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**What is Appreciative Inquiry?**

**Appreciative Inquiry - an Overview**

In the words of its creator, David Cooperrider, Appreciative Inquiry, “is about the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organisations, and the relevant world around them.” **Appreciative Inquiry (AI)** was conceived at Case Western Reserve University in 1980 by doctoral student David Cooperrider and his thesis advisor, Suresh Srivastva and since then has become a popular tool in the fields of Community, Organisational and Personal Development.

Appreciative Inquiry suggests that the most energising and quickest route to change is to focus on and explore the positive. Based on the truism that what we give attention to gets bigger, the AI approach suggests that a traditional ‘problem solving’ approach to an issue is both de-energising and involves an unnecessary detour in to the world of ‘what’s wrong’ rather than giving initial focus to ‘what is right’ and the creation of a compelling vision of the future.

AI suggests that we can create reality through our conversations and interactions with others. Through positive dialogues we can co-create inspiring images of what we want, and then build on the positive aspects of what already exists to make change happen. It suggests we build on our strengths, successes, and best practices to envision ‘what could be’ and build a practical and cooperative road-map to deliver the future we want to create.

**Using Appreciative Inquiry**

The AI process involves the framing of ‘unconditional positive questions’ which allow us to appreciate and acknowledge what already is. Once we have a thorough understanding of the best of what is, we can begin to envision a desired future and plan the steps at a community, organisational and personal level to carry us towards the desired future.

The first step is obviously to choose the issue for Inquiry – remembering to phrase it in the positive and not as a problem statement!

***For example:***

* ‘Enable conversations and share information’ *rather than*

X ‘improve poor communication’.

We could even develop this further in to what is called a *Provocative Proposition*. A Provocative Proposition is when we begin to envision and create the desired future. It helps to express, to proposition as if it is already the case.

***For example:***

*We enable motivating conversations and share information to empower team members to make the best decisions they can in every part of their role.*

**The 4 D Process**

Once we have framed our issue for Inquiry, and perhaps developed a *Provocative Proposition*, the **4 Ds** guide us through the AI process step by step:

-**Discovery** – Appreciating the ‘best of what is’

-**Dream** - Envisioning ‘what could be’

-**Design** – Co-constructing ‘what should be’

-**Destiny** – Sustaining ‘what will be’

AI is typically used to explore the positives in organisations *(see case study)* or even across different organisations or groups. However it can also be used to promote reflection and development for individuals and small teams. Some potential sample questions, particularly useful for small teams or individual practitioners, follow *(further examples can be found in Appendix 1):*

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| **Discover – Appreciating the best of what is**   * When do I find pleasure and fulfilment in my work? * When am I performing at my best? In what areas do I excel?  This could be personal, professional practice or business. * Describe a critical incident when you were operating at your best as an example.  Think about what you could see hear and feel. Make your descriptions as vivid as possible. * Tell a story or anecdote that brings an example of your ‘peak performance’ to life. |
| **Dream – Envisioning what could be**   * How can I create these conditions more often? * How can I fully utilise my strengths? * How can I do more of what I love? * What does my ideal way of working look like? |
| **Design – Co-constucting what could be**   * What can I positively influence? What small steps can I take to create this reality? * Who else in the organisation can get involved? * What role do other professionals or support groups play in creating Design? Give specific examples. * Who else needs to be involved? |
| **Destiny – sustaining what will be**   * Developing an action plan and embedding good practice. * A simple action plan could include Start, Stop, Do more of. * Reviewing achievements and appreciating the best of ‘what is’. |

In fact the 4 D process is usually expressed as an iterative cycle rather that a linear, one off process.   
The suggestion being that we are constantly creating and refining.

**Case Study**

At the start of the millennium one of the U.K.'s leading cancer research charities was going through a period of prolific change. It employed thousands of highly skilled and motivated staff in the areas of research and fundraising as well as a small team of Head Office support functions such as Finance,   
IT and HR.

The organisation was highly regarded and attracted some of the most prestigious scientists in the arena of cancer research employing more than one Nobel Prize winner. However, communication between departments was sometimes strained and there was a sense of a ‘them and us’ culture. The organisation wanted to improve communication both within and across departments and create a shared language for the whole organisation. It was agreed that AI could offer a way forward to build on the organisations many strengths. The starting point was for executive board agreed provocative proposition. This was agreed as:

*Our staff are motivated, skilled and supported to win the fight against cancer.*

With a provocative proposition in place the organisation then works through the 4 D process as follows:

**Discover**: ‘Critical incident interviews’ were conducted with staff across all departments to discover what staff valued most about the organisation and what enabled them to perform to the best of their ability.

**Dream**: Some key themes were identified from the Critical incident interviews and volunteers were sought from all departments to attend workshops to help develop a set of ‘Leadership Behaviours’ to inspire performance and contribution from staff at all levels in the organisation.

**Design**: The ‘Leadership Behaviours’ developed by staff at the *Dream* stage were introduced to staff in a series of organisation wide workshops.

**Destiny**: ‘Leadership Behaviours’ were embedded in day-to-day practice as part of regular conversations at 1-2-1s, appraisals, during training and development programs and team meetings etc.

The impact of this journey of appreciative inquiry was to help create a sense of cohesion and community across the organisation. The very process of AI had created dialogues across the organisation that would not have happened otherwise. Likewise by co-creating a shared language, of ‘Leadership Behaviours’ staff within the organisation could acknowledge similarities as well as appreciate differences.

*A further list of potential benefits of AI can be found in Appendix 2.*

**Conclusion**

Appreciative Inquiry is a versatile tool which helps us to acknowledge and explore the positives of our past and present situation to enable us to build towards our desired ideal. It requires a paradigm shift from the traditional problem solving approach and by refocussing our attention to recognise ‘what is right’ rather than ‘what is wrong’ we can create, motivation, momentum and inspiration to move towards the future we want to create.

**Further Resources**

**Book**:

*Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change* by David L. Cooperrider (Author), Diana Whitney

**Articles**:

*Appreciative Inquiry: The Power of the Unconditional Positive Question* by James D. Ludema, David L. Cooperrider, Frank J. Barrett

<http://www.2012waic.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Ludema-Cooperrider-Barrett-goed.pdf>

*The child as agent of Inquiry*  byDavid L. Cooperrider <https://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/uploads/Child_As_Agent.pdf>

**Website**:

*Appreciative Inquiry Commons*: <https://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu>

**Appendix 1**

**Appreciative Interview Protocol**

Appreciative inquiry asks two basic unconditional positive questions:

1. What in this particular setting or context makes organizing possible?

What gives life to our organization and allows it to function at its best?

2. What are the possibilities, latent or expressed, that provide opportunities for even better (more effective and value-congruent) forms of organizing?

Building on these two core questions, a list of questions specific to the topic of inquiry can be developed.

***For example:***

1. Think of a time in your entire experience with your organization when you have felt most excited, most engaged, and most alive. What were the forces and factors that made it a great experience? What was it about you, others, and your organization that made it a peak experience for you?
2. What do you value most about yourself, your work, and your organization?
3. What are your organization's best practices (ways you manage, approaches, traditions)?
4. What are the unique aspects of your culture that most positively affect the spirit, vitality, and effectiveness of your organization and its work?
5. What is the core factor that "gives life" to your organization?
6. What are the three most important hopes you have to heighten the health and vitality of your organization for the future?

**Source**: *Appreciative Inquiry: The Power of the Unconditional Positive Question* by James D. Ludema, David L. Cooperrider, Frank J. Barrett

<http://www.2012waic.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Ludema-Cooperrider-Barrett-goed.pdf>

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**Appendix 2**

**Summary of the Relational Consequences of Appreciation**

1. **Releases Positive Conversation Within the Organization** – Unconditional positive questions ignite a virtual explosion of constructive conversations that refocus an organization’s attention away from problems and toward hopeful, energizing possibilities.
2. **Builds an Ever-Expanding Web of Inclusion and Positive Relationships** – An ever increasing number of voices are included in conversations that highlight strengths, assets, hopes, and dreams. Respect, understanding, and strong relational bonds are formed.
3. **Creates Self-Reinforcing Learning Communities** – As positive vocabularies multiply, people strengthen their capacity to put possibilities into practice. Organizational members learn increasingly sophisticated vocabularies for doing things in new ways.
4. **Bolsters Democracy and Self-Organizing** – Appreciative self-organizing systems are marked by an epistemic stance of liberation, freedom, solidarity, social construction, and a deep appreciation for the miracle and mystery of organizational life.
5. **Provides a Reservoir of Strength and Unleashes a Positive Revolution of Change** – The aim of appreciative inquiry is to discover the organization’s “positive core,” which provides continuity, strength, and stability in the face of turbulence and is also the source of energy for positive innovation and change.

**Source**: *Appreciative Inquiry: The Power of the Unconditional Positive Question* by James D. Ludema, David L. Cooperrider, Frank J. Barrett

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