

What is Appreciative Inquiry?

'Ultimately, Appreciative Inquiry is a methodology for connecting the deepest and best in us and in an organisation, building on instances of positive exceptionality'. – David Cooperrider ¹

What do you think of when you hear 'Appreciative Inquiry'? Do you think of massive community building events? Or perhaps incredibly effective vision building sessions? These are just a couple of applications of a tool that is rapidly becoming the methodology of choice for professionals working in any field related to personal or organisational transformation.

It is easy when hearing the words 'appreciative inquiry' to associate it with group hugs, political correctness and rigidly enforced positivism. However, this is far from the experience that I have had with this tool. I have found incredibly useful both in my consulting work with organisations and communities, but also in my coaching work with individuals. I would like to share with you today a little about the methodology and how it may be helpful for you personally or for your own organisation or group.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) can best be described as a potential based approach that urges us to rediscover and organize the good rather than limit the focus to problem solving. It is grown from the principle that individuals and organizations move in the direction of what they inquire into, and that seeds of organizational change are implicit in the very first questions we ask.² It is also based on the premise that the more we, or an organizational system, can find out about ourselves, the more information and options there are available and therefore the greater likelihood positive transformation can occur.

It is about solutions not problems

As a societal and cultural norm, it is noticeable that we are more interested in focusing on problem solving to what is not working and than looking for solutions that already work. We often feed the critic gourmet meals and starve the rest!' *Angeles Arrien*. David Cooperrider the instigator and chief proponent of AI is often quoted as saying 'Vocabularies of human deficit are the opiates of the masses'.³ Deficit thinking dovetails nicely with the traditional 'mechanistic' view of organizations. This view sees groups and organizations as complicated machines that can be broken into small units or parts. These units or parts are often viewed as either functioning smoothly or acting as if they are broken in need of 'fixing'. Unfortunately, this metaphor allows very little room for the chaos and complexity that is now a constant part of 21st Century personal and professional lives.⁴ It also means that there is a presupposition that there is one 'true' solution to be found if only we paid enough money for it. In my opinion, this idea of there being 'one truth' is its best is an obstacle to creativity and at worst leads to issues of power and rank abuse by consultants and senior managers or leaders. If

one sees that there are in any situation a variety of possible solutions that can be discovered then there is room for greater collaboration, participation and 'ownership' from all the stakeholders in any given system.

Why is AI different?

Appreciative Inquiry is born from more cutting edge theories that see organizations as dynamic, complex, vibrant living entities similar in nature to biological forms.⁵ AI aims to help a system know itself better through a process of sharing stories from the past and present. Through these shared stories, and experiences, a shared vision for the future can be formed. AI assumes that all these experiences and stories, from whatever 'level' of a community or organization are 'valid' and also assumes that the very act of sharing a story institutes a change process in of itself.

AI also assumes that every individual and organization has a 'positive core' and that with a little encouragement this 'core' will naturally begin spread like a benign virus throughout any system. The positive core is the core motivating impulse that helped the organization start, and gives it fuel to continue.

But what about 'organizational shadows'?

In saying this, it should be made clear at this point that AI is not designed to exclude any negativity. In my experience 'shadow parts' will arrive as a natural element of a living system and are vital when trying to develop a strong holistic identity. However, I find it personally more useful as a consultant and coach to have emotions and experiences of pain, disillusionment and defeat arise as part of a positively framed inquiry, than to focus on them to the exclusion of what is working well. In this way, clients (individual and organizational) are in a resourceful emotional state to examine what isn't going well and can experience depression and grief about lost dreams while still holding on to experiences that affirm potentiality and hope.

Incidentally, I find it amazing that consultants will spend hours eliciting supposedly 'deep processes' (usually involving crying) and at the same time will criticize groups for not being 'real enough' if they dare to express hope, happiness and joy.

Where is it used and how?

AI is designed to serve a variety of situations, ranging from individual goal setting, deepening interpersonal relationships and whole system change processes.

AI is particularly useful as a method of including many people in planning change and movement together and in defining or redefining a collective sense of purpose. Time frames range from one-day 'conversations' to four-day 'summits'. It has also been used as a change initiative that cascades through large systems over many months.

It has proven to be a groundbreaking philosophy and tool in situations as diverse as Imagine Chicago Initiative,⁶ and mainstream corporate change processes. AI was also the methodology used at His Holiness the Dalai Lama's conferences with the leaders of global religions.

What exactly happens?

In practice, AI uses meaningful, positive questions in a paired interview format as a main tool. This data then becomes the material out of which the future is conceived and constructed.

Examples of AI Questions that could be applied to the Findhorn Foundation event:

Tell a story about a time when you experienced [insert organisation's name] **at its best** and were proud to be a part of it?

Can you share what inspires you about being part of [.....]

What do you think makes [.....] such a special and unique place?

Example structure of a small scale AI event would involve:

- A. pairs interviewing each other with preset questions
- B. pairs then join other pairs to form small groups and briefly share their stories
- C. Groups then start gather common themes from the interview answers
- D. Groups 'present' to the large group.
- E. From there, depending on the purpose and size of the group there is a movement towards further defining themes and slowly developing 'mission statements'.

In my own work I have used AI for:

- Re-inspiring individuals who are returning to the workforce after a long absence
- Coaching self employed individuals to aspire to greater heights in their business
- Building shared meaning and vision within small teams, committees through to a large ethnically diverse village
- Creating new ways of looking at assessment within college and training environments

- Formulating goals and contracts for students embarking on journeys within a holistic educational environment

Everything in moderation

There is, like many methodologies, a sort of 'evangelical' element that sees 'pure' AI as the answer to everything. It is not. I believe, that the skill of the consultant is to use the presupposition and beliefs behind AI creatively with other approaches, rather than blindly applying it to every situation in the exactly the same way. I personally use AI in combination with a variety of other approaches I have gleaned through over eleven years worth of professional business experience. I always make sure that purpose of my work is to do the most good and the least harm, and focus on sound outcomes that help people and organizations move towards goals and outcomes they have formulated for themselves with my assistance.

Finally...

AI can be an effective tool for personal and organisational transformation. If you wish to understand more about AI and its many applications then visit: appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu and aiconsulting.org

Maggie Buxton

Valued colleagues who have collaborated with me on some of the AI initiatives mentioned in this article include: Ben Fuchs, Joan Wilmot and Robin Shoheit.

¹ As cited in Lee, Sallee, *Appreciative Inquiry "Co Creating Meaning and Values"*, (Shared Sun Organizational Design Studios)

² *ibid*

³ *ibid*

⁴ Wheatley, Margaret, *Leadership and the New Science*

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ www.imaginechicago.org