Exploring Appreciative Inquiry

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Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has been described in a myriad of ways: a radically affirmative approach to change that completely lets go of problem-based management,[1] the most important advance in action research in the past decade,[2] and organization development's philosopher stone.[3] Summing up AI is difficult—it is a philosophy of knowing, a methodologyfor managing change, an approach to leadership and human development. Here is a practice-oriented definition:

Appreciative inquiry is the cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives a system "life" when it is most effective and capable in economic, ecological, and humun terms. AI involves the art undpructice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to

heighten positive potential. It mobilizes inquiry through crafting an "unconditional positive question" often involving hundreds or sometimes thousands of people. In AI, intervention gives way to imagination and innovation; instead of negation, criticism, and spiraling diagnosis there is discovery, dream, and design. Al assumes that every living system has untapped, rich, and inspiring accounts of the positive. Link this "positive change core" directly to any change agenda, and changes never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilized.

The positive change core is one of the greatest and largely unrecognized resources in change management today. The most important insight we have learned with AI to date is that *human systems grow toward what they persistently ask questions about.* The single most important action a group can take to liberate the human spirit and consciously construct a better future is *to make the positive change core the common and explicit property of all.*

The Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle

The AI cycle can be as rapid and informal as a conversation with a friend or colleague, or as formal as an organization-wide process involving every stakeholder. While there is no formula for Appreciative Inquiry, most organization change efforts flow through the 4-D cycle (see figure below). Each AI process is homegrown-designed to meet the unique challenges of the organization and industry involved.

At AI's heart is the *appreciative interview*. The uniqueness and power of an AI interview stem from its fundamentally affirmative focus. Appreciative interviews uncover what gives life to an organization, department, or community when it is at its best. They discover personal and organizational high points, what people value, and what they hope and wish for to enhance their organization's social, economic, and environmental vitality.

Discovery

The core Discover Phase task is disclosing positive capacity. AI ignites this "spirit of inquiry" through the interviewing process. When asked how many people should be interviewed or who should do the interviews, we increasingly say "everyone" because in the process, people reclaim their ability to admire, to be surprised, to be inspired. What distinguishes AI at this phase is that every question is positive. As people throughout a system connect to study qualities, examples, and analysis of the positive core-each appreciating and everyone being appreciated-hope grows and community expands.

From Discovery to Dream

An artist's imagination is kindled not by searching for "what is wrong with this picture" but by being inspired by those things worth valuing. Appreciation draws our eye toward life, stirs our feelings, sets in motion our curiosity, and inspires the envisioning mind. The Dream Phase uses interview stories and insights discovered through the interviews. People listen together to moments when the organization was "alive," and the future becomes visible through ideals interwoven with actual experiences.

Design

Once the strategic focus or dream is articulated (a vision of a better world, a powerful purpose, and a compelling statement of strategic intent), attention turns to creating the ideal organization, a design of the system in relation to its world. One aspect differentiating Appreciative Inquiry from other planning methodologies is that future images emerge through grounded examples from an organization's positive past. Good-news stories are used to craft possibility propositions that bridge the best of "what is" with collective aspiration of "what might be." People challenge the status quo as well as common assumptions underlying the organization's design. They explore: "What would our organization look like if it were designed to maximize the positive core and accelerate realizing our dreams?" When inspired by a great dream we have yet to find an organization that did not feel compelled to design something very new and very necessary.

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Destiny

We used to call the fourth "D" Delivery. We emphasized planning and dealing with conventional implementation challenges. Then we discovered that momentum for change and long-term sustainability increased the more we abandoned "delivery" ideas of action planning, monitoring progress, and building implementation strategies. Instead, we focused on giving AI to everyone and stepped back. Organizational change needs to look more like an inspired movement than a neatly packaged or engineered product. We call it the path of positive protest or a strategy for positive subversion-it is virtually unstoppable once up and running.

Applying the 4-D Cycle

Two totally different approaches to applying the 4-D cycle AI are emerging. One says get the whole system into the same room. We have called this the AI Organizing Summit (like climbing to the peak of the Himalayas). The other says let the whole thing out of the room-make the later phases more web-like, more self-organizing, more like a social movement. It is an autopoietic network structure within a bureaucracy.[4] The first, the summit, is a modality that often results in "home runs" and strong relational ties. The second appears to be built on "the strength of weak ties" and "small wins." Both have led to huge momentum.

Roles, Responsibilities, and Relationships

The role of an organization's leadership is that of *Positive Change Catalyst*—to plant the AI seed and to let it grow in its own way, in its own time. Leaders are invited to participate equally as one of the many essential voices at the table. Given the opportunity to listen to and hear the creative ideas, hopes, and dreams of their colleagues and organization stakeholders, leaders recognize that their greatest job is to get out of the way. Once the positive revolution begins, what it needs most is affirmation and a clear pathway for experimentation and innovation. AI is a high-participation process that once begun continues in remarkable ways, with remarkable results.

The consultant's role in AI is that of *Agent of Inquiry.*[5] It includes four aspects:

- To view organizations as living spiritual-social systems, mysteries of creation to be nurtured and affirmed, not as mechanistic or scientific operations with problems to be solved;
- To work in the affirmative, continually seeking to discover what gives life to the organization and its members;
- To be facilitators of possibilities, hope, and inspired action;
- To continually seek ways to give the process away, to support organization members in making it their own.

The primary role of an Appreciative Inquiry participant is that of *Student of Organizational Life*. AI engages all levels and stakeholders in a cooperative learning and co-creation process. To be a Student of Organizational Life emphasizes curiosity and learning in the most pragmatic ways possible. The best of what has been and what is possible can be linked to inspired action. Future dreams are grounded in reality and hence believable.

Stewardship of an organization-wide Appreciative Inquiry generally rests with a *Core Team* selected for diverse backgrounds, functional experience, and organizational responsibility. The Core Team oversees the process, monitoring its overall impact.

Appreciative Inquiry and Power in Organizations

In our view the problem-solving paradigm, while once perhaps quite effective, is out of sync with the realities of today's virtual worlds.[6] Problem-solving approaches to change are painfully slow (always asking people to look backward to yesterday's causes). They rarely result in new vision (a problem, implicitly, assumes an ideal, so we are not searching for new knowledge but are searching for how to close gaps). Finally, problem approaches generate defensiveness and separation among people (it is not my problem but yours).

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Our real concern is with power, control, and ways the problem-solving paradigm limits human potential. In particular, our concern is with more consciously linking the use of language to human potential and change. Words do create worlds-even in unintended ways. From a constructionist perspective, words do not mirror the world out there; they coordinate our actions. Professional languages function like tools. When I gave my son a hammer, inevitably everything became a nail. What happens when the "scientific" human-deficit vocabularies become everyone's tool kit? In particular, scholars have documented that deficit-based change approaches reinforce hierarchy, erode community, and instill a sense of self-enfeeblement.[7]

It is not problem-solving methodologies per se that are of concern, but that we have taken the tools a step further. Somewhere this shift happened: It is not that organizations have problems, but that they are problems. Once accepted as fundamental truth, change management becomes infused with a deficit consciousness. For example, "Action-research is both an approach to problem-solving, a model or paradigm, and a problem-solving process."[8]

Tough questions remain about power and deficit discourse. Our hypothesis is that when AI is conducted as a whole systems approach moving through the 4-D Cycle, the positive core becomes the explicit and common property of all. In every case there is movement toward a greater equality and less hierarchy. Inevitably, post-bureaucratic organization designs that distribute power and liberate human energy emerge.

Conditions for Success

Appreciative Inquiry works best when there is a high level of *process integrity*, where the means and the ends are the same. If an organization wants greater cooperation across functional lines, greater employee commitment and responsibility, and faster cycle time, the process must engage people in interviews across functional lines, involve employees in making decisions and determining the process, and do it faster than usual.

Telling their stories and being witnessed by other people is an exceptionally transforming experience.

Human change integrity also contributes to AI's success. This is the capacity for system members to be, in Gandhi's words, "the change they want to see." AI impacts personal, relational, and organizational performance profoundly and simultaneously. As individuals are interviewed, they experience unfamiliar validation and support. Telling their stories and being witnessed by other people is an exceptionally transforming experience. At the relational level, the interview taps a human longing to experience and recognize meaningful connections. Once discovered, the stories, the shared experience, and the connection become part of the individuals' and the organization's identities. With AI, the organization, its members, and stakeholders transform simultaneously in relation to one another.

Perseverance in change is another success criterion. Change is life itself, not an event. At its best, AI leaves greater organizational capacity to change through inquiry, sharing stories, relationship-enhancing communication, and cooperative innovation. We do not leave organizations in a final state called effectiveness or excellence. We persist in being open to learning, discovering new possibilities for understanding and performance, and sharing our best with others to raise the collective standard of living within our organizations and on the planet.

Creating *narrative-rich communication* ensures a fertile field for success. In contrast to memos, plans, and policies, Appreciative Inquiry works into the organization's communication through storytelling, testimonials, and large-group forums. AI taps into the organization's inner dialogue-the stories that members tell about themselves and their organization. In effect, sharing best practices, magic moments, and life-giving experiences is how organizing occurs. Through narrative-rich communication, best practices are disseminated and enhance enthusiasm and the sense of well-being. When appreciative stories "have wings" and fly around, the capacity for change and high performance expands.

Inquiry and dialogue create rich anticipatory images. AI is based on the principle that our future images guide our present performance. Where the images are hopeful and expansive, organization performance and personal motivation are generally high. Where the images are depressed or deficient, morale tends to be low and turnover high. By fostering the discovery and sharing of success stories-past and imagined-AI invites affirmation and expansion.

Theoretical Basis

AI accelerates organization breakthroughs. Changes never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilized when people constructively adopt the power of the positive core and simply *let go* of negative accounts.

But then the question is always voiced, "But what do we do with the *real* problems?"

To address this question in anything other than Pollyannaish terms, we need to comment on the work that inspired AI. Five principles central to AI's theory base are discussed below:

The Constructionist Principle: Human knowledge and organizational destiny are interwoven. To be effective, we must understand organizations as living, human constructions.

We are constantly involved in working to understand the world around us-doing strategic planning, environmental scans, audits, surveys, and so on. Constructionism replaces the *individual* with the *relationship* as the locus of knowledge by valuing the power of language to create our sense of reality.

Inquiry is inseparable from action. Its purpose is to create "generative theory." Rather than explaining yesterday's world, it articulates tomorrow's possibilities.

The Principle of Simultaneity: Inquiry and change are not separate moments but are simultaneous. Inquiry is intervention. The seeds of change-the things people think and talk about, the things people discover and learn, and the things that inform dialogue and inspire images of the future-are implicit in the first questions we ask. They set the stage for what we "find." What we "discover" (the data) becomes the stories out of which the future is conceived. Therefore, one of the most impactful actions a change agent takes is to articulate questions.

One great myth is that first we analyze, and then we decide on change. Not so, says the constructionist view. Even the most innocent question evokes change-even if reactions are simply changes in awareness, dialogue, feelings of boredom, or laughter. When we consider that inquiry and change are a simultaneous moment, it is no longer, "Is my question leading to right or wrong answers.?" but rather, "How does my question impact our lives together? Is it generating conversations about the good, the better, the possible?"

The Poetic Principle: Human organizations are like open books. An organization's story is constantly being co-authored. Pasts, presents, and futures are endless sources of learning, inspiration, and interpretation- like the endless interpretive possibilities in a good poem. The implication is that we can study any topic related to human experience. We can inquire into the nature of alienation or joy, enthusiasm or low morale, efficiency or excess, in any human organization.

"But what do we do with the real problems?"

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Constructionism reminds us that the "world out there" doesn't dictate our inquiries; rather, the topics are products of social processes (cultural habits, rhetoric, power relations). AI makes sure we are not just reproducing the same words over and over again through simple and boring repetition of our questions (not one more morale survey!). AI also says, with excitement, that there are great gains in linking the means and ends of inquiry. For example, in talks with great leaders in nongovernmental organizations (Save the Children, World Vision), we have begun to appreciate the profound joy the CEOs feel as "servant leaders." This positive orientation plays a profound role in creating healthy organizations. Does this mean that joy has something to do with good leadership? Why aren't we including this topic in our change efforts? What might happen if we did?

The Anticipatory Principle: Our positive images of the future lead our positive actions- this is the increasingly energizing basis and presupposition of Appreciative Inquiry.

The infinite human resource we have for generating constructive organizational change is our collective imagination and discourse about the future. The image of the future guides any organization's current behavior. Much like a movie projector to a screen, human systems are forever projecting expectations ahead of themselves. The talk in hallways, the metaphors and language, bring the future powerfully into the present as a mobilizing agent. Inquiring in ways that redefine anticipatory reality-creating positive images together-may be the most important aspect of any inquiry.

In studies of positive imagery from athletics, research into relationships between optimism and health, placebo studies in medicine, and studies of the Pygmalion dynamic in the classroom, the conclusions are converging on something Aristotle said long ago: "A vivid imagination compels the whole body to obey

The Positive Principle: Our experience is that-building and sustaining momentum for change requires large amounts of positive outlook and social bonding-things like hope, excitement, inspiration, caring, camaraderie, sense of urgent purpose, and sheer joy in creating something meaningful together. We find that the more positive the question we ask, the more long-lasting and successful the change effort.

Sustaining the Results

Results generated through Appreciative Inquiry are immediate, often surprisingly dramatic and broad in scope, touching personal as well as whole-system transformation and enhancing organization performance, productivity, and profitability.

The key to sustaining high participation, enthusiasm and morale, inspired action, and organizational agility and innovation lies in an organization-wide commitment to becoming an Appreciative

Inquiry Organization (AIO). Sustainability depends on consciously and strategically reconstructing the organization's core processes - human resources, management, planning, and measurement-in alignment with the AI principles and methodologies.

As AI's principles and methodologies become embedded in daily practices, the organizational capacity to sustain high levels of participation and enthusiasm increases. For example, at one AIO, all meetings begin with a brief inquiry into "magic moments"-times of extraordinary success among members. Other organizational enactments of AI include annual strategic planning summits, appreciative interviewing as an employee-orientation process, appreciative feedback, and affirmatively focused measurement systems.

Perhaps our inquiry must become the positive revolution we want to see in the world. Albert Einstein's words clearly compel: "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."

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