"An evaluation of 'Appreciative Inquiry' as a methodology for maximizing the potential of people and organisations".

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a strategy for change based on the idea that focusing on what works within organisations, communities and individuals instead of what is not working, leads to a new and a better future. Its earliest theorists date back to the 1970s. The original theory has been further developed by David Cooperrider of Case Western Reserve University, Frank Barrett and Suresh Srivasta in the 1980s, to whom we owe much of the literature on the topic. Since then a centre for research and practice in social construction and AI has been set up in New Mexico, and a number of conferences have been devoted to this approach to organisational development. Although AI is practiced by a number of international organisations, it is still more widely used in the United Stated although it is spreading steadily this side of the Atlantic. I came across this theory a few years ago in an effort to make my training and coaching / mentoring practice more effective and I have been using it in many different situations and environments. This essay aims at evaluating this approach in the light of the extensive work conducted over the years by a number of organisational development practitioners and of my personal practice.

The knowledge base that supports AI comes from many different fields such as medicine, sport and anthropology. In the field of medicine for instance, predominantly in Eastern cultures, it has been recognized that the mind has the power to heal the body. Western cultures are also beginning to accept that patients can show improvements simply by believing that they are given the right treatment. In the field of education, experiments have been conducted in classrooms to demonstrate the power that another person's image, the teacher, has in shaping students' performance. Interesting experiments have been conducted in sport too, all leading to similar conclusions that our minds seem to be better equipped to act on the positive rather than on the negative. AI builds on Positive Thinking theories and on the science of Positive Psychology and its applications are very wide ranging.

 The words 'Appreciative' and 'Inquiry' are fundamental in the development process of individuals and organisations. The term appreciative has to do with valuing and recognizing the best in anything. By singling out those elements that have been essential for past and/or present successes, be they assets, strengths or indeed potential and by bearing in mind how they change over time and according to different circumstances, organisations can move forward as they become aware of the solid base they are working from. The second word is inextricably linked to the first in that fundamental to appreciating is the ability to explore and discover new possibilities stemming from those very successes or from new ones. AI utilizes a cycle of 4 distinct stages for achieving this.

'Discovering' is the first stage of the process and is aimed at identifying what gives life and blood to the organisation; the second phase, called 'Dreaming', consists in envisioning what would work well in the future, whereas the third stage, 'Designing', is about planning and prioritizing the processes. The final stage, 'Delivering', is to do with implementing those processes.

This cycle can be applied to any development process as it assumes that every living system has many rich, inspiring and untapped accounts of the positive however, it is in the field of organisational development that it has made its mark because the AI process represents a very powerful way of making change happen, grounded as it is on reality rather than wishful thinking. The recalling and the understanding of real examples of past successes set the scene for visualizing what could be a possible future and for acting in order to achieve it. Through a guided process of appreciation and inquiry, individuals shift their attention from analysing problems to affirming their own strengths, successes and values, those of the organisations they work for and of the communities they belong to. Rather than assuming that the organisation is or has a problem that needs to be solved, individuals focus on their own strengths and ask themselves what works in what they do rather than finding faults in their performance. This accent on the individuals' contribution goes a long way to increasing trust and alignment with the organisation's goals and objectives.

Before considering what the AI approach is bringing to organisations it is worth noting that the term 'organisational development' has changed in meaning since it was first coined in the late 1960's by Beckhard who stated that:

> "Organization Development is an effort planned, organization-wide, and managed from the top, to increase organization effectiveness and health through planned interventions in the organization's 'processes,' using behavioural-science knowledge."

Organisations have changed dramatically since the 1960's and organisational development with it. In the past fifteen years or so the accent has been more on stimulating the conditions that would enable people to give their best by empowering them to take on board responsibilities and by working in a more collaborative way. AI developed back in the 1980's in the midst of all this change. The big innovation that AI brought in terms of organisational development was represented by the shift from the need to solve problems to the need to appreciate what is working.

Before AI, organisational development focused its efforts in finding the problems and in solving them. This is because there is a wide held belief in our society that the way we improve ourselves is by eliminating defects and errors and by solving problems. This way of thinking is also deeply ingrained in the way companies and organisations work as exemplified in executive coaching

practice where coaches are brought into organisations to help executives improve their performance or adapt swiftly to changes. The first thing that occurs in a coaching session is to identify the issues/problems or the goals to be achieved by focusing on the gap between existing and desirable behaviour. Even when training people in how to develop creativity and innovation in the workplace the accent is on problem solving. In fact, trainers and consultants tell us that we need to establish what the issue is before attempting to solve the problem in a creative or innovative way. Edward De Bono, arguably the leading authority in the field of creative thinking, developed a technique called 'The six thinking hats' to look at a problem from six different perspectives. Such technique is widely used in companies and organizations around the world.

It may be argued that focusing on solving problems both at an individual and at an organizational level is called for to respond to the rapid changes brought about by technology which require that individuals adapt and change their behavior by looking forward rather than looking backward. This seems a plausible argument however, the AI process is firmly anchored in all the interviews and conversations (first stage of the cycle) conducted with the people making up the organization, which are serving to construct the future. In AI, looking back also serves the purpose of examining ways in which similar problems may have been approached and solved successfully in the past. This can best be exemplified by a case study. One of my mentees needed some help with networking. When we first discussed it, she considered it a big problem that hindered her from progressing in her career. She was very adamant she lacked those social skills indispensable to good networkers. Rather than focusing on the 'perceived problem', I asked the mentee to recall ways in which she had been making friends. I asked her to think about her university days and beyond. That very simple exercise brought her to realize that she had made a good number of friends over the years and that she made them mainly through finding out commonalities with them. We then consider how those 'positive' experiences could be translated into the world of work and into networking effectively with colleagues and potential clients. Fuelled by the positive experiences she had in the past, it did not take long for my mentee to adopt a different mind-set and consider networking less of a problem and more of a search for commonalities with the people she encountered.

The AI cycle can be as rapid as informal as in this example or as formal as an organization wide analysis that involves all stakeholders, from customers to suppliers, staff and executives. With AI organizations open up to the positive core, to strengths, achievements, values, stories and passions in order to proceed to their systematic inquiry. In our daily lives and in those of the organizations we work for we tend to celebrate our victories but rarely stop to think about the causes of those victories or successes. Considering we can learn both from what goes right as from what goes wrong,

it is interesting to note that most debriefings skip over what caused the achievements and dwell instead on the causes of failure. In an article appeared recently in 'The Observer' there was a reference to the economic bounce-back that Germany is currently experiencing being due to '… its respect for manufacturing and a backbone of small- and medium-sized firms….'. The author of the article went on to comment that in Germany the business culture has profound respect for manufacturing and strives to maintain excellence in the products produced by a core of small and medium-sized firms. This may arguably be a case of AI in action within a country. By appreciating what is working well and by learning from previous recessions, Germany has been able to bounce back from the present recession quite successfully. Looking now at Britain and how it is wading itself out of recession, one may see a different approach, one that does not build on its successes but is intent on starting from scratch with new policies and a new vision. Admittedly, this could be considered a very reductive and simplistic statement however, it is certainly a good topic for closer examination and study.

A country such as Britain is a living organism and organisations are organisms within it. If things are not working, it is not the fault of the country but of the people that run it. I often ask myself how it is it that a number of leaders of successful organisations, once able to steer them to success now have lost their touch. It would seem that a number of organisations have fallen victim to 'if it isn't broken, why fix it?' While a success or a series of successes may mean that the company or organisation has got it right, it does not mean that is absolutely the case. Investigations on the causes of the success may lead to discovering that the success was perhaps due to chance or that some of the factors may be very hard to replicate. AI stresses the need to put failures and successes on equal footing so as to learn from both and also ask to beware of 'solid' truths and core assumptions. In organisations, the ability to articulate faults and problems is generally more prized than the ability to appreciate achievements. AI asks organisational leaders and managers as well as HR to critically examine this need to be hypercritical and to focus more on generating actions leading to better prospects and a better future.

The 'generativity' power of AI has been well argued by Bushe (2007) who states that AI is not just about the positive but about generating new ideas. Getting people in organisations to tell their best 'stories' may not lead to much if it is not supported by generative thinking. According to Bushe, it is the notion of 'hope' that fosters action. It is when people realize that they share common images and values that hope kicks in and cynicism is replaced by generativity. The recipe for a productive generative phase of AI is given by a combination of consensus on what the organisation is trying to achieve; on authorizing people to take actions and on creating commitment by everyone involved.

This is not as easy as it may sounds. To carry forward the process just outlined, good facilitators that have the necessary background knowledge of the organisation and good leadership, that keeps track of what is happening are required. AI is not only a method or a technique, it is a mindset that focuses on highlighting the factors and the forces that help nourishing and empowering staff members. Some people may think that AI is just so positive that it almost runs by itself. This is certainly not the case. Politics and competing agendas still need to be managed. AI is not enough in itself as it needs the support of traditional form of organisational development as well as good leadership. In fact, one may argue that it is the quality of leadership that predicts the success of any AI projects.

If good leadership is the prerequisite for AI to work, the language of understanding and appreciation is its engine. Both sciences of sociology and psychology have shed light on the complex relationship between social perception and belief. Our thoughts and beliefs govern what we look for and what we perceive as well as how we interpret what we see. One of the main challenges organisations face is that of integrating the various voices, cultural or otherwise, and appreciate the fact that common interests lie above the interests of any particular group and above personal interest. AI may be capable of providing a process and a language capable of refreshing and enriching our approach to diversity. Take for instance the gender issues in organisations. In my mentoring work with blue chip organisations I often come across issues of gender. Sometime it is to do with existing pay gaps or with the needs of young mothers coming back to work. More often than not though, it is about a perceived glass ceiling and discrimination. One such case involves a young solicitor who claimed the gender problem in law firms was so irredeemable to justify positive discrimination. When confronted with the question of what it took female colleagues to work up the career ladder successfully and reach partnership position, the answer was compromise. The discussion that ensued was about what prompts change and what happens when a woman becomes a member of an all male group.

There are several possibilities. One is that she behaves like one of the boys and accepts their rules. In this case she is treated as an exceptional woman by the group and the culture does not change. The second is that her presence within the group is such that the group dynamic changes and the males give up some of their behaviour or, a third possibility, the woman gets promoted but is not accepted, with the consequence that she may face failure. An AI approach to gender issues and to diversity would lead not only to accepting differences but in truly appreciating them. As the number of women executives and women entering the boardroom increases, the question to be asked is whether they are adapting to the masculine culture or are modifying it. Both men and women find it

difficult to describe or to have a clear image of what a good relationship between sexes would look like. An AI approach would look at the shared, positive history and would then help with visualizing what an excellent working relationship would look like. This process holds a promise for facilitating the level of change that is needed however, we are just at its beginning.

The critical issues for AI in this case as in others is not with the process but with building trust and gaining commitment from all those involved. AI may be perceived as a touch too idealistic an approach as it focuses on the positive dimensions of organisational life, not on the day to day reality. While it is difficult to express how useful AI can be and what an impact it makes in an organisation or community it certainly makes us think about the necessity for organisations to catch up with people's more intuitive way of connecting and creating conditions for emergent and ongoing change.

Despite its increased popularity and its wide range of applications there is little critique available of the strategy. I agree with Bushe who stated that the appreciative process as a consulting and change strategy may have a more lasting impact than AI itself. His consulting style, as well as mine, have undergone a radical transformation in an effort to adopt an appreciative approach. Most of us came from the school that asserted that the first step in a development process is awareness of how bad things are. In my work as a coach /mentor I now focus more on how good things are and I am finding that things happen quicker and that it generates more energy.

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