

**Appreciative
Inquiry**
as a
Daily Leadership
Practice

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Appreciative Inquiry as a Daily Leadership Practice

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FOREWORD

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The literature on Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has grown consistently and dramatically over the past three decades since being introduced. From thick and thin primers on the foundational principles and the “4 (or 5!) D” intervention model to contextual applications (coaching, churches, six-sigma, program evaluation, outdoor education, peace initiatives, healthcare, communities, education, military, and numerous corporate case studies), this body of applied scholarship has broadened and deepened our understanding of how strength-based, positive change can enable flourishing at the individual, group, and larger system levels. In this contribution to the AI literature, authors Luc Verheijen, Saskia Tjepkema, and Joeri Kabalt add significantly to this trajectory. Specifically they deepen our awareness of how to “be” in appreciative inquiry (not just “do,” “apply,” or “follow” it) and they broaden our perspectives on how to adapt, flex, or even play with the foundational ideas, beyond the now “traditional” discovery-dream-design-destiny flow of activity.

There is much to glean from this work, whether you are a practiced expert in AI or a novice, a facilitator or a manager, or reading from personal or professional curiosity. I am grateful to the authors for the opportunity to share (in no particular order) a few of the things that stand out most to me; my personal view of some “gems” embedded in these pages.

Shift in Focus from Positivity to Generativity

I appreciate the authors’ strong assertion that, in their experiences with AI, it has become more and more apparent that the intention or purpose of applying AI principles is *not* to make people feel better; to experience more positive emotions. Rather, the focus on positivity (positive images attract positive action) is a means to an end – a necessary ingredient for generative connections that ignite sustainable collaboration. A generative connection is a unique emergence of ideation in a space where those coming up with new ideas *also* connect in a way that makes them want to work on those ideas

further. They self-organize and “own” taking initiative instead of waiting to be given permission or to be delegated a follow-up task. Several of the authors’ stories reveal this remarkable potential with AI where stakeholders, who otherwise would not be asking for more work or added responsibility, in fact, come out of an “AI experience” having volunteered to take on more responsibility and do more work to achieve a shared desired future outcome. In my humble opinion, it is paramount for the worldwide community of AI practice to understand this distinction. The amazing force of positivity, supported now by nearly two decades of scientific research,¹ is in service of an experiential outcome where generative collaboration emerges through self-managed, multi-stakeholder groupings. The work with AI is therefore not about positivity as much as it is about fostering generative collaborations.

The Generative Power of Stories

Staying with the theme of generativity, the numerous examples shared in this work all point to the generative power of story-seeking, story-telling, and story-listening. The authors model this in the way they weave all kinds of stories throughout the text. I love the richness of many of the stories in this book that expose more of the inner experience of managers and leaders while and after they engaged with AI. Each account paints a new canvas for the reader to imagine additional possibilities; *not* a best solution or expert advice on how AI should be conducted. Narratives have always been deeply rooted in AI practice² and with the advent of neuroscience we are beginning to learn more about why sharing good stories might enhance cooperation, trigger compassion, and foster a helping orientation through the release of the hormone Oxytocin when we listen to a good story.³

Generative Space

I have often thought of working with AI as if choreographing collaborative spaces. While my focus has been mainly on the interactive nature of that “space” the authors here go further and deeper into the design of spaces for human systems to flourish within. They look at the meaning of space from a relational, physical and aesthetic perspective. They describe often how they improvise in the moment to create special cues and emotional reactions to accompany the task or issue being discussed or explored. This mindful attention to a holistic construct of “space” is a unique gift from this book.

Emergence over Form

As the authors blend case examples and stories with interpretive concepts, they weave a tapestry for us that sends another important message, perhaps “between the lines.” They do state that working with AI cannot and should not be formulaic, as if putting people through fixed steps or a rigid sequence of conversations. But the way they go back and forth between planning and designing prior to an AI intervention, and then flexing and improvising during said intervention communicates an even deeper message. To be truly in a stance of inquiry – and never forget AI is about a type of inquiry – we must be open to emergence, open to new ideas, meanings, perspectives we did not have prior. Even the classic AI Cycle of Definition, Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny, while logically based on the foundational principles, can easily be experienced as a forced march toward predictive outcomes. In fact, as the authors’ examples boldly imply, the conversations in each of these so-called phases *should* lead to unpredicted, surprising, or even unsettling outcomes. Otherwise we are not learning from the inquiry at hand. Through this message about valuing emergence, this is the first book (to my knowledge) that connects the practice of AI with the ideas of organizing as Complex Responsive Processes. Influenced by the works of Ralph Stacey and his notions of complexity,⁴ this perspective of so-called human systems boils down to this; the root of all organizing lies in conversations, each with its own unique flow of gestures and responses. One may begin with a gesture (assertion or question) that has intention or even predictability behind it, but once the response is given, the parties in the conversation are now in uncharted waters. Shared meanings, differences, conflicts, agreements, etc. *emerge* from this complex and uncontrollable interplay of gesture and response. This aligns strongly with the social constructionist principles underlying AI from its inception; words create worlds, questions are fateful, and to change something, begin by changing the way you are conversing about it.

This may be the most important contribution from this book – a bold calling (not just a reminder) that in order to “be” or to embody AI, we must also be truly open to emergence. That means to expect it in our planning and design of AI activities, and to flex with it or lean into it once we are in those generative spaces. This is important for both the AI practitioner and the participants, or co-inquirers. Appreciative Inquiry is about inquiring into

something we desire from a lens that values strengths and positive anticipatory images. In that inquiry, we appreciate or value sincerely all that emerges. This book is full of suggestions, examples, and ideas about how to be in this frame of mind and action. By underscoring and appreciating the power of emergence, the authors draw our attention to the idea of *anticipatory learning* that can (only) come from generative connections – the real promise of AI.

[1] cf Fredrickson, B. (2009) *Positivity: Ground-Breaking Research Reveals How to Embrace the Hidden Strength of Positive Emotions, Overcome Negativity and Thrive*. Random House: New York

[2] Barrett, F & R. Fry (2005) *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive approach to Building Cooperative Capacity*. Taos Publications: Chagrin Falls, OD.

[3] Zach, P. J. (2015) "Why Inspiring Stories Make Us React: The Neuroscience of Narrative." *Cerebrum*, Jan-Feb: 2

[4] Stacey, R. (2001) *Complex Responsive Processes in Organizations*. Routledge: London

INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND AND STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

“The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made, and the activity of making them, changes both the maker and the destination.”

– John Schaar (1928-2011)

As a leader, there is always something new you want to achieve with your organization and team. It may be a new way of working, improved collaboration with another department, a change of focus for the whole organization, a fresh approach to external collaboration, a more innovative culture, or...

How do you approach your goal in such a way that it leads to sustainable change? How do you ensure that the process itself is energizing for you and all the other people involved? And how can you access and make use of all of the knowledge and experience of your organization or team, and create co-ownership of the change?

Organization and team development have increasingly become everyday components of a leader’s role. Sometimes, they concern organization-wide changes with a distinct beginning and end – a program-like change in which you are called upon to take an active role, as being responsible for the implementation or as a pioneer. Even more interesting are those developments that emerge from your own vision and drive: improvements that don’t translate into a dedicated, explicit change program, but that you seek to implement in and on the job, in everyday practice.

This book is aimed at informal and formal leaders who aspire to get things done; to realize meaningful changes in everyday practices that will lead to a better performance and at the same time contribute to a vitalizing and energizing working environment. These types of change processes often cannot be planned or controlled in detail, but they can be initiated with intent and be supported and encouraged from your position as a leader.

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an approach to change that has increasingly gained ground. Developed in the USA, the practice of AI with its worldwide recognition as a refreshing theory and method of change, has also grown more and more in Europe in the past decade. It is a perspective, a way of looking or even a way of *being* in your job that focuses on what gives life, on opportunities and on generative energy. It is an approach that is more developmental than strictly change-oriented. It draws on capacities and strengths. Rather than implementing, it focuses on continuously inquiring, experimenting and playing around with new ideas. It sees organizing and changing as relational processes: *doing together* through powerful collaborative relations, active engagement and by entering into continuous dialogue – internally and externally. This vision and approach enables leaders to bring about smaller or larger changes *with* the involvement of employees, clients, and other stakeholders.

An essential starting point of Appreciative Inquiry is that change happens one conversation at a time. The big change happens in the small moment. And the small moments become the bigger movement. This provides opportunities and leads one to view every day and even every encounter as an opportunity for the desired development to come into being. It presupposes a specific way of looking at leadership and change with an accompanying repertoire that includes leading by asking questions, encouraging and supporting exactly those initiatives where change is beginning to happen, and catalyzing the energy and ideas that are already present amongst employees.

We are very enthusiastic about Appreciative Inquiry, both as change theory, and as a daily management practice. We observe and note that in many instances this way of working enables people to develop exceptional and surprising innovations, in a way that fuels pride and job satisfaction, while strengthening mutual connectivity, leading to more effective and healthier work places.

THIS BOOK

This book is titled *Appreciative Inquiry as a daily leadership practice*. It offers lessons from the field to help expand manager's capacities to bring out the best in people while organizing for a common good. Our purpose is to inspire

leaders, whether formal or informal, to develop their daily practices from an Appreciative Inquiry perspective. To live the underlying principles and to realize that change happens one conversation at a time. The book intends to support you as a companion on your route to applying Appreciative Inquiry in your own way.

By combining a theoretical perspective with an abundance of examples and practical ideas and guidelines, we hope to provide a helpful instrument and source of inspiration and understanding. We added personal vignettes: portraits of leaders who consciously or unconsciously apply and live Appreciative Inquiry principles or methods. We offer examples of intentional change interventions that increase levels of energy and inspiration – for example: articulating an affirmative topic for the intended change, organizing round table sessions during which staff members can exchange success stories, or creating change through designing a cycle of experiments. We also reflect on what you can do in your daily work practice in conversations with fellow workers – think of performance reviews, team meetings and casual conversations that happen near the coffee machine.

We draw upon published literature and research in the field, on our own experience as consultants, coaches and interim-managers, on stories and experiences of people we've worked with and conferences that we've attended and co-organized with fellow professionals. In the past years, we followed a steep learning curve on Appreciative Inquiry and Appreciative Leadership; through applying, talking, thinking and reading about it, and now through writing about it. This book was published in Dutch by Boom Publishers, Amsterdam, in the spring of 2016. To our wonder and with gratitude, the book has found its way to many readers in our region and has been reprinted several times since its initial publication. Encouragement from good friends and colleagues has led to the translation and this publication of the English version by Taos Institute Publications.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

This book contains five sections. In every section you will find several short chapters. These can be read in any order and each contains a distinct perspective on the theme. You can browse through the book and just read the chapters that catch your eye, or if you would prefer to read the book from cover-

to-cover, that is most certainly possible as well. Our key point is: the book is not a step-by-step guide. Rather it is a collection of ideas and examples of AI in practice that we hope will help any reader to begin to experiment, inquire, and develop as an Appreciative Leader.

In the first section, we outline our perspective on Appreciative Inquiry and its foundations. What is it? Where does it come from? What makes it relevant? And which perspectives on leadership and change is it rooted in? This first section (by far the longest) has a different, more reflective and theoretical character than the other sections, and as such it lays the groundwork for what follows. If you would like to understand our viewpoints on Appreciative Inquiry, and/or if you are new to AI, it might be useful to read this first.

In section two we focus on the underlying principles and most significant mechanisms of Appreciative Inquiry. How do you come to an appealing direction or image as the starting point for a change? How do you orchestrate change in such a way that it gives space for others to contribute? Who do you include as fellow inquirer or designer of the change process? How can you deal effectively with so called negative emotions such as resistance and fear?

The third section zooms in on the good conversation as one of the most important ingredients of Appreciative Inquiry. Conversational practices are at the heart of AI. How do you create conversations during which new ideas surface and energy for action emerges? How do you recognize them? As a leader how do you encourage these conversations? How can you use the strength of generative questions and stories? How can you lead the process from talk to action?

The fourth section has a more practical focus. What concrete forms or methods could you use to apply Appreciative Inquiry? How do you encourage people to enter into conversations on what works well and what provides energy in your team or organization? How do you use the past as a stepping stone for transformation? How do you collectively envision the desired future or change direction? How can you entice people to make a start with their own experiments in their work setting?

In the fifth section we address what is specifically required of you as a leader or facilitator of change. How can you honestly realize the true potential of

people and groups you work with? How can you encourage people to progress in small steps? How do you give enough space to others, while you continue to aim for the bigger change that you envision as a leader? How do you focus your attention?

We conclude the book with an epilogue, written by Dr. Rene Bouwen, emeritus professor at the Catholic University Leuven and a pioneer of Appreciative Inquiry. He puts the appreciating-inquiring approach in a broader frame of social learning and organizing processes.

We hope you enjoy the book and that you will find new and inspirational ideas for your own leadership practice.

By Luc Verheijen, Saskia Tjepkema and Joeri Kabalt,
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