How can appreciative inquiry be used to improve cancer clinical trials efficiency? The UNC Lineberger case study

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Abstract: Cancer is a leading cause of death world-wide and the number of new cases diagnosed annually is expected to double by 2050. Better treatments are urgently needed. Clinical trials, the gold standard for testing therapies for safety and efficacy, are conducted in settings including academic medical centers. Long-standing difficulties with the clinical trials system are exemplified by the slow pace of clinical trial activation and low rate of trial completion.

Descriptive case study research was conducted at the UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center to explore how Appreciative Inquiry (AI), a generative form of organization development, can be used to improve clinical trials efficiency. The literature on clinical trials efficiency, organization development, appreciative inquiry, and case study research was reviewed. The case study protocol included six questions for two units of analysis, research coordinators and disease team leaders. A process improvement initiative using AI had been completed and documentation was available for analysis. AI was conducted with the disease team leaders and interview notes were analyzed. Participant observation was employed with both groups. Themes and provocative propositions were identified or created. Changes attributable to the use of appreciative inquiry and potential contributions to improved efficiency were documented along with limitations, barriers, or obstacles to the use of the technique with each group. Together the case study protocol questions described the extent and effect of applying AI with the two groups.

A plan for change included six recommendations to advance and sustain change towards improving the clinical trials system. These included presenting the case study report to the Protocol Office Executive Committee; initiating a system-wide application of AI with the CPO; monitoring efficiency metrics and assessing impact of AI; assessing other potential AI applications at UNC Lineberger; publishing and presenting findings. Leadership theory and practice will continue to guide efforts to create a more efficient cancer clinical trials program.

Links: Linking Service

Subject: Behavioral psychology; Organizational behavior; Oncology;

Classification: 0384: Behavioral psychology; 0703: Organizational behavior; 0992: Oncology

Identifier / keyword: Social sciences, Psychology, Health and environmental sciences, Appreciative inquiry, Cancer centers, Case study research, Clinical trials, Leadership, Oncology, University of North Carolina

Number of pages: 86

Publication year: 2012

Degree date: 2012

School code: 0153

Source: DAI-A 73/09(E), Mar 2013

Place of publication: Ann Arbor

Country of publication: United States