

calliope learning

Appreciative Inquiry Briefing Paper



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Appreciative Inquiry

Briefing Paper

Problem analytic methodologies are based on deficit discourse. Over time, they fill the organization with stories, understandings, and rich vocabularies of why things fail. Compulsive concern with what's not working, why things go wrong, and who didn't do his or her job demoralizes members of the organization, reduces the speed of learning, and undermines relationships and forward movement. Cooperrider, D.L., and Whitney, D. (1999)

Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry

Michael Moore in his 2002 movie, *Bowling for Columbine*, explores the relationship between fear, violence and consumerism that characterizes the US. In his unexpectedly insightful interview with Marilyn Manson, a rock star who appears to capitalize on this mood through his own brand of shock rock, Manson suggests that Americans are driven by fear and the way they deal with their fear is to consume. It's refreshing and hopeful, then, to discover the appreciative inquiry (AI) movement originated by David Cooperrider and his associates in the US, which is providing a more promising look at the future. In contrast to the mainstream "deficit" model of change, AI examines how positive change can be facilitated.

Philanthropic Quest International suggests that (AI) is "an exciting new paradigm for human development and social innovation. By asking positive questions, we can generate new images of the future -- images evoked by the best of the past and present. These powerful images --of ourselves, our organizations and the world -- can inspire action and innovation." [<http://www.appreciative-inquiry.org/> accessed June, 2003] Whitney and Trosten-Bloom suggest that AI "is the study and exploration of what gives life to human systems when they function at their best. This approach to personal change and organization change is based on the assumption that questions and dialogue about strengths, successes, values, hopes and dreams are themselves transformational." (2003, p. 1) AI encourages us to focus on "the best of the past and present" so that we can "ignite the collective imagination of what might be." [Philanthropic Quest International, <http://www.appreciative-inquiry.org/> accessed June, 2003]

For some people, AI is an immediate and comfortable fit. For others, it's a challenge because to focus one's energy on the positive has the risk of not addressing systematized and long-standing societal, political and organizational inequities. Cathy Royal, an AI researcher and practitioner, told us at a workshop in Calgary in April 2003, that she came "kicking and

screaming" to AI. When questioned as to what she meant, she said "If I really believed in the principles of AI, then I as a black woman would have to allow the same space for you as a white man." Her experiences over the years with AI have, however, addressed these initial concerns and she's an inspiring and passionate advocate for the power of this approach.

We've had the privilege of working with several Royal Roads University learners who have chosen AI as an approach to their own graduate action research projects. Some of their comments provide further evidence of the power of AI.

"I found appreciative inquiry to be a tremendous way to design the interviews ... If time permitted, holding focus groups using appreciative inquiry would add another dimension to the research." (Judy Dyke, 2003)

"It is clear that focusing on people's strengths brings about more fruitful responses. It also encouraged a few members to consider using Appreciative Inquiry in their workplaces." (Monica Mangione, 2002)

"I felt that using the appreciative inquiry technique gave the interview a very positive outlook while still being able to discover the constructive criticism. I was grateful for the depth of information that delegates and staff were willing to share with me." (Jackie Wright, 2002)

"Through this project I looked at positive aspects of home experiences [of men in long term care facilities]. By suppressing discussion of why the goal could not be achieved, we produced numerous strategies appreciating how it has, and could continue to be achieved. This positive approach for change is a valuable lesson I am carrying with me into other aspects of my life." (George Matthews, 2002)

The Theoretical Basis for Appreciative Inquiry

It may sound as if AI is little more than looking on the brighter side of life and, in terms of organizational development, a way to encourage members of the organization to focus on what they do well rather than fix specific problems. AI does, however, have a solid basis in social constructionist theory. Put simply, if reality is a social construction and the vocabulary, discourse and behaviour our society use are focused on problem solving, then our reality will be one with problems to solve. In order for our dreams to come true, we need to talk about them, not our problems, so that the focus of our organizations is on what we want, and not on what we don't want.

This may sound a bit new age, but let's suppose that the future we anticipate is more likely to unfold than the future we haven't even thought about. If this were true, and social constructionists would hold that it is, then imagine the power of a group of people, or even a whole organization, anticipating a future where best practice is commonplace, dialogue is open and honest, and everyone is working to make dreams come true. Isn't it more likely that this organization will succeed while another, which has a focus on its shortcomings, will continually struggle with its problems?

Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) suggest that AI is also based on image theory, which suggests that the images we hold of the future influence the decisions and actions we take in the present, and grounded research methodology, which challenges researchers to remain open to understanding an organization through the eyes of its members. They have developed eight principles of AI, based on the original work of Srivasta and Cooperrider:

Eight Principles of AI

Principle	Short Definition	Explanation
The Constructionist Principle	Words Create Worlds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reality, as we know it, is a subjective vs objective state • It is socially created, through language and conversations
The Simultaneity Principle	Inquiry Creates Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquiry is intervention • The moment we ask a question, we begin to create a change.
The Poetic Principle	We Can Choose What We Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizations, 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	Image Inspires Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human systems move in the direction of their images of the future. • The more positive and hopeful the image of the future, the more positive the present-day action.
The Positive Principle	Positive Questions Lead to Positive Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Momentum for large-scale change requires large amounts of positive affect and social bonding. • This momentum is best generated through positive questions that amplify the positive core.
The Wholeness Principle	Wholeness Brings Out the Best	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wholeness brings out the best in people and organizations. • Bringing all stakeholder together in large group forums stimulates creativity and builds collective capacity.
The Enactment Principle	Acting “As If” Is Self-Fulfilling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To really make a change, we must “be the change we want to see.” • Positive change occurs when the process used to create the change is a living model of the ideal future.
The Free Choice Principle	Free Choice Liberates Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People perform better and are more committed when they have freedom to choose how and what they contribute. • Free choice stimulates organizational excellence and positive change.

Table taken from Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2003, pgs 54-55.

A Framework for Appreciative Inquiry

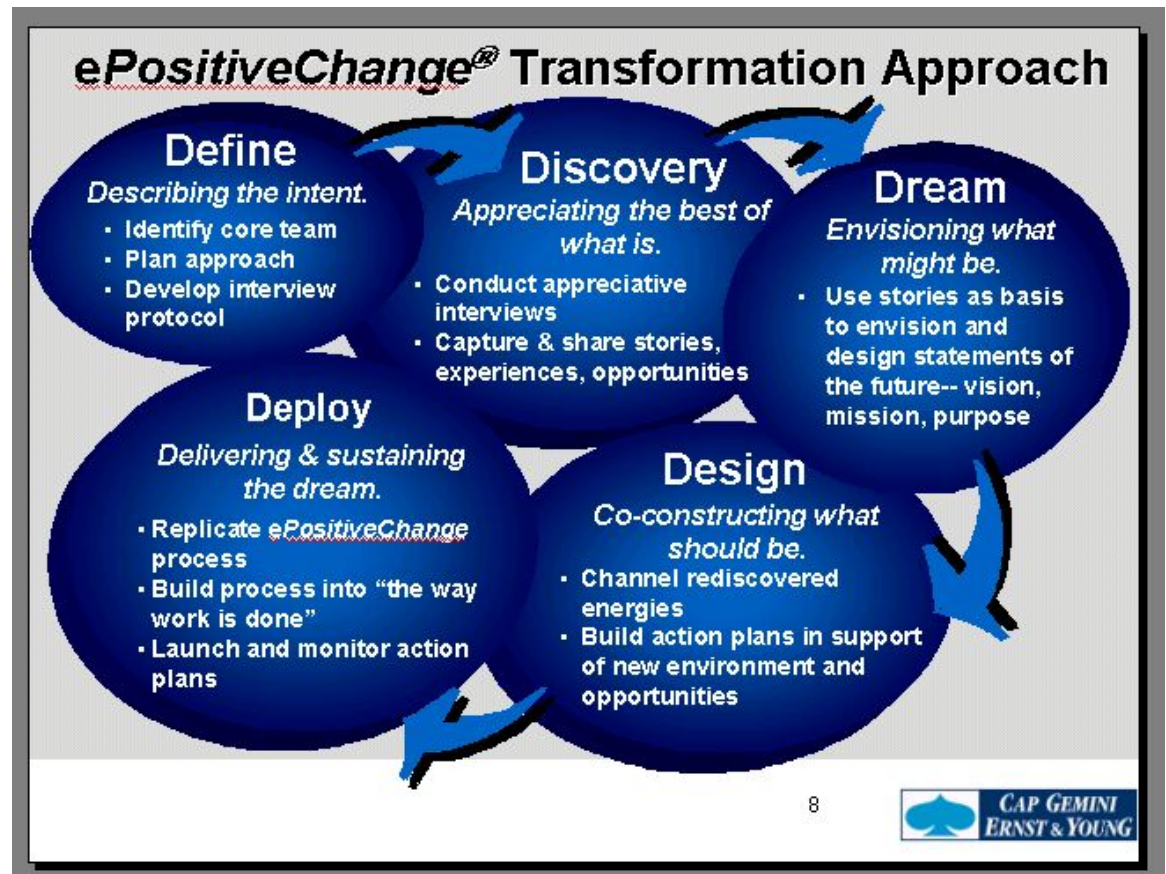
Researchers and practitioners in AI have developed a 4 stage model to organize an AI intervention in an organization. These 4 stages are:

- Discovery – appreciating the best of what is
- Dream – envisioning what might be
- Design – co-constructing what should be
- Destiny – delivering and sustaining the dream

We like the 5 D model that has been used by some practitioners as it adds an initial stage:

- Defining – describing the intent

In our experience, this initial stage is a necessary “contracting” stage where the AI practitioner can clarify the principles behind AI and ensure that the organization is ready for such an intervention. The following model is taken from a Cap Gemini Ernst & Young presentation:



[<http://appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu/practice/toolsModelsPPTsDetail.cfm?coid=1587>
accessed June, 2003]

The Appreciative Inquiry Commons [<http://appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu/default.cfm>] is a website sponsored by the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University and Cap Gemini Ernst & Young, and provides updates on research and practice in AI. You will find powerpoint presentations, articles, suggested videos and films to help you work with AI, and case studies from a multitude of sectors. Another great resource if you are considering doing an AI intervention in your organization is the Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) book which is full of practical examples and tips on AI.

Determining Readiness for AI

One of the challenges brought up by many who are supportive of AI is their uncertainty about the “fit” with their own organization. Whitney and Trsoten-Bloom (2003) suggest that using AI can turn a hierarchical command and control culture into communities of discovery and cooperation, but some people are still skeptical about this dramatic shift and are interested in working with organizations who may have already made some of these shifts or are working in that direction.

While the 5D model mentioned above can somewhat address this concern (by making explicit your definition stage, for example, you could surface any potential areas of concern), we’ve just recently found an organizational tool that you could use independently to make your own assessment. The Institute of Cultural Affairs [<http://www.icacan.ca/>] has developed “Mapping the Organization Chart”, a tool that can help you diagnose an organization in one of four stages, using 8 different criteria. See the chart on the next page:

Appreciative Inquiry Case Studies

It's easy to be sceptical about AI and it may not always be the best way to approach organizational development. However, it has proved valuable in a wide range of situations and having an understanding of how and when AI works can give you the confidence to integrate aspects of AI into your existing work.

The Appreciative Inquiry Commons website noted above contains many examples of AI being used in a number of different sectors. Two projects that have captured our attention are Imagine Chicago (<http://www.imaginechicago.org/>) and Imagine Scotland (<http://www.imaginescotland.com/>), stewarded by Bliss Browne.

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