

Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Approach to Change

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Introduction

Maybe it is because we have just emerged from the midst of election season. Or perhaps it is the constant barrage of negative news about virtually every aspect of our existence, whether it is about issues of significance (terrorism, hunger, and genocide) or about matters so trivial one wonders how spoiled we have become. We are awash in a sea of negativity. It seems that no matter what we do, who does it, or how it is done, there is a never-ending supply of critics and complainers just waiting to tell us what is wrong. As John Gardner puts it, we are increasingly engaged in a self-destructive “war of the parts against the whole.”¹

There is evidence to support the notion that this is just the natural tendency of the human animal. Negativity certainly seems to be the normal state of the culture in all too many of our organizations and communities. And few things bring out negative reactions in people, organizations and communities more than efforts to change what is perceived to be wrong.

The traditional approach to change is problem solving in nature. It starts off from a negative perspective—something is broken, something could be done better, something needs to be fixed. Thus we engage in problem identification, root cause analysis, brainstorming possible solutions, action planning, implementation of changes, and hopefully, evaluation of the results. Indeed this is precisely what managers are trained to do—identify problems and fix them. However well intended, problem solving approaches to change are notoriously difficult and often unsuccessful. (See John Kotter’s book *Leading Change* for an excellent treatment of change and the traditional change process.)²

Resistance to change is a well-established fact of organizational life, and for good reason. Change always involves uncertainty. Invariably it involves more work. And we have learned by experience that change is not always for the better.

Change causes many in the organization to feel incompetent, needy and powerless. It creates confusion and unpredictability throughout the organization. It generates conflict, and ultimately creates loss (of certainty, control, ownership, or even jobs).³

While the literature on change helps us to diagnose and understand resistance to change efforts and provides us with various strategies for designing processes to overcome resistance, success is still illusive.

Maybe we should try a completely different approach to change.

Appreciative Inquiry

In the 1980s, David Cooperrider, professor at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University, developed a new model for organizational development and change which he termed “appreciative inquiry.”

Appreciation has to do with both recognition and enhancing value. It is about affirming past and present strengths, assets, and potentials. Inquiry refers to both exploration and discovery. It is about asking questions, study, and learning.⁴

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a positive way to embrace organizational change based on a simple assumption:

Every organization has something that works right—things that give life when it most alive, effective, successful, and connected in healthy ways to its stakeholders and communities. AI begins by identifying what is positive and connecting to it in ways that heighten energy and vision for change.⁵

AI assumes that human systems, e.g., organizations and groups, are not like machines that can be taken apart and fixed, but rather are social systems. As such, they are more like organisms—living, breathing entities that stay healthiest when they are focused on their positive life-giving characteristics, rather than their problematic aspects.

Thus, AI starts from the positive perspective. Rather than looking at what is wrong, it looks at what is right in the organization. It is the discovery of the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It is the art and practice of asking the unconditional positive questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential.

AI is an approach to organizational analysis and learning that is intended for discovering, understanding, and fostering innovations in social organizational arrangements and processes. In this context, AI refers to two things:

- A search for knowledge; and,
- A theory of collective action designed to evolve the vision and will of a group, an organization, or society as a whole.

Instead of negation, criticism and spiraling diagnosis, there is discover, dream, design and destiny. It works from accounts of the “positive change core.” AI links the energy of the positive core directly to any change agenda and changes never before thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilized.

The Positive Core

As noted, and it is worth reemphasizing, all organizations have something about their past to value. This element must be appreciated in order that change becomes a positive experience, without encountering unnecessary resistance from the sense of disruption, failure, and powerlessness. The AI process helps one to honor the past (continuity) and search for newness (novelty) in order to embrace movement toward the new future (transition).

The organization's positive core can be found by looking at its...

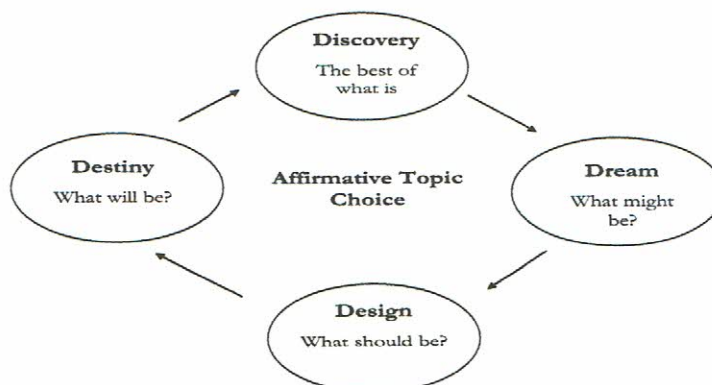
- Achievements
- Strategic opportunities
- Product strengths
- Technical assets
- Innovations
- Best business practices
- Positive emotions
- Financial assets
- Cooperative moments
- Organizational wisdom
- Core competencies
- Visions of possibilities
- Vital traditions and values
- Social capital
- Embedded knowledge
- Business ecosystems, e.g., suppliers, partners, competitors, customers.⁶

It is here that we can find those things that give us satisfaction, provide meaning from our efforts, give us pride in our work, our organizations and our communities. Here we find those things of which we would like more.

The Four Stages of Appreciative Inquiry

The AI process involves four stages which have been labeled discovery, dream, design, and destiny known as the 4-D Cycle.

The 4-D Cycle



1. Discovery

The Discovery phase is a diligent and extensive search to understand the “best of what is” and “what has been.” It begins with a collaborative act of crafting appreciative interview questions and constructing an appreciative interview guide.

Appreciative interview questions are written as affirmative probes into an organization’s positive core, in the topic areas selected. They are written to generate stories, to enrich the images and inner dialogue within the organization, and to bring the positive core more fully into focus.

2. Dream

The Dream phase is an energizing exploration of “what might be”: a time for people to explore their hopes and dreams for their work, their working relationships, their organization, and the world at large. It is a time for groups of people to engage in thinking big, and thinking out of the boundaries of what has been in the past. The intent of the Dream phase is to identify and spread generative, affirmative and hopeful images of the future.

3. Design

The Design phase involves making choices about “what should be” within the organization or system. It is a conscious re-creation or transformation, through which such things as systems, structures, strategies, processes and images will become more fully aligned with the organization’s positive past (Discovery) and highest potential (Dream).

4. Destiny

The Destiny phase initiates a series of inspired actions that support ongoing learning and innovation—or “what will be.” Since the entire 4-D cycle provides an open forum for employees to contribute and step forward in the service of the organization, change occurs in all phases of an appreciative inquiry process.

The Destiny phase, however, focuses specifically on personal and organizational commitments and paths forward which result in changes in organizational systems, structure, processes or procedures.

The Affirmative Topic Choice

The 4-D Cycle begins with the affirmative question, which grows out of the choice of affirmative topic. Thus the choice of both topic and question are critical to the direction of the change process. AI is premised, in part, on the belief that human systems grow in the direction of what they study, talk about, and focus on. People, organizations, and

communities construct and exist in worlds of their own making, which in turn act back on them.⁷

An interesting example of the use of the AI comes from British Airways (BA). At one point the airline had a great deal of concern about its handling of baggage and their customers' "arrival experience." To put it succinctly, customers and their baggage did not always arrive on the same flight. This, of course, cost BA considerable money, time, and goodwill.

Using the AI model, BA employees focused, not on what was wrong (lost baggage), but rather on what they wanted. In this case, they wanted more "exceptional arrival experiences." So an appreciative question was to "describe times when customers had an exceptional arrival experience." In an interview process using this question, employees identified the components of an "exceptional arrival experience." This inquiry led to the discovery of a number of best practices that could be implemented at BA as a part of their quest for world class service. What's more, it did it in an inclusive, energizing manner that inspired the group rather than criticizing it for past failures.⁸

Does AI Work?

There are numerous anecdotal examples and case studies of success using the AI model. Research as to why it works indicates that, among other things, it gives people the experience of personal and collective power, and the exercise of that power for the good of the whole. It enhances self-esteem and self-expression. It gives people the freedom to be heard and to make a positive contribution. Indeed it addresses many of the causes of resistance to change as experienced in the traditional approaches to change.

Beyond that, there is convincing evidence about the power of positive thinking that also makes this model appealing.

And finally, how refreshing it would be to approach the many issues we have in our organizations and our society from the positive perspective, seeking what we would like to have more of, rather than always bemoaning what is wrong with everything. Rather than being constantly at war with one another about virtually everything, how productive would it be to try and appreciate the good that we have accomplished, and to explore ways to have more of that success?

Of course some might be skeptical! But as Tom White, then head of GTE Telephone Operations stated:

Don't get me wrong. I'm not advocating mindless happy talk. Appreciative inquiry is a complex science designed to make things better. We can't ignore problems—we just need to approach them from the other side.⁹

For More Information:

For the reader who might be intrigued by this approach, there are a number of excellent resources available. Here are three that I would recommend as a starting place:

The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change by Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom.

Appreciative Inquiry Handbook by David L. Cooperrider, Diana Whitney and Jacqueline M. Stavros.

“The Appreciative Inquiry Commons,” a website devoted to the sharing of academic resources and practical tools on AI has an excellent collection of articles on the rapidly growing discipline of positive change. See <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/>.

About the Author

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ENDNOTES

¹ Gardner, J. (1990). *On leadership*. New York, NY: The Free Press, p. 95.

² Kotter, J. (1996). *Leading change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

³ Bolman and Deal. (1991). *Reframing organizations: artistry, choice, and leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, p. 377.

⁴ Whitney, D. & Trosten-Bloom, A. (2003). *The power of appreciative inquiry: a practical guide to positive change*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, pp. 2-3.

⁵ Cooperrider, D., Whitney, D., and Stavros, J. (2005). *Appreciative inquiry handbook*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, p. xvii.

⁶ Ibid., p. 31.

⁷ Op. Cit. Whitney, D. & Trosten-Bloom, A. (2003), p. 132.

⁸ Ibid., pp.133-134.

⁹ Op. Cit. Cooperrider, D., Whitney, D., and Stavros, J. (2005), p. xx.