

Appreciative Inquiry: A New Approach to Change Leadership

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Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was first introduced by David Cooperider and Suresh Srivastva in 1987 in an academic journal. Since that time, the new approach to change has caught on with change practitioners around the world with remarkable results. Why all of the excitement and why does this approach get positive results?

Most management and change models focus on identifying and solving problems and are deficit based. On the other hand, Appreciative Inquiry concentrates on creating a positive future through conversations. Change is created in an AI approach by paying more attention to what is wanted in organization than what is not wanted. This is truly a new way of viewing the world, and is often difficult for those of use schooled to use rational, logical approaches to solve problems.

Rather than focusing on solving problems, the AI approach is based on the notion that individuals and organizations evolve toward the highest and best. Therefore, in an AI intervention the attention is on creating a compelling vision of the future for the organization, with the idea that people will evolve toward that vision.

There are five principles underlying Appreciative Inquiry.

1. The Constructionist Principle—the relationship, not the individual, is at the center of knowledge, and how we know, which is through language and discourse, including words, metaphors and narratives, creates our sense of reality. Therefore, how we know is fateful, for it portends what we create.
2. The Principle of Simultaneity—inquiry and change are simultaneous. That is, the moment we ask a question, we are intervening in a system. The questions we ask determine what we will find. Therefore, our attention shifts from whether we are asking the right questions to are our questions helping to generate conversations that strengthen our relationships and create a positive future together?
3. The Poetic Principle—organizations are more like an open book than a machine and the company's story is continuously being told. Therefore, the

topics that we choose to inquire about will impact what we find. There are endless possibilities for what we study and being thoughtful in choosing a topic that revitalizes and releases energy is much more likely to bring about a positive change.

4. The Anticipatory Principle—Placebo studies in medicine and the Pygmalion effect in schools in which children whose teachers expected them to perform at high levels did indicate that what we anticipate manifests itself.
5. The Positive Principle—the more positive the questions that are asked the more successful the change efforts.

The key approach to change in Appreciative Inquiry is to collect stories of people at their best. If the topic is leadership, then stories of leadership at its best are collected. If the topic is customer service, then stories of customer service at its best are collected. These stories are collected early on in the AI process, with pairs interviewing each other regarding personal experiences of the topic at its peak or high point, things valued most about the topic, a core factor that gives life to the unit of analysis and wishes about the possibilities in the future. It is out of this initial topic that topics for an Appreciative Inquiry intervention are designed.

The Appreciative Inquiry Summit is one of several ways to apply the AI methodology. The AI Summit involves a large group of people, 30 to several thousand who participate together in a 3-5 days process. Other applications of AI include a whole system dialogue in which stakeholders within an organization take part in a summit. Sometimes just a core group of people within an organization select the topics, develop the questions and conduct the interviews.

An Appreciative Inquiry process can also be conducted by a small group of people working on a specific project. Another application is a mass mobilized inquiry that includes large numbers of interviews on a socially responsible topic throughout a city, country or world. An example is the Imagine Chicago project in which thousands of interviews were held for the purpose of creating a more livable Chicago.

In the Appreciative Inquiry examples cited, change occurs throughout the inquiry, by generating positive images of the future and focusing inquiry and action on that positive future. Participants develop new and shared meanings through uncovering what is the best in their current experience.

A facilitator using Appreciative Inquiry needs to know how and when to use this approach. For some consultants, AI is a hammer and every client situation is a nail. In an organization in which there are deep grievances, particularly those that are

not publicly expressed, an appreciative inquiry approach would be counter-productive.

There are a number of strengths in the Appreciative Inquiry Approach. First, this method of working unleashes large amounts of positive energy into an organizational system. The work is done by the people in the system, inquiring about what they want more of. Therefore, there is faster buy-in and engagement, and a greater likelihood of innovative solutions. If a practitioner believes that organizations are emerging, self-organizing systems as opposed to “machines,” this methodology supports that view. Also, this method has yielded remarkable results in community, corporate, religious and global settings in groups with seemingly intractable differences. Finally, the popularity of the approach because of its focus on generating a positive view of the future has obviously struck a chord in those that are dissatisfied with a deficit and problem-solving approach to change.

AI requires high levels of empowerment and ownership within the system, or a trust that this will be unleashed during the process. Senior management who are command and control driven would likely not tolerate such a systemic approach. In systems with a lot of repression, a focus on the highest and best could be ridiculed. Finally, given all the attention given to Appreciative Inquiry, a practitioner who is not reflective and deeply schooled in all aspects of organization development could use it to the exclusion of other useful tools and frameworks.

Marcia Ruben, President of Ruben Consulting Group, is a certified management consultant who helps leaders, teams, and companies achieve high performance. Her firm focuses on organizational change management, executive development and coaching. She has worked with leaders of Fortune 500 high technology and financial services companies for over twenty years. Ms. Ruben graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of California, Berkeley, and received her Master’s of Science degree in counseling from California State University. She is currently pursuing her doctorate in Human and Organizational Systems at the Fielding Graduate Institute.