Appreciative Problem Solving

Many industrial production work systems have increased in complexity, and their new business model compete on innovation, rather than low cost. At a medical device production facility committed to Lean Production, a research project was carried out to use Appreciative Inquiry to better engage employee strengths in continuous improvements of the work system. The research question was: “How can Lean problem solving and Appreciative Inquiry be combined for optimized work system innovation?”

The research project was carried out as a co-creation process with close cooperation between researcher and participants and was documented by qualitative methods.

This paper presents an academic literature review on Appreciative Inquiry and problem solving for continuous improvements that did not reveal successful attempts in combining the two. Both the literature and the empirical study showed one of the main challenges to be to connect the two different thinking modes in the daily practice. The empirical study found both approaches useful for creating continuous improvements of the work system and identified different practices of combining them. From the empirical study, the paper identifies three approaches to work system innovation and discusses how Appreciative Inquiry, Problem Solving, and the combination ‘Appreciative Problem Solving’ can be used to optimize continuous work system innovation. These findings add to the theoretical foundation of the emerging field of Strength-based Lean.

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