

## What is Appreciative Inquiry?

Appreciative Inquiry is a strength-based approach to leadership, organisational development and change. It can be used in a range of ways to suit different organisational circumstances and to create positive organisational cultures. Appreciative Inquiry is both a philosophy and a process, which engages organisations in exploring the best of their existing experiences and fostering a sense of collective responsibility for building on this in the future.

## The origins of Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry is built on social constructionism and the power of image. Social constructionism is the theory that our perceived reality is the result of countless human *choices*, rather than laws resulting from divine will or nature. That our world is shaped by the many conversations we have with one another, in which we selectively make sense of our present and past and create shared images of what we anticipate in the future.

The images we hold and the way we use them have enormous power over our future realities. Consider the power of the placebo effect, anywhere from a third to two thirds of all patients will show marked improvement simply by believing they are being given a treatment. The effect is even more powerful if the doctor also believes the medication will help. Pygmaillian studies carried out in classrooms with schoolchildren equally show the power of another person's image of us. Children of a similar ability level but labelled low or high potential quickly begin performing according to their label rather than their actual ability levels.

## The principles of Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry is based on five core principles:

- ***The Constuctionist Principle*** – that reality as we know it is subjective and socially created through the language we use and the conversations we have
- ***The Simultaneity Principle*** – that inquiry in itself is an intervention, the moment we ask a question we begin to create change.

- ***The Poetic Principle*** – that organisations, like open books, are endless sources of study and learning. What we choose to study makes a difference. It describes – even creates – the world as we know it.
- ***The Anticipatory Principle*** – that human systems move in the direction of their images of the future. Therefore, the more positive and hopeful the image of the future, the more positive the present-day action.
- ***The Positive Principle*** – that momentum for change requires large amounts of positive affect and social bonding. The practice of Appreciative Inquiry has shown that momentum is best generated through positive questions that amplify the positive core of an organisation.

### **A different approach to creating and sustaining change**

Significant organisational change is usually catalysed by some form of challenge pressure or opportunity. As the organisation begins to contemplate its response, one of the first activities it usually undertakes is a strategic analysis to study the situation and generate data or information about the issues.

If organisations follow a traditional gap approach to change, they will tend to start off by identifying their problems and issues, finding out what's wrong, understanding what caused them to be in their current situation. They will then generate and analyse a range of potential solutions and finally adopt some form of action planning to bring about the desired change. The difficulty with this approach is that it is based on the assumption that organisations are problems to be solved. It can result in individuals feeling they are part of the problem or the 'gap' that needs to be filled and can suppress motivation and innovation

The Appreciative Inquiry approach is to seek out what's right and build on this, going beyond the original normal baseline by seeking out the positive history of issue, exploring moments in the organisation present or past when issue X has given life to their organisation

For example, traditionally an organisation wanting to heal the wounds of racism will inquire into instances of racism in the workplace with the idea that once a system is really clear on what racism looks like and feels like and what causes it, it can be eliminated. Alternatively AI would choose to inquire into stories of exceptionally good cross cultural/race working relationships, discover the conditions present at those times and create images of desirable future relationships.

Appreciative Inquiry starts from the assumption that the organisation is in itself a solution to be embraced. The process of Appreciative Inquiry therefore follows a different route. This approach allows all those involved in the system to have a stake in its future direction. It views organisational development as a journey rather than an event. By starting from an affirmative standpoint, Appreciative Inquiry sets a positive frame for that journey. The process of Appreciative Inquiry is an inclusive one which engages all parties in co-constructing the future of the organisation.

### **The processes of Appreciative Inquiry**

The five stages of an Appreciative Inquiry are

- Choose the positive as the focus of inquiry
- Inquire into stories as life giving forces
- Locate the themes that appear in the stories and select topics for future inquiry
- Create shared images of a preferred future
- Find innovative ways to create that future

The process is also described as the 4 Ds

- **Discovery** – appreciating the best of what is already and what ‘gives life’ to the topic under inquiry
- **Dream** – challenging the status quo by envisioning a preferred future and describing it in possibility statements
- **Design** – constructing the social architecture and infrastructure of the organisation
- **Delivery** – creating ongoing ways to deliver on the new image of the future

Or as the 4 I s

- **Initiate** – introduce to concepts, create project group, determine focus
- **Inquire** – conduct interviews
- **Imagine** – Collate shared data and identify themes, develop possibility statements and validate these across the group
- **Innovate** – Conversations about commitment and design of new roles and systems

However described, all the models have within them the same core processes and are all built on the same principles

### **How Appreciative Inquiry is used**

Choosing how to apply an Appreciative Inquiry is rather like sitting down to dinner in a very fine restaurant and putting together an exquisite meal from a wide menu. Most Appreciative Inquiry processes follow the general flow of the 4D cycle. However the reasons for using Appreciative Inquiry vary, as do the approaches taken.

Some processes take place over a period of days or even hours, others unfold over a period of months. Some require resources and co ordination, others become self managed. Some are complex while others are more straightforward.

- **Whole System Dialogue** – All members of the organisation and some stakeholders participate in the interviews, analysis and future design. This can take place at multiple locations over an extended period of time and involves activities that integrate the inquiry across departments and functions and usually culminates in a summit meeting.
- **Summit** – A large group of people participate simultaneously in a one to two day summit process.
- **Mass Mobilized Inquiry** – Large numbers of interviews (thousands to millions) on a socially responsible topic are conducted throughout a community or city
- **Core group Inquiry** – A small group of people select topics, craft questions, conduct interviews and undertake the analysis – useful for getting started quickly when planning a wider summit approach later on
- **Positive Change Network** – Rather than beginning with the selection of topics and launching an organisation wide inquiry, this begins with a training programme to create a critical mass of people familiar with AI who then begin to launch inquiries in their own teams and departments.
- **Positive Change Consortia** – Where several different organisations are brought together to undergo an inquiry and see what they can learn from each other. The focus of such an inquiry is usually a change agenda of shared strategic importance such as ‘exceptional call centre management’ or ‘improved health care.’ Teams work together as larger cross organisational inquiry teams and conduct interviews at one another’s sites in a kind of mutual benchmarking. Later they return to a summit to make sense of the data and self organise into company specific teams to see what they have learned.

- **Learning Teams** – most often formed at the delivery stage, learning teams come together to carry out new projects, create innovations consistent with the newly articulated vision of the organisation.
- **Progressive meetings** – Working through the Appreciative Inquiry cycle through a series of short meetings over several months. This creates opportunities to engage in inquiry and change without significant disruption of the day to day operations. Meetings do take discipline though and it is easy to lose momentum.

As you consider using Appreciative Inquiry choose a form of engagement that best suits your change agenda, then experiment. As you apply Appreciative Inquiry adapt it, alter it and let it unfold as it will. Given that Appreciative Inquiry is an approach not a single methodology it's helpful to consider the following questions to assist in choosing the best approach.

1. What is your change agenda? What are you trying to accomplish? What is your purpose?
2. What is the most appropriate form of engagement given your change agenda, your organisational culture, time frame and resources
3. What is your inquiry strategy – what decisions and steps must you take along the way to ensure the projects success?

## References:

- Appreciative Inquiry – Change at the Speed of Imagination. Jane Magruder Watkins and Bernard J Mohr
- The Power of Appreciative Inquiry – Diane Whitney and Amanda Trusten Bloom
- Positive Image, Positive Action: The Affirmative Basis of Organizing. David L. Cooperrider, Case Western Reserve University