

An Open Invitation to the Appreciative

Diana Whitney
Diwhitney@aol.com

When Peggy Holman posed the Question "What is Open in Appreciative Inquiry?" and asked me to write about it, I immediately said yes. I had worked with Harrison Owen, the originator of Open Space, and David Cooperrider, the originator of Appreciative Inquiry, in the early days of these significant social innovations.

What is Open in Appreciative Inquiry?

As I reflected on this question my first thought was that Appreciative Inquiry opens the realm of possibility through affirmation and inquiry for organizations and communities to discover their positive core. It shifts from the polarity of "we/they" to the grace of "I/thou", opening us to connect. Connection awakens a sense of possibility, inspiring organizations to open to their dreams. And perhaps most radically, people open to change itself when exposed to the power of the appreciative.

Opening to the Positive Core

AI unlocks the positive potential of an organization through inquiry and dialogue into its positive core – its unique configuration of strengths, resources and assets, tangible and intangible. Tapping into and making known the positive core, opportunities for transformation, strategic advantage and success are opened. Consider Hunter Douglas Window Fashions Division: During an AI based strategic planning session, approximately 80 people mapped their competencies and strategic opportunities. Conversations made it apparent that their core competency was less defined by windows than by the technology of bonded fabric. This redirected their strategic vision and business strategies creating highly successful non-window products and a new business unit.

Opening to the Other

Through appreciative interviews, people find themselves in the other's story, paradoxically accepting differences in that discovery, embracing new relationships and generating new possibilities for action. Time and again, improbable pairs – people who might otherwise not be in dialogue – build bridges. People of difference approach each other with respect and sincere curiosity, opening the door for ongoing relatedness and cooperation. Perhaps the greatest illustration is the United Religions Initiative (URI), a global interfaith organization founded using AI. URI now exists in 260 cooperation circles on five continents. Forming a cooperation circle requires: 7 people of 3 faiths working toward the purpose of the URI – ending religiously motivated violence and creating cultures of peace. Interviews and dialogue establish a foundation of respect, relational responsibility and shared purpose. Appreciative interviews open people to meet one another, learn about the other, gaining a deeper respect and appreciation for the life conditions and challenges facing the other. AI, at its best, creates what Gandhi described as "relationship enhancing conversations."

Opening to Dreams

As AI's anticipatory principle says, changing a human system begins by changing deeply held images of the future. AI opens the organization to identify, express and live into the greatest hopes and dreams of its stakeholders. It shifts an organization's inner dialogue from what can't happen to what can happen, individually and collectively. "We are the world's favorite airline," said Lord Marshall when he took responsibility for a British Airways in great disarray. Whenever anyone told him it was not true, he said, "That may be so – but your job is to make it true." His image became a guiding light to the future, a challenge and a worthy goal – one that many now would say has been attained.

Opening to the Power of Change

As AI is taught and practiced, organizational members gain confidence and ability in positive change. They recognize the power of positive emotions, relationships and analysis to create organizations that serve the triple bottom line – people, profit and planet. When Amerquest Data Services learned about AI, they saw it mobilizing the culture among its 700 members. Facing uncertainty while planning three AI Summits, the greatest concern was how to manage the destiny process. People wondered how an already busy organization could take on more projects. At the first summit, new relationships formed, significant business information was shared and the organization was infused with energy and enthusiasm. Senior management opened the lid on the number of projects, supporting a self-determined process. Positive power opened high performing people to more time, energy and creativity, embracing change to meet business needs.

Appreciative Inquiry opens organizations and communities to listening, learning and leading from strengths. It invites and opens a space for whole system vulnerability leading to organizational learning and wisdom. It creates an appreciative dislodgement of certainty enabling people and groups to move toward higher goals, principles and practices without blame or resistance. By creating a safe space for people to share their experiences, hopes and dreams, and ideas for action AI unleashes collective energy and commitment to the whole. At the end of an AI workshop one young man said, "About a month ago an assessment said that I was not very creative. This week, another class participant told me he would like to have me on his team because I am so creative. A week in such a positive environment opened me up, letting my creative self come forward. I feel creative now. I look forward to using my newly discovered creativity, along with AI to get better results and to have more fun."

AI and OS in Service of Higher Good

I work appreciatively because it is congruent with my spiritual beliefs. It is energetically positive, giving life to that which I value, and being the change I want to see. Over the years, I have grown accustomed to comments like those from participants at the 2004 Parliament of Worlds Religions, "It was wonderful to talk with someone about what really matters." And, "Appreciative Inquiry helps people in my country meet without fear now that the wars are over." And, "I am so glad to be part of an organization that uses Appreciative Inquiry. It enables us to build bridges of enduring friendship among people whose life experiences and cultures are quite different. OS and AI emerged as bold social experiments to midwife the liberation of human spirit, voice and cooperation. Perhaps their contributions to global wellbeing and evolution open the human family to its next chapter.