

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO PEOPLE AND ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT

What is Appreciative Inquiry? Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a powerful new vehicle for energizing positive change in an organization. Its aim is to discover, expand, and sustain an organization through determining the root causes of success. AI is particularly useful in turbulent environments and has been used very successfully with complex changes like transformation, restructuring, mergers, acquisitions, and for building processes such as union/management relationship, teambuilding, capacity building and diversity. It engages people in discovering what makes human systems effective and constructive and facilitates self-directed learning. Major outcomes identified are involving individuals and getting them to take responsibility, valuing differences, communicating, taking risks, and innovating.

David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, noted AI experts, use the dictionary meanings of the words in AI as:

Ap-pre'ci-ate, v., 1. *valuing; the act of recognizing the best in people or the world around us; affirming past and present strengths, successes, and potentials; to perceive those things that give life (health, vitality, excellence) to living systems (groups and organizations) i2. to increase in value, e.g. the economy has appreciated in value.*
Synonyms: VALUING, PRIZING, ESTEEMING, and HONORING.

In-quire' (*kwir*), v., 1. *the act of exploration and discovery. 2. To ask questions; to be open to seeing new potentials and possibilities.* *Synonyms: DISCOVERY, SEARCH, and SYSTEMATIC EXPLORATION, STUDY.*

Appreciative Inquiry is a search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them as a way of learning how to act in the future. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what constitutes “a living system” when it is most effective and capable in economic and human terms. AI takes a view that reality is socially created, and people can choose to focus on positive and generative aspects rather than deficit-based perspectives. Rooted in a number of fields including action research, organizational development, and chaos theory, AI recognizes the power of language and imagery to shape consciousness so that learning and positive change happen simultaneously. It assumes that every living system has many untapped and rich and inspiring accounts of the positive and that linking this energy and knowledge directly to any change and improvement effort can bring about innovative, speedy, and very acceptable outcomes. Instead of negation, criticism, and spiraling diagnosis, there is the positive energy of discovery, dream, and design.

Rather than just another technique, AI is presented as a radically innovative next generation approach to the whole field of organization development. About ten years ago in its introduction, the AI approach was used as the major intervention to create the new company of GTE (a phone company with 67,000 employees) in fourteen months. Based on significant and measurable changes in stock prices, morale survey measures, quality/customer relations and union-management relations, in 1997, the American Society for Training & Development recognized the company for “Best Organization Change Program in the U.S.”. Since then many managers, consultants, human resource professionals, organizational and community facilitators in corporations, government, religious and community organizations are introducing it. It is being used in strategic planning, internal auditing and evaluation, instructional system design, diversity, organizational redesign, mergers, teambuilding, workplace learning, career development, and education.

The former President, Tom White, GTE telephone company, expressed that “AI can get you better results than seeking out and solving problems. That’s an interesting concept for me because telephone

companies are the best problem solvers in the world. We trouble shoot everything. We concentrate enormous resources on correcting problems that have relatively minor impact on our overall service and performance (and which)... When used continuously over a long time, this can lead to a negative culture. If you combine a negative culture with all the challenges we face today, it could be easy to convince ourselves that we have too many problems to overcome—and slip into a paralyzing sense of hopelessness. Yes we can't ignore the problems—we just need to approach them from the other side.”

Proponents of AI see the end of the problem solving approach. “In our view, the problem solving approach, while once perhaps quite effective, is out of sync with the realities of today. Problem solving approaches are painfully slow (always asking people to look backward to yesterday's causes); they rarely result in a new vision and they generate defensiveness and powerlessness (it is not my problem, its yours).”

How Is AI Done?

It involves the mobilization of a constructive inquiry through the crafting of the “unconditional positive question” and can involve hundreds or sometimes thousands of people. AI seeks, fundamentally, to help discover past and present capacities: achievements, assets, unexplored potentials, innovations, strengths, elevated thoughts, opportunities, benchmarks, high point moments, lived values, traditions, strategic competencies, stories, expressions of wisdom, insights into the deeper corporate spirit or soul-- and visions of valued and possible futures.

AI involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. Instead of beginning with problems to be solved, it aims to define the positive (what should be rather than what is wrong).

Cooperrider identifies that AI has four learning processes:

1. **Discovery**-- Identify when talking to one another, often via structured appreciative interviews, exceptional/peak moments
2. **Dream**--Envision what might be if the peak moments were the norm, not the exception; the images of the future that emerge are grounded in the "positive present." Create a clear-results-oriented vision in relation to discovered potential and in relation to questions of higher purpose, i.e. What is the world calling us to become?
3. **Design**—Create "provocative positive propositions" of the ideal organization to achieve the organization/project vision and identify strategies to implement it.
4. **Destiny**— could be called “delivery.” Strengthen the affirmative capability of the whole system enabling it to build hope and momentum around a deep purpose and creating processes for learning, adjustment and improvisation over time. Act out the provocative propositions, establish new relationships, and mobilize resources. This is the time for action planning, developing implementation strategies, and dealing with the challenges of sustainability. It is a time to empower people to take their own actions in line with the approach.

Examples of AI

Some examples illustrate the way in which organizational members can be involved in AI.

Phase of Discovery

- A large Canadian accounting firm used it to undertake executive succession. The managing partner seized the opportunity to engage in the process as an incredible leadership development

opportunity for all 400 partners. An extensive two-hour interview with all partners covered topics, such as innovation, equality, partnership, marketing, and valuing diversity. And not one outside consultant did the interviewing; rather thirty junior partners did all internal interviews as part of a leadership development program. A powerful and intergenerational personal story of the firm's history came alive. At the annual partners meeting with over 400 people, the material was showcased and coupled to the future in a memorable strategic planning exercise.

- At GTE in a system-wide organization analysis, thousands were asked questions like: “Obviously, you have had up and downs in your career at GTE. But for the moment, I would like to focus on a high point, a time in your work experience here where you felt most alive, most engaged and most successful. Can you tell me the story? How did it unfold? What was it organizationally that made it memorable? What was it about you that made it a high point? What key insights do you have for all of us at GTE?”

From Discovery to Dream

Before a strategic planning meeting, a Brazil Food Company closed down its plant for a full day to bring all 700 employees together for a day of discovery into the factors and forces that contributed to previous successes and effective outcomes. At the end of the day, with cheers and good wishes a “smaller” group of stakeholders- employees from all levels, suppliers, distributors, community leaders, financiers, and customers- were directed to hold a four-day strategy session to articulate - based on the day's stories - a new and bold vision for the company. The discussions addressed questions such as: What is the world calling us to become? What are those things about us that no matter how much we change, we want to continue into our new and different future? Let's assume that tonight while we slept, a miracle occurred where our company became exactly as we want—all its best qualities are magnified, extended, multiplied – what do you see is different and how do you know? Six months later, the company had the highest profits ever.

Design

- In Zimbabwe, a non-governmental organization found that once their staff had a vision of a better world, positive things happened. A powerful purpose and a compelling statement of strategic intent move people to create the ideal organization. The staff redesigned the organization in terms of structures and systems that would support the “dream.” The articulation of the image of the future was simple, “Every person in Zimbabwe shall have access to clean water within five years.” The purpose of the design phase was to devise a new form of organization based on a network of alliances/partnerships, not a bureaucracy. The question addressed was “What would our organization look like if it were designed in every way possible to maximize our positive qualities and enable the accelerated realization of our dreams?”
- A rapidly growing distributor of consumer products became a learning organization that fosters the cross fertilization of ideas, minimizes the building of empires, fosters group cooperation, and cultivates pride in each employee of being a valued member of an outstanding corporation. The company accelerates its learning through an annual strategic planning conference that involves all five hundred firm staff, as well as key partners and stakeholders. At this conference “strategic learning” teams present their benchmarking studies of the best five other organizations. Other teams present an annual appreciative analysis of the company. Together these databases of success stories (internal and external) provide the information for the strategic planning.

Destiny

At GTE, training on AI was conducted for employees. After the training, an article in the company's newsletter spoke about the voluntary results emerging throughout the company. Frontline employees launched interviews to gather positive examples regarding innovation, inspired leadership, revolutionary customer responsiveness, labor-management relations, and fun. One employee did 200 interviews to determine the positive ingredients of a major call center. No one said "no" to the request for information when someone posed the request in the following way: "would you help me out... I'm really trying to find out the best innovations developing in your area and I see you as someone who could really give me new insight into creating settings where innovations can happen.... It is part of my leadership development. Do you have time for an interview...I would be glad to share my learning's with you later."

Soon the topics found their way into meetings, brainstorming applications, corridor conversations, focus groups with satisfied customers, and senior planning meetings. The use of distance technologies also proved to be helpful to bring people together to respond. And when everyone's awareness grows at the same time, a new consensus develops that fundamental change is possible. When used with unions, positive support evolved for moving to act in partnership with the company in order to adapt to the new global telecommunications marketplace.

AI can be genuinely transformative in the right conditions, but it requires time, trust, and a "new mental metabolism." It accelerates organization breakthroughs, which together with historic, positive traditions and strengths creates a "convergence zone" facilitating the collective repatterning of human systems. At some point apparently minor positive discoveries connect in accelerating manner and quantum change. What is needed are the network-like structures that facilitate not only the daily search into qualities and elements of an organisation's positive core, but enables people to empower one another—to connect, cooperate, and co-create. Changes never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilized when people constructively appropriate the power of the positive core and simply... let go of accounts of the negative.

Perhaps our inquiry must become the positive outcomes we want to see in the world? Albert Einstein's words clearly move us in new ways: "*There are only two ways to see in the world. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.*"

*To learn more about AI, explore the Website: **Appreciative Inquiry Commons** at <http://appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu/>. It is a comprehensive worldwide portal at Case Western Reserve University (US) devoted to the sharing of research, resources and practical tools on Appreciative Inquiry.*

This article was adopted from the research of Sandra Kerka, Trends and Issues Alert no. 41, ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, 2003, at: ericacve.org and also the work of David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney secured from the University's website.