

An Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry

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Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a way of thinking, seeing and acting for powerful, purposeful change in organizations. Appreciative Inquiry works on ***the assumption that whatever you want more of already exists in all organizations***. While traditional problem-solving processes separate and dissect pieces of a system, AI generates images that affirm the forces that give life and energy to a system. David Cooperrider, Suresh Srivastva, Frank Barrett, John Carter, Pam Johnson and others developed the theory at Case Western Reserve University in the seventies.

What kind of problems are you having?

That was often the first question I spoke to my clients when I was an internal organizational development consultant. I looked for “needs” or gaps in skills to help managers fill their gaps or solve their problems. Because I looked for problems, I not only found them but I helped make them bigger than they were before I appeared. After I encountered AI theory, I re-played in my mind many encounters with my internal clients. I realized that I had placed the spotlight on problems that may not have been worrisome before I appeared in my role as the problem-finder. Instead, I should have asked, “What is going well around here? What ideas can you tell me about that I can share with others? How are you documenting your excellence?” My role would then become the facilitator to help determine what conditions made excellence possible and how we could encourage those conditions within the organizational culture.

This table illustrates the difference between the traditional diagnostic model used in Organizational Development and the Appreciative Inquiry model.

TRADITIONAL OD PROCESS

Define the problem
Fix what’s broken
Focus on decay
What problems are you having?

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Search for solutions that already exist
Amplify what is working
Focus on life giving forces
What is working well around here?

Appreciative Inquiry is a complex philosophy that engages the entire system in an inquiry about what works. The inquiry discovers data that is then analyzed for common themes. The group articulates the themes and dreams of “what could be” and “what will be.” *What will be* is the future envisioned through an analysis of the past. The entire system maintains the best of the past by discovering what it is and stretching it into future possibilities. This

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differs from other visioning work because the envisioned future is grounded in the reality of the actual past.

The best way I know how to communicate the basics of AI in a short period of time is to introduce the principles of AI (see Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1990) translated into assumptions. Assumptions are the “rules” that a group follows to make decisions about their behavior or performance (see Argyris for more on assumptions). Many times, assumptions are unspoken or operating at an unconscious level. I believe that the key to all change efforts is the surfacing and examination of working assumptions.

The assumptions of Appreciative Inquiry are:

1. In every society, organization or group, something works.
2. What we focus on becomes our reality.
3. Reality is created in the moment and there are multiple realities.
4. The act of asking questions of an organization or group influences the group in some way.
5. People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known).
6. If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what is best about the past.
7. It is important to value differences.
8. The language we use creates our reality.

This set of assumptions may look reasonable to you but the application of the set may be a challenge. For example, Assumption 4 counters the traditional social research model that the researcher can remain a neutral observer or interviewer. Our very presence in the group changes the group dynamics in some manner. Also the way we word our questions influences the group in some manner (assumption 8).

Imagine the Possibilities

Imagine if your job is to help people and organizations find what they are very good at and help them take action to do more of what they do well? Or imagine structuring who you are based on what you do well instead of trying to change who you are? Or imagine a psychologist working with you in three sessions to make significant progress in your battle with bulimia? All of this is happening in organizations, communities and within individuals. Organizations know it as Appreciative Inquiry; communities call it Asset-Based Development or Appreciative Planning & Action; individuals know it as Solution-Focused Therapy or Brief Therapy.

I can only speak with experience as an organizational consultant but I know that all of us who are using this philosophy are thrilled with the results. We are excited to see that we can help others create a better workplace, community or lifestyle by looking for what works and determining how to do more. When you do more of what works, the stuff that doesn't work goes away. This is almost heresy to our problem-solving identities and we all have felt the resistance. In one Fortune 50 organization, the president heard about AI and with a few choice words reminded people that the only way they ever learned anything was by solving problems. Another Fortune 50 organization adopted appreciative theory with a first step of learning how to ask questions from a positive frame. You can

now find many case studies at the AI Commons, a website maintained by Case Western and dedicated to sharing AI resources.

Appreciative Inquiry truly honors the past and that is another reason it is a wonderful way to help people manage change. Those of us who use it often use the work; “magical” when we describe the power we have experienced. The magic comes from the great relief from participants that the message isn’t about what they’ve done wrong or have to stop doing. It is an affirmation that much is well and ready to be nurtured.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sue Annis Hammond is an organizational development consultant based in Bend, OR. She has over 30 years experience working to help organizations develop constructive corporate cultures that stress innovation. She also heads The Thin Book Publishing Co, which publishes *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry* and other Thin Books™ designed to deliver cutting edge knowledge in an easy to read format. She can be reached at info@thinbook.com. www.thinbook.com.

Note: This article replaces “What is AI” by the author and Joe Hall. That article contained two old phone numbers that were reassigned. Please delete that article if you have it (to save the poor customers who keep getting calls! Thank you.)

Resources

AI Commons: For up-to-date information on AI visit www.appreciativeinquiry.case.edu

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