have a higher rate of burnout and withdrawal behaviors than other firms (Cherry, 2015). Threats and punishment are used by autocratic leaders to control their employees. This traditional based approach causes autocratic leaders to focus on their employees' weaknesses. To handle the

change successfully, managers may need to develop employees' strengths and listen to what they need, rather than focusing on their deficiencies and flaws. Hence, the concept of Appreciative Inquiry must be used to accomplish this.

Appreciative Inquiry is a philosophy as well as a process for creating worlds where people wish to reside in (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). As a modern organizational change approach, Appreciative Inquiry treats organizational challenges in a very different way. Rather of focusing on issues and what is not functioning properly, AI invites the members of an organization to identify what is functioning very well and then imagine what it would be like if "the best of what is" happened more frequently. The firm's members develop and implement the desired changes based on their visions and desires. Since the late 1980s, the concept of Appreciative Inquiry is being applied to a numerous number of firms for wide area of applications; it has been used to combine organizations following a merger, develop alliances and partnerships, and carry out the economic development initiatives (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). Moreover, the theory of Appreciative Inquiry was being employed to assist firms in becoming more productive and effective by "discovering and appreciating, imagining, discussing, and co-constructing the future" (Ashford & Patkar, 2001, p. 4). When compared to traditional methods, AI has made system change processes incredibly painless. The excitement and intensity of the process make it even hard for anybody to sit in the shadows (Head et al., 2000).

There is a lack in the literature on the impact of AI on organizational change in developing countries. It would be interesting to

investigate how AI will challenge or transform the current autocratic leadership style which is seemingly an opposite approach to AI, especially in the context of Lebanon. The aim of this article is to investigate the impact of AI on organizational performance in one Middle Eastern company, particularly in Lebanon. Consequently, the research question of this article is: What is the impact of AI on organizational change in Lebanon? To answer this, Appreciative Inquiry and its "5-D cycle of Define, Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 16) were applied to Alfa, the Lebanese telecom company that was experiencing an internal organizational problem as a result of the Beirut explosion. Employees were allowed to involve in many discussions that addressed similar wishes and desires during the process. The outcome was a set of actions created and implemented by the action team, in a way to fulfill their mutual objectives.

Appreciative inquiry is a beneficial approach for academics and practitioners to utilize when looking at organizational change from a positive perspective. The five phases of AI assist in guiding people's attention to activities and processes that will help them discover the change and adapt to it (Couch, 2017). Bushe (2011) emphasized a need of more scientific literature demonstrating examples of Appreciative Inquiry being applied in the right way while assessing the impact of employing such a theory in a variety of businesses (Couch, 2017). Since the late 1990s, there has been a constant increase in the interest of AI; this is reflected in the number of papers, case studies, and books that have been published (Cooperrider et al., 2008). In July 2014, a recent search in the literature was conducted on 'ProQuest' using the terms 'Appreciative Inquiry' in the title;

the bulk of the research papers listed was from universities, schools, hospitals, and non-profit organizations in the United States, Europe, and North America, with only a few publications from international countries (Drew & Wallis, 2014). The article will contribute to the current literature in which AI was applied and used to create change in a developing country, as well as the consequences that this process had on the company and its stakeholders. This study will also address a gap in the application of AI in Middle Eastern countries that are dominated by an autocratic leadership style through embedding strength and positivity in the firm.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

It is vital to define strength in terms of understanding the principle of Appreciative Inquiry. Researchers and scholars presented a variety of viewpoints on the term 'strength'. The strength of an individual, according to Buckingham and Clifton (2001), is made up of three key attributes: skills, knowledge and talents. Skills and knowledge are the core abilities to perform a given task in a job. Talent corresponds to fundamentally repeated thinking, emotions, or patterns of behavior. Peterson and Seligman (2004) claims that strength consists of traits that are seen through any person's behavior or attitude. Thus, they believed that strength may be fixed and changeable in the same time. Finally, Linley and Harrington (2006) asserted that a person's strengths are a collection of innate abilities to understand and act.

The viewpoints mentioned before may not possibly include all of a person's strengths while simultaneously giving them enough flexibility in defining their own. Strengths,

according to Wood et al. (2011), are personal characteristics that allow people to accomplish good performance while overcoming their weaknesses to the maximum degree feasible. Individual outlying strengths derived from connections, chances, and external resources are not included in Wood et al. (2011)'s definition. Then, according to Niemiec (2012), an individual's strength should contain personality characteristics and leadership qualities together.

Understanding one's strengths seem to be useful not just to people but to businesses also, since using such strengths have a favorable influence on the stakeholder's wellbeing (Miglianico et al., 2020). As much as, employees that use their positive and personal strengths in the workplace are more productive and have greater degrees of energy and enthusiasm while doing their job (Van Woerkom et al., 2016a). Hence, businesses that depend on their people's strengths enjoy a boost in performance and profits (Hodges & Asplund, 2010), followed by an increase in employee satisfaction and pleasure (Harzer & Ruch, 2012, 2013).

Strength-based leaders claim that people are more effective when they use their strengths in the workplace (Burkus, 2011). This type of leadership is built on a principle that those who have strengths have the highest chances of being successful (Burkus, 2011). Any leader should always focus on enhancing the strengths of his employees, which leads to an increase in the company's productivity. Positive psychology's objective and main purpose is to complement the traditional deficit-based approach (Miglianico et al., 2020). It appears that humans have a natural propensity to focus directly on the deficits side. Numerous research was conducted to

address this negative bias, with the findings resulting in quick deployment of innovative theories to shift into a positive psychology (Nathan & Gorman, 1998; Seligman, 1994).

The strength-based approach comprises 4 sections (Van der Plas, 2016). He claims that the process of discovering one's strengths or being aware of one's own skills, is known as 'identification'. 'Development' is the second section. This part builds capacity by enhancing strengths via knowledge and skills. The third section, 'use', relates to putting one's abilities and skills to use. The final and last section is 'appreciation'; it guarantees that stakeholders feel valued, in which they receive a favorable feedback from their leaders (Hossain & Khan, 2015).

Appreciative Inquiry is about collecting the finest experiences of individuals to create a good change (Preston, 2017). It is one of the change management theories that relies on strengths and positive psychology. Moreover, AI is interested with changing actions by the use of storytelling (Cooperrider et al., 2008). Once leaders do implement the positive workplace characteristics, the stakeholders will have a deeper appreciation for any modifications that may result from their feedback (Preston, 2017). Clearly, the AI process is greatly different from addressing change by identifying the issues and striving to solve deficiencies, which is a prominent strategy used in many firms (Cooperrider et al., 2008). Understanding organizations in affirmative terms means understanding that the problems observed to "organizational wellbeing is the positive image of the affirmative projection that guides the group or organization" (Cooperrider, 1990, p. 15, as cited in Conkright, 2011). Appreciative Inquiry presumes that a company evolves from the

way it raises a question; this may result in an increase in the positive energy of stakeholders involved during the inquiry process (Rockey & Webb, 2005).

The prime intention for AI's development was a conventional action research that has an intense focus on actions, while limiting attention to solve problems from a deficit perspective (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Unlike traditional action research, AI was meant to be a provocative and appreciative kind of studying an organization (Cooperrider, 1986; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), which is able to generate new ideas from the world of participants (Bushe & Paranjpey, 2015). The effectiveness of AI as a strength-based strategy was accepted and implemented quickly worldwide, offering attempts to create generative ideas (Cooperrider, 2013).

AI is frequently carried out in what is known as "4-D Cycle of Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 16). The process of AI allows participants to engage in a cooperative inquiry to discover the best of the prior experiences "Discovery". Discovering commonalities and similarities between stakeholders establishes a new basis from which they may imagine ideal ideas for the future "Dream". Then, participants construct the most desired opportunities by developing provocative propositions "Design", and start self-directed efforts to achieve the action plan they generated through the "Destiny" phase.

The emotions of individuals through the change process affect both their willingness to support a good transformation and their behaviors to the planned change (Huy, 2002, as cited in Belias & Koustelios, 2014). Individuals' positive emotions, in particular, positively affect organizational willingness to

change (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). Because of this, organizations should tackle and handle several challenges and problems in order to operate successfully (Kang & Snell, 2009; Van Looy et al., 2005). Stakeholder reactions are universally recognized now as crucial and important to handle an organizational change effectively, and numerous academics have tried to explain the causes of such reactions and their effect on wellbeing (e.g., Stevens, 2013).

Like any other approach, Appreciative Inquiry is subjected to criticism and critiques. A major complaint from researchers is that an emphasis on being positive in an organization could prevent members from addressing their negative experiences, despite the fact that doing so may be important during the change procedure. For example, Barge and Oliver (2003) claimed that concentrating only on positive experiences is yet insufficient, rather appreciation demands interacting with what others value in their life. The concept of AI was designed to be a modern reimagining of research (Bushe, 2012). Furthermore, the theory of Appreciative Inquiry was designed as a flexible method in discovering a wide range of innovative and positive opportunities from the participants involved (Cooperrider et al., 1995). Wenger (1998) reminds scholars that the theory in general is only a point of view; "It does not tell you what to do". Instead, a theory provides reference for "what to pay attention to" (p. 9 as cited in Preston, 2017).

Studies examining how strength-based leadership can improve the organizational performance in developing countries have been lacking in the literature (Yousef, 2000). Also, the link between the strength-based leadership and organizational change success

has gained less attention, particularly in the Middle East area. To fill this gap, Appreciative Inquiry will be applied on 'Alfa', a telecom company in Lebanon to support an internal organizational change that happened due to the explosion of Beirut. The telecom sector has a crucial effect on the economic status of Lebanon. The sector, however, has various faults in its operational processes, such as regulatory constraints and burnouts (Damaj, 2013). Additionally, the telecom industry is still open to numerous local revolutions and is likely to undergo several unforeseen financial, legal, and technical developments (Damaj, 2013). We may claim that an internal change is now required to solve the deficiencies in the organizational structure to ensure smooth and efficient operations in an increasingly dynamic environment (Najjar, 2017).

2.2 Context

A massive explosion occurred at Beirut port, Lebanon, in 2020. This bomb package was equal to 570 tons of TNT (Sly et al., 2020), and harmed almost 6500 people living close to the capital (CARE, 2021). Also, nearly 300,000 civilians were evacuated from their properties, and the bomb inflicted 4.6 billion dollars in actual damages (CARE, 2021). The port has been an important link in Lebanon's supply chain. The explosion destroyed a substantial amount of grain silos and boxes that operated as crucial grain reserves, resulting in collapse in the country's economy (Somwanshi, 2020). The blast that happened is recognized as the 3rd strongest explosion in non-nuclear explosion history, by one-tenth the power of Hiroshima bombing (Clifton, 2020).

This means that such an incident was a catastrophic event that took lots of lives and

ruined the economy and infrastructure. Many companies were forced to close down, leading to a collapse in the Lebanese currency that lost 95% of its primary value (CARE, 2021). In order to deal with financial challenges, firms tended to lower the salary of their employees by one-third on average. This resulted to a decrease in the consumer's buying power on which companies focus to survive (BBC News, 2020).

Within the Middle East, traditional autocratic-style government and education structures, as well as absolute monarchies, predominate in nearly all Arabian countries (Budhwar & Mellahi, 2007). Arab societies are power-stretched and operate through hierarchical relationships and connections (Al-Romaihi, 1977; Barakat, 1991). Cultural traditions and collective culture, in turn, profoundly influence Arab managerial style, with tribe leaders generally shouldering all responsibility and authority (Shahin & Wright, 2004). Some argue that the purpose of discussion in the Arab world is to please the interests of the members involved, but not to improve the existing processes and outcomes (Heard-Bay, 2005). Despite the widespread influence of globalization and innovative theories, Arab cultures still lag in applying those concepts to human relations within organizations due to the dominant autocratic leadership style (Al-Yasin, 2013).

3. Application

Alfa (or Alfa telecommunications) is a Lebanese telecom company that was founded in 1994. It was the first provider in Lebanon to introduce 3G+ technology, 4G-LTE and 4G+ LTE-A technologies. Also, Alfa operates one of Lebanon's two GSM networks which is controlled by Orascom TMT. The company has

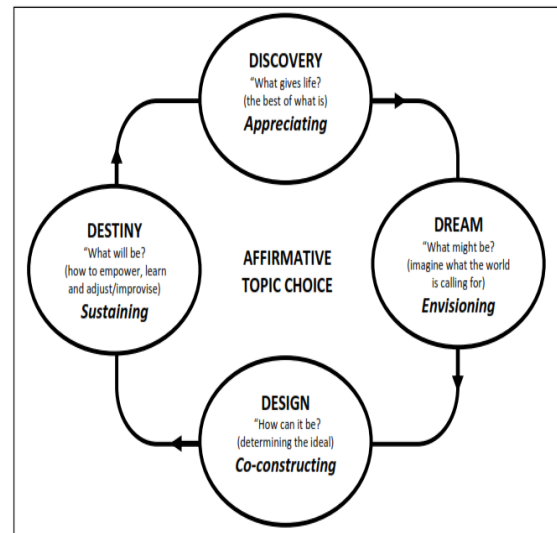
1.8 million subscribers, according to a Zain Group study from June 2014, with the number growing rapidly due to the migration of over a million Syrian refugees in the previous two and a half years. Alfa has stores all over Lebanon that offer mobile services, pre-paid and post-paid sim cards, data services, and customer care. It has a large number of point of purchase (POP) stores and dealers to handle its operations all over the main cities in Lebanon. Market duopoly of Alfa and its single competitor 'touch' has been extensively critiqued for the high pricing in their services, where the Lebanese family pays 5 percent of its earnings on mobile services, comparable to 1.4 percent only in Egypt and UAE.

Due to the explosion that happened in Beirut, Alfa had to terminate more than 500 employees in all its branches. With the sharp fall in salaries and the rise in costs of the company, and because of the depreciation of the Lebanese lira against the dollar, the possibility of an increase in the price of services started to increase. Consequently, Alfa employees began a series of open-ended strikes in many branches every now and then to protest violations of their rights and to express their opposition to any increase in telecoms tariffs. Employees have stopped delivering the recharge cards, which threatens to raise their prices on the black market. Internet services and communication were suspended in more than one area after the employees' refusal to do any maintenance tasks. The strike was also used to ask for other demands like health insurance contracts and salary adjustments.

Appreciative Inquiry was applied to Alfa in one of its branches in Chtoura, Lebanon to solve the organization's problem. The instrument used to collect relevant data for the study was

qualitative in nature. The purpose of this data was to show how the participants construct value from their personal experiences as a result of social interactions. Participants included one branch manager, two assistant managers, and 28 sales, marketing, and customer service representatives. Individual semi-structured interviews were selected to obtain data for this research, which were guided with a pre-created set of questions. Such questions were developed to generate the stories that happened with participants while also honoring and valuating their individual life stories. It is worth noting that all of the questions were strength-based, as it is in the power of how the question is asked.

"The 5-D cycle of Appreciative Inquiry consists of Define, Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny phases" (Figure 1). It was critical to apply the 5-D cycle, with the define phase added at the start of the summit. The define phase is regarded as a crucial phase since it defines the problem and employs the flipping technique to achieve an affirmative topic. Hence, it is far preferable to begin the process with a positive atmosphere. In the discovery phase, a group discovers what works and uses success stories to elevate into generating new suggestions or dreams. The group then designs a total outcome of those visions and moves to the destiny phase, which is also known as the deployment phase.



"Figure 1: The 4-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 16).

3.1 Define Phase

On day 1, I formed a design team including the branch manager and the two assistants to define the design task and be in charge of the entire follow-up process. None of the employees were selected for the design team. This is due to the small number of staff participating, as well as some language challenges and barriers. As a result, every employee had the chance to contribute to the change process by expressing and sharing their own ideas and desires. Employees were invited then to participate in the orientation session. The orientation session's goals were to inform employees about the research objectives, introduce the appreciative inquiry process, and explain how it differs from the traditional based approach. I explained the appreciative inquiry process to the attendees so that they could participate in the discussion with a positive attitude and feel comfortable sharing their knowledge and values. Then I discussed the meaning, principles, and success stories of appreciative inquiry in developed countries, as well as how it is

applied through the 5-D process to solve an internal change.

To begin the process, we defined the main problem of the company and reframed it to reach an affirmative topic using the constructionist principle (reality), which is a subjective state that investigates what is not working rather than what is (words create worlds). AI is not only about being positive; it is also about taking a problem and reframing it in order to achieve the "ideal wished for" state. To get the affirmative topic, the flipping approach was used. Flipping is a four-step process for shifting viewpoints into a strength-based perspective. This approach consists of 1) Naming it, which involves listing the issue or complaint and the negative consequences; 2) Flipping it, which involves describing the positive impact of the flip or the desired outcomes; and 3) Framing it, which involves identifying the positive impact of the flip or the desired outcomes 4) The last step is to give it a North Star Quality (check the criteria of powerful affirmative topics and give it a good quality).

1) Naming the problem: Alfa has a high employee absenteeism rate, which has a detrimental influence on the company's financial success.

2) Flipping the problem: Alfa has a high level of employee engagement and loyalty.

3) Framing it: Alfa provides an exceptional and magnetic working environment for their satisfied employees.

4) North Star Quality: A magnetic working atmosphere will boost employee productivity and appreciation in the workplace.

3.2 Discovery phase

On day 2, employees were divided into pairs and asked to interview each other for 15 minutes using an interview guide. Discovery questions focused on the best prior stories and experiences that have occurred with employees in the past to emphasize how a system can operate while showing value and appreciation among employees. Questions were usually followed by a series of follow-up questions as the power is in the question itself.

Employees were told to pay close attention when listening and to believe that they were hearing a fantastic story to support their interviewee partner in recalling more facts while telling the story. The listeners were not allowed to interrupt the story with any comments or feedback. When the 15 minutes were finished, employees were asked to switch roles where the listener takes the role of the interviewee and tells his own story. The stories were used in a way to increase the energy level of employees and appreciate what worked well. Also, the effectiveness of stories was to remind employees that they can be successful and can bring energy and life to their workplace.

After the paired interviews, employees were assigned in a random way into 4 groups, where each group consisted of 7 participants to share their stories on a larger scale. Every stakeholder involved was invited to recount the story of his interview mate. After telling their stories, participants were asked to give their top three themes that were derived from their own stories.

3.3 Dream phase

On the 3rd day, employees were divided again into groups of 7 people to discuss the dream phase for 3 hours. This day was dedicated to highlight the company's best opportunities for the future. Communities, in general, suffer day-to-day difficulties and have never had the opportunity to create and dream about their future. This stage will encourage employees to think beyond their serious obstacles. The dream phase involved jointly building an ideal vision of a desirable future depending upon 'what gives life' components that were realized during the prior phase. Moreover, the discovery phase themes allowed employees to decide for themselves on new opportunities and possibilities in the workplace.

According to Rob Hopkins, asking dream questions requires a shift from "what is" to "what if" as good AI questions can give new perspective and reality (Hopkins, 2019). Every group was asked to answer the generative questions and imagine what would they do for Alfa if a miracle happened to them. As generative questions were answered, each group created a poster with a summary of emerging themes. Following an analysis of the themes, the four groups were asked to come up with common key elements and dreams that would identify Alfa as a successful firm. These elements were displayed on the meeting room walls so that employees could be reminded of their positive organizational features as they entered the design phase.

3.4 Design phase

On day 4, the design phase symbolized the beginning of transition from reflection into action. The design phase was centered on collaborating with employees to design future

plans and opportunities. Employees were guided in formulating provocative propositions using the 'Deep Dive' approach. 'Deep Dive' is a design process that encourages creativity and by bringing together individuals with diverse skills and organizing them in intensive cooperation to achieve a common objective. To accomplish this, action teams from various departments were formed to implement the key elements and ideas of the summit outcomes, while developing a successful action plan to reach their objectives and desires. Each team designed one distinct method for Alfa to achieve the key desires of its employees. Following the formation of action plans, a representative from each group presented his plans to the stakeholders, ending the phase with one final action plan. The design stage resulted in a precise plan of activities that expressed the responsibilities and duties of Alfa to achieve the shared goal of its employees.

3.5 Destiny phase

The last day was an invitation to deployment inspired from the previous phases of Appreciative Inquiry. It was the grateful day that everyone was waiting for, as employees got to work on the details of what has to be done. Each group reported their final provocative propositions, targets, and action steps to be applied after the summit. To help in the follow-up after the summit, each of the four teams was asked to find one volunteer to become a part of the steering group. This group's job is to have monthly meetings with the branch manager to assess and evaluate progress, share best practices, and sustain positive outcomes. At the end of this phase, the design team announced that a one-day follow-up session will be held in the coming

months to evaluate progress and celebrate wins.

4. Results

The data analysis in Appreciative Inquiry occurs simultaneously with the process of sharing individual stories within the group. The data analysis process was used to prepare a comprehensive list of themes derived from the stories of stakeholders. Furthermore, theme categorization was intended to be the root of the future image that would solve the organizational problem (Nuyapane & Poudel, 2011).

4.1 Discovery phase

In the discovery phase, the shared stories from each group were both inspiring and interesting. There was a lot of discussion and energy surrounding the previous stories of Alfa employees. They were excited to go back in their chapters and share them with other colleagues. It was amazing to see how this approach reminded participants that Alfa added substantial value to their life and offered them several benefits compared to other rivals. The themes derived from those stories were as follows:

1) Attractive salary and benefits

The majority of employees were satisfied and happy when the economic situation in Lebanon was great where they had an attractive wage compared to other firms. Back then, all the departments in the company were productive and worked as a team during flexible hours to meet Alfa's long-term goals. Employees were delighted when the firm provided all employees with comprehensive health insurance contracts that had been

suspended due to monetary concerns following the explosion.

2) Informal gatherings

Employees were energized when they used to meet with the managers during breaks and share their personal stories together. This allowed employees to feel more relaxed and comfortable at work by minimizing the hierarchy and authority between the employees themselves and the higher management. One employee mentioned that the sessions provided from appreciative inquiry have shown him that his colleagues really care and are ready to listen to any of his stories.

3) Personal growth

The majority of employees were pleased and joyful when their prior companies provided them with training sessions. This gave them the impression that they were extremely valuable to the organization which offered them lots of opportunities for promotion. Moreover, prior employers provided employees with guidance and mentorship to achieve the appropriate outcomes while working with flexible deadline schedules.

4.2 Dream phase

Moving forward to the dream phase, participants were asked to imagine the futuristic view of Alfa in case of a miracle. Employees appreciated how the summit began with positive work experiences and then encouraged them to discuss their future perspectives. Elements derived from the themes included many interesting topics like empowerment, rewards and incentive systems, remote teleworking, salary adjustments, off-site training, and health insurance plans.

1) Employees wished that Alfa managers would delegate their power by enabling them to participate in decision making, make crucial decisions, and identify solutions to rising problems. The majority of employees stated that empowerment allows them to remain productive in areas where they can improve their talents and boost the company's success.

2) A reward and incentive system poster was also displayed in the meeting room. Alfa employees stated that such a system would motivate them to develop a sense of teamwork through friendly competitions and positivism inside the workplace.

3) Employees also wished for off-site training to expand their knowledge and skills in the evolving communication technology to identify better alternatives and deliver better costs for Lebanon.

4) A key desire held by all groups was for salary adjustments and comprehensive health insurance benefits, especially during these difficult times considering the country's poor economic status.

5) Employees hoped if they would be able to work from home again as it was successful during COVID-19. This dream was popular among employees because of the high prices of gasoline, which has almost gone missing from the country and is being sold on the black market.

4.3 Design phase

The collaboration of employees to create future ideas to Alfa was the emphasis of the design phase. Participants were happy and optimistic about the company, where they have more trust in Alfa than ever before. Previous appreciative inquiry sessions raised

employees' expectations where the meetings demonstrated to them that they are capable of achieving what they desire. Nevertheless, employees were impressed that the company was designing a clear approach to connect and fulfill the needs of its stakeholders. Action teams created a single action plan for Alfa that included 4 key aspects. Stakeholders were consistent in implementing the action plan in the workplace so that they could be as productive and efficient as before, if not more so. The major activities that employees listed were:

1) Stakeholder empowerment and a change in the hierarchical structure of Alfa, as well as the development of a reward and incentive system for teamwork.

2) Salary adjustments through monetary awards based on performance.

3) Comprehensive health insurance contracts for every stakeholder working in Alfa to guarantee their safety while on duty.

4) Teleworking option for staff to minimize the expensive gasoline costs.

The final action plan satisfied everyone on the team. This enabled employees to design and shape their company's destiny. The stakeholders agreed to work together to complete the listed actions and to divide duties among them based on their respective interests. This phase demonstrated workers' willingness to collaborate with one another to achieve their shared goals and remain loyal to the company with which they work.

The action plan was given to the management to achieve employees' desires and needs. The branch manager emphasized that all insurance firms are taking subscriptions for comprehensive plans that are paid entirely in

dollars. Due to the massive fall of the Lebanese lira, Alfa would be unable to pay such subscriptions in foreign currency. As a result, the manager recommended a second-class insurance option that covers up to 70% of medical expenses. Also, management will develop a reward and incentive system based on setting sales targets, selecting an employee of the month, and rewarding him/her with a bonus. Concerning teleworking options, the branch manager had no objections as long as the employee completes his job flawlessly from home, as many employees were not at their peak productivity while working from home during the pandemic. The story of empowerment was a bit difficult. The branch manager stated that she can only delegate power in certain responsibilities at the branch because many major decisions are made at the headquarters and cannot be controlled by any of the company's branches. As a result, the branch manager will seek to get employee feedback on specific challenges and submit the crucial choices to the headquarters for consideration. Employees were satisfied with the final outcome as the main concern of their strike was about the salary raise and health insurance plans, which Alfa will achieve now.

4.4 Destiny phase

The destiny phase allowed the staff to put their action plan into effect after the summit's completion. The steering committee was made of four volunteers, one from each group. Each volunteer was responsible for a specific action step and subsequent follow-up with the branch manager to accomplish the required results. After 2 months of applying AI on Alfa, an online interview with the steering committee was performed to assess progress. According to the group, Alfa is almost there in

terms of providing its employees with second-class health insurance contracts that protect them while on the job. In addition, the steering committee declared that the firm resumed giving the teleworking option to a significant number of employees who may work from home based on their specialty. According to the interview, the branch manager is in frequent contact with the headquarters to offer a salary raise for the personnel based on a bonus paid every month. A second interview will be conducted with the steering group in the upcoming months to evaluate the new outcomes.

Participants stated that Appreciative Inquiry created mutual trust, appreciation, and understanding and facilitated the achievement of a shared goal. They realized that they were in the same boat that is moving forward to reach their mutual needs. Employees started working again in Alfa with a smile on their faces, knowing that their mission is being carried out more successfully by the company. This fostered a sense of gratitude and appreciation among employees, which resulted in improved performance from the whole stakeholders.

5. Discussion

Appreciative Inquiry is indeed an effective technique for fostering change by breaking borders and forging relationships amongst participants. Many challenges were faced during the application of Appreciative Inquiry in an autocratic-style environment. Lower-level employees were often hesitant to share their stories because they believed their stories were unworthy. The design team's aim was to promote and establish an environment in which all the stakeholders feel comfortable sharing their experiences. It has also been

observed that middle managers prefer to dominate while delivering their ideas and thoughts. In a few cases, we even had to assist in order to allow all the groups to participate in discussions and express their own viewpoints. Despite these difficulties, this study demonstrates that AI can be employed to support organizational change in Lebanon. Although the autocratic leadership style was used in the workplace, this was not what the employees preferred. Employees were forced to follow the rules and accept the company's decisions without even being asked for their opinions. In our case, AI enhanced employee awareness of possibilities to create change by acting as ambassadors for future change. AI tapped into positive emotions and created an atmosphere in which stakeholders could adopt a positive mindset in order to construct a better workplace for themselves.

Traditional deficit-based methods to practice change, which commonly faces defensive responses and resistance due to the hierarchical structure, makes it difficult to build such an openness to change. In the current study, Appreciative Inquiry was found to be a successful tool for challenging authority and facilitating an organizational change in Lebanon. The staff identified the opportunities for change and worked together to achieve their joint objectives, regardless of their position in the company. In contrast to the deficit-based approach, AI has the advantage of promoting positive elements of practice and allowing participants to feel that their own opinions and experiences are significant; they should feel free to express their ideas without judgement. Due to power and hierarchy difficulties, this latter aim may be difficult to attain in settings where employees with varying levels of responsibility engage together. The idea of empowerment is

respected by Appreciative Inquiry during the process. Hence, AI requires a participatory atmosphere for the stakeholders involved, which supports the empowerment of all the individuals who do not usually have a voice in organizations.

People in developing countries tend to have more expectations from researchers to help and support them. If the process was not carefully followed, Appreciative Inquiry may have been nothing more than a fantasy or a false hope (Nyuapane & Poudel, 2011). Hence, participants become more disengaged and frustrated when the Appreciative Inquiry process fails. To avoid this, we made it clear from the start what the aim of the research was and what we expected to achieve at the end of the process, taking into consideration the country's economic condition and inviting stakeholders to design a reasonable action plan based on that. By doing so, we guaranteed that Alfa would meet the objectives of its people based on the given action plan. There was also a risk of leaving the setting before the action plan was implemented, which would result in employee dissatisfaction. As a result, it was critical to form a steering committee to maintain continuous contact with the branch manager and conduct interviews to assess the results.

6. Conclusion

The article focused on the research question: What is the impact of Appreciative Inquiry on organizational change in Lebanon?

After applying the 5-D cycle of Appreciative Inquiry to one of the companies that are dominated by an autocratic leadership style, Appreciative Inquiry process resulted to be a successful tool in supporting an organizational change. Appreciative Inquiry has emerged to

counter the traditional deficit-based approach. This is due to the fact that it concentrates on the accomplishments of stakeholders instead of deficits. Unlike the traditional approach, the concept of Appreciative Inquiry capitalizes the strength of an individual to provide a proactive approach to problem-solving. Furthermore, Appreciative Inquiry was discovered to be a useful technique to supersede authority in the workplace via empowerment. The findings show that Appreciative Inquiry is a credible technique for creating actionable plans and improving the company's performance. The structure of Appreciative Inquiry promotes strategic thinking, which is seen through design statements that are transformed into action plans later in the process. Similarly, Appreciative Inquiry aided participants in creating the workplace in which they desired to work in by discovering, appreciating, and shaping their own future. Appreciative Inquiry process was successful in Lebanon since it embedded strength and hope in pessimistic individuals who were doing their best to accomplish their goals in a crisis environment. Ultimately, this study confirms the AI approach as a positive approach to fostering changes in the context of Lebanon.

Practitioners always concentrate on what is not working. Instead, they should raise positive questions and identify the best practices of their organizations. Middle East employers may benefit from AI by gathering valuable information from stakeholders that provides the company with the right solutions. We recommend applying Appreciative Inquiry to Middle Eastern companies to solve and support an organizational change. In general, autocratic leadership is very problem-centric (leaders search for flaws and undesirable results). The advantage of a problem-centric approach is that employers may create and

execute suitable solutions by recognizing current problems and their causes. However, this methodology only serves to maintain the current status and cannot guarantee a resistance to change on the occasion of an external or internal event trigger.

According to the findings of the study, middle managers tend to dominate when expressing their ideas and thoughts, with no chance for others to participate during discussions. Because of the prevalence of authority in developing countries, we advise researchers and academics to be aware of the existing hierarchy among the stakeholders in the workplace, in a way to prevent the dominance of stories and ideas over another ones. Also, researchers must be aware of the local context where Appreciative Inquiry will be applied. Hence, researchers must make it clear from the start what the study project can and cannot offer to the stakeholders involved in the process; otherwise, the outcome may be negative if employees are dissatisfied as a result. The study's scope was restricted due to time and resource limitations. The researcher collected data from a branch of the company where AI was being applied. The study's scope could be expanded to include more branches around the country and to apply Appreciative Inquiry on a wider scale. Alfa is a large corporation where the headquarters handles the final decisions. Hence, the stakeholders will not participate in critical decisions. This was also a limitation of the study. Also, the economic situation in Lebanon limited the desires of stakeholders while designing their final action plan (e.g. high salaries, transportation costs, welfare facilities). Future research could be extended on assessing and evaluating the impact of Appreciative Inquiry on small businesses in other Middle Eastern countries where the economy is stable.

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8. Appendix A. Interview Protocol

The aim of this study is to investigate the impact of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) on organizational performance in Lebanon. The goal of this stage was to develop an interview protocol for the application of Appreciative Inquiry. We were very careful in developing questions since we realized that what we ask determines what we will discover. Also, we made sure that the questions were affirmative and appreciative to get the most energetic answers. Hence, the employees were asked to answer the interview questions based on each phase.

Interview Questions

- **Discovery Questions:**

- 1- Tell me about a great period in your career where you felt energetic and satisfied.
 - What happened?
 - What were you doing?
 - What contributed to the success you experienced?
- 2- What was your most positive work experience in which you felt truly supported and engaged by your employers?
 - Tell me about this experience and how it impacted your career
 - What did it mean for you personally?
 - How this influenced your productivity?
- 3- What are some of your favorite memories from your time at Alfa?

-**Dream Questions:**

- 1- What if you had a magical wind in 2054? What would you do for Alfa to increase the employee engagement in the company?
- 2- What if you were living a decade from now, how would you describe an ideal process to increase the magnetic working environment in Alfa?
- 3- You have just awakened from a deep sleep in the year 2030. As you wake up and look over, you see that the organization is just as you had hoped and dreamt it would be.
 - What is going on?
 - What distinguishes Alfa from other companies?

-**Design Questions:**

- 1- What will be the action plan to have a satisfying working environment at Alfa?
- 2- What are the employee-driven opportunity areas that will be implemented in Alfa?

-**Destiny Questions:**

- 1- Who will take action to fulfill the desires of employees?
- 2- How can we ensure a good follow up on the change process?
- 3- What has been done for Alfa after the summit? Are the stakeholders happy and satisfied with the outcomes?