Appreciative Inquiry, a positive revolution in change

by Bridget Woods

Organisations: problems to be solved or living systems to be celebrated?

Realising inherent potential is the enduring challenge facing business, schools, community leaders and individuals. Much has been written and said about 'people' being the only real source of competitive advantage. Yet, meeting this challenge remains the holy grail of systems thinking, leadership and organisational development.

Many hours and great expense have been spent on 'gap analysis', 'problem-solving', 'identifying weaknesses' and yet surprisingly little effort afforded to identifying strengths, building on existing competencies and working with the whole system. This alternative focus offers much in the way of unfolding inherent potential and releasing new energy. Rather than focusing on the 'deficit' side of a system, this approach seeks to find the forces at work when the system is most alive, creative, and productive. Collaborative appreciative inquiry into these life-giving capacities, inspires members of the community with what is possible based on the 'best of what is', rather than exhausting them with what is problematic, difficult and the 'worst of what is'. It is a process that leads to deep, fast, democratic, unifying, and sustained change.

As David Cooperrider says "We have reached the end of problem solving as a mode of inquiry capable of inspiring, mobilising and sustaining human system change, and the future of OD belongs to methods that affirm, compel and accelerate anticipatory learning involving larger and larger levels of collectivity". Appreciative Inquiry first appeared on the OD horizon in a publication by Cooperrider and Srivastva of Case Western Reserve University, Ohio USA in 1987. Since then, through the medium of many worldwide forums, events, and networks and the extensive and broad application of its philosophy, it has become an approach to change that is fundamentally reshaping the practice of organisational learning, design and development.

Appreciative Inquiry is to the biocentric world of complexity science, systems thinking, and chaos theory what problem solving is to the industrial world of Newtonian science, mechanistic thinking and reductionist theory. It understands organisational life as a complex web of relationships fluctuating between static, chaotic and creative states and producing outcomes that are largely unpredictable. AI strengthens the connectivity and relationships within the web, valuing multiple perspectives, drawing attention to that which sustains, and allowing the creative, innovative and inherent capacity to emerge.

The 4D Cycle
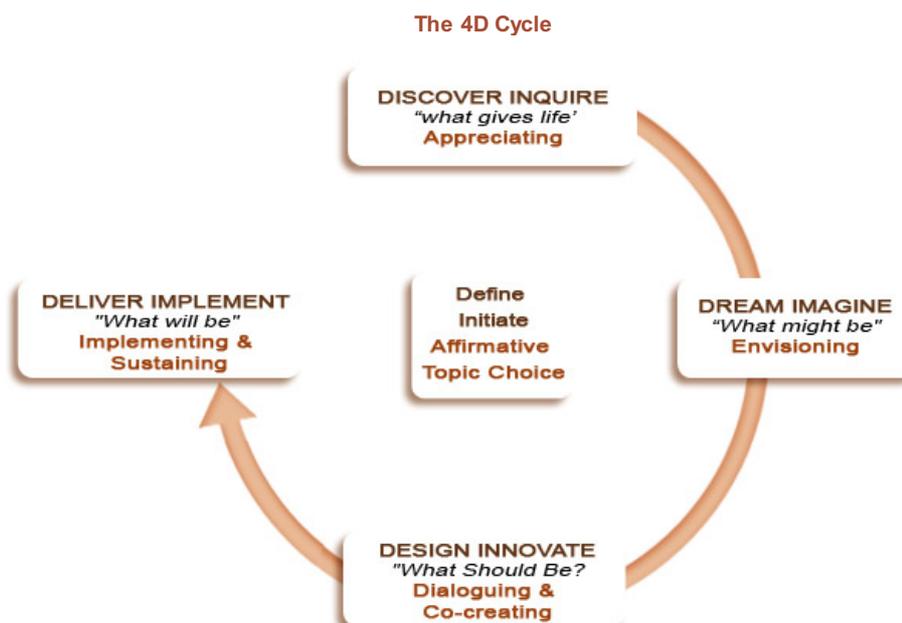
How does Appreciative Inquiry Work?

The process seeks to discover what is of value to each member of the community, to develop a collective vision or dream for the future and to design the systems and structures that will support and deliver the desired organisational community.

At the core of the cycle is Affirmative Topic Choice. An underpinning principle of AI is the 'constructionist' principle: that the beliefs we hold about our world, the way we describe it, the conversations we have with others about it, is in fact what creates our world. It is the self-fulfilling prophecy at work. Careful definition of the topic or central issue is therefore critical. We may need to turn our attention to the desire that lies

beneath the apparent problem. For example, if the 'problem' is cultural intolerance and bigotry in the work place, the deepest desire is not simply to remove the negative expression but rather to encourage an environment where cultural diversity is valued and celebrated. The topic of inquiry becomes 'Valuing Cultural Diversity' and the questions seek to explore where and how vibrant multicultural systems and relationships are thriving. The moment we ask the questions, we bring the system's attention to the topic at hand and the change process has begun. The 'stories' of the nature of such past and existing relationships become the source of future 'best practice' and inspiration for different and more rewarding ways of working together.

The Phases

At the heart of AI is the appreciative interview. The unique power of an AI interview stems from its fundamentally affirmative focus. Questions posed bring people together to seek out, appreciate and study the attributes of their best organisational experience related to the topic of inquiry. Every organisation, no matter how dismal things may appear, has within it strengths and assets that give the system life. We can choose to study alienation, bureaucracy, low morale, and customer complaints or we can choose to study team spirit, innovation, productivity and customer satisfaction - all exist to some extent in every organisational system. As Marcel Proust said, "The real act of discovery lies not in finding new lands but in seeing with new eyes". This then, is the task of the Discovery phase – disclosing positive capacity and valuing the best of what is.

The Dream phase involves the collecting and sharing of people's visions and wishes for the future that have been inspired by the best of what is. This is a powerful vision building process in which everyone has equal voice in crafting a compelling image of what might be. As Peter Senge says, "The bottom line with shared visions is that individuals must have their own visions before a shared vision can exist. If people have no sense of what truly matters to them, the best they can ever do is follow someone else's vision. This is the fundamental distinction between commitment and compliance." (The Art and Practise of the Learning Organisation). At the heart of this process is another AI principle - the anticipatory principle. It is our image of the future that guides our current behaviour; therefore real change requires changes in people's active images of the future and the more positive they are, the more positive the action.

During the Design phase, groups draft provocative and practical propositions that incorporate elements of the ideal organisation, into its strategies, processes, systems and structures in order to craft what should be. Reward systems, learning practices, organisational structures, quality systems, communication processes and so on are designed in support of the ideal. An important aspect of AI is that future images have emerged through grounded examples from the past. The capacity inherent within these examples, is used to bridge the best of what is with the collective aspiration of what might be.

In the Delivery phase people are invited, through self-selected groups, to plan and take action, to co-construct what will be. By expanding dialogue about innovative possibilities, equalising relationships, promoting learning and providing broad access to decision making, appreciative inquiry creates the conditions necessary for self-organising to flourish. The challenge of management is to encourage and support emergent groups that form to plan and commit to action - the same individuals who crafted the design, drive its implementation. Through the Ai process, we are reconnected with our personal vision and our personal capacity to act with others on a collective vision.

When and where is AI applicable?

AI is increasingly appropriate in the new world of work where diverse, flexible, responsive, relationship-based and value-led organisations thrive. NGOs, corporates, and global movements including organisations such as British Airways, John Deere, BP, GTE, UNICEF, Red Cross, the United Religions Initiative, and Imagine Chicago use Appreciative Inquiry to continuously renew their organisations and support their initiatives. In this country we have used AI in a wide range of applications with a number of very different organisations. SA Breweries has embarked on an initiative at all 6 breweries to build individual and organizational resilience with impressive results, Spier recently used an appreciative summit to develop brand values, St Luke's Hospice is successfully developing innovative ways to provide palliative care to exploding numbers of Aids sufferers, a privileged and resource-rich private school created a compelling 2010 vision to serve the greater South African society, merging institutions developed a collaborative charter and an operations consulting team created a strategy for global expansion. In all cases the process has led to innovative thinking, high levels of commitment and sustained ongoing support. But the real gift has been the many and diverse ways the appreciative 'mode of being' has been adopted and built in to every day organisational practices. As psychologist William James said "The deepest longing in every human being is the need to be appreciated". It is this recognition of the value in the other through appreciative conversation, that potential unfolds and work becomes meaningful.

The interview process may be cascaded through the organization, used in focus groups, or piloted in key areas, ensuring that responses and stories are captured and shared and that larger representative groupings come together for the design and implementation work. AI is often at its most powerful when as many diverse representatives of the organisational community as possible, (20 to 500 people) work through the full process at the same time in the same room for 2 – 4 days. This is becoming known as the AI Summit and is increasingly used in transformation processes as a highly effective, fast and unifying approach to whole system design, building on the experience of Future Search and Open Space Technology. Increasingly appreciative inquiry principles are being applied to leadership, coaching, mentoring, and performance 'valuation' processes.

How is AI best supported?

Our organisations are modelled on deficit based management; seeking out and focusing on problems is part of our daily work, we are called on to give answers rather than ask questions, our relationships are competitive rather than collaborative, and we are often so task focused, we lose the meaning of our work and why it is important to us. To the many of us, accustomed to living in an adversarial rather than appreciative world, AI is a strange new language and approach. It takes time and conscious effort to move from the one to the other and it is therefore important to orientate a wide cross section of the organisational community to the principles of appreciative inquiry.

When leaders listen to the multiple points of view, creative ideas, and hopes and dreams of their teams and stakeholders, they are able to redefine their roles in ways that respond to the need. Their support lies in affirming the process, keeping people and teams connected to each other and to the collective vision, while clearing a pathway for experimentation and innovation.

Preparation includes the careful design of the intervention and interview protocol by diverse key stakeholders, and the training of facilitators in AI processes and principles. Post intervention work involves ongoing support and co-ordination from the design and implementation project team/s with particular emphasis on highly effective, widespread 'storytelling' and communication.

What are the results of an AI approach?

Turnover at Nutrimental in Brazil went up by 300%, product quality at Dex, in the USA, improved by 51%, GTE won the 1997 ASTD award for most effective change programme and a prestigious Cape Town school implemented 25 proposals within six weeks after an AI summit. AI offers a fast, unifying, creative and more sustainable approach to change. It accelerates organisation breakthroughs by making explicit core competencies and creating network-like structures that liberate and enable people to connect, collaborate and co-construct a desired future.

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