

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

by Jane Logan

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What is it?

Appreciative Inquiry is a facilitated approach to organizational planning and change that asks, “what is working well around here and how do we build on it?” It’s based on the assumption that in every group or organization, something works well. Developed by David Cooperrider and his colleagues at Case Western University, it has been used by both the non-for-profit sector and private industry. It is also called Appreciative Planning and Action.

Why use it?

The positive, affirming nature of Appreciative Inquiry, where people discover and then build on the root causes of success rather than dissect problems, can be a powerful stimulus to change. It’s non-threatening and empowering. It taps into the knowledge and energy of internal experts. If you are going to carry forward parts of the past, they should be the best parts, according to AI author and expert Sue Hammond.

How to use it?

This process is suited to both large and small groups in face-to-face meetings. Some processes have involved over a thousand people, even entire organizations. Originally developed for planning, Appreciative Inquiry is also a helpful tool for the development of best practices. One colleague used it in an international gathering of 400 drug enforcement officers. A soccer association used it with junior soccer teams to draw out norms based on each team’s most positive game experiences.

The AI framework can be applied to a variety of interventions such as: strategic planning, instructional system design, diversity, organisational redesign, mergers and evaluations.



The four stages of Appreciative Inquiry are Discovery, Dreaming, Design and Delivery.

- **Discovery - “The best of what is”**

In the first stage, a question is set to stimulate the discovery of excellence and achievement in an organization. For example Sue Hammond suggests, “Think back through your career in this organization. Locate a moment that was a high point, when you felt effective and engaged. Describe how you felt, and what made the situation possible”. Or questions can be more focussed, such as “Think back over the past few years to a fundraising exercise you were part of – a life experience or moment that stands out for you as exceptional, one that left you enthused, excited, energized and empowered. Reflect on what happened and what went on that made this such a memorable event for you.”

Participants work individually to map out their stories. Then, they share their stories in pairs and ask probing questions such as “If you had to pick one thing that made your experience truly memorable, what would it be? What skills helped you? What was its key to success?” Other questions hone in on personal strengths and contributions. Groups then identify the common themes behind their examples of excellence. These could be anything from core practices, structures, assets, values, customer service, technology, or capacities such as leadership.

- **Dreaming – “What could be”**

Next, a Future Vision is developed based on the common themes that surfaced through the examination of past excellence. The group develops a picture of the ideal future, grounded in the organization’s reality. What could the world look like if our moments of exceptional success were the norm? As American poet Carl Sandburg said, “Nothing happens unless it is first a dream”.

- **Design – “What should be”**

Through consensus, short and long-term goals are developed to achieve the dream based on what Cooperrider and his followers call a “provocative proposition”. Examples of provocative propositions are “Our association will do whatever is necessary to build a school, and have a full primary cycle within two years ” or “We will face HIV/AIDS in our community and do what is called for to save our people” or “In eight months we will have a



fully functional membership database that is fully accurate and is the key to tracking, managing and forecasting superior customer service needs.”

Tips: This is the challenging part – be sure the “provocative proposition” is actually provocative and involves stretch for the organization. Think big!

- **Delivery – “Action plan and execute”**

This is the action planning and execution stage. Strategies and plans are put in place to meet the goals of the provocative proposition, and roles and responsibilities are assigned. Although any strategic or operational planning methodology can be used, to follow AI principles you must maintain a positive mindset and involve a broad spectrum of people throughout your organization. It also involves monitoring, evaluation and feedback.

Tips: Unless you follow through with Design and Delivery, you will have spent your time on a “feel good” experience, rather than building a roadmap for positive change.

Final thoughts

On the surface, Appreciative Inquiry can sound too “touchy feely” for hard-nosed business people. We like to vent and to gripe. But is venting the best use of time at an organization’s planning meeting? Appreciative Inquiry is a highly successful tool that contributes to team building, and discovers, expands and sustains the best of what an organization can offer. It allows continuity with what has worked well in the past and respects unique cultures that are successful in their own way. Many facilitators integrate Appreciative Inquiry’s story telling, sharing and visioning pieces into their designs with other facilitation processes, rather than use it exclusively. They capitalize on its flexible and constructive approach for a broad range of purposes and change the focus of meetings from dissecting problems to harnessing excellence.

Resources

Sue Annis Hammond, [The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry](#). Thin Book Press, 1996. See www.thinbook.com for other resources.

Charles Elliot, [Locating the Energy for Change: An Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry](#), Winnipeg: International Institute for Sustainable Development, 1999, 288 pp. This text is available for downloading free at <http://www.iisd.org/ai/locating.htm>



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Contact janelogan@loganstrategy.ca

