

Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry

Richard Seel, January 2008 (edited version)

1: Introduction:

Why is Change So Difficult?

We all have experience of change, whether at the personal or organisational level. It often feels hard or unsatisfactory. There are lots of reasons for this. One of the most common is that we don't feel involved. Far too often change feels as if it is being done to us rather than done with us. "I don't mind change but I don't like being changed" sums up how most of us feel.

Another reason why change initiatives seem to flounder is that they often bring up so many negative feelings. They ask us to look deeply into the causes of our 'failure' or to discover the reasons why we have so many problems. This is an inherently demoralising approach which rarely seems to lead to lasting improvement.

Appreciative Inquiry takes a different approach. Instead of focusing on the negatives in an individual or organisation and trying to change them, it looks at what works well and uses that as a foundation for future development. It is essentially life-affirming rather than deficit-based and this has the effect of increasing the amount of energy and enthusiasm in the organization or person.

2: The Power of the Positive

Appreciative Inquiry builds on what is positive in life. It seeks out stories of success and tries to ignore stories of failure. To some, this sounds unrealistic, a rather idealistic approach, not rooted in the 'real world' of problems and failures. Yet there is evidence from a number of different fields to show that a focus on positive reinforcement can have real and lasting effects.

Blue Eyes, Brown Eyes

In 1968, after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jane Elliott, an American third-grade teacher conducted a famous experiment on her children. She was concerned to expose the horrors of discrimination and she told her pupils that blue eyes showed people who were cleverer, quicker, more likely to succeed. They were superior to people with brown eyes, who she described as untrustworthy, lazy and stupid. She made a point of praising the blue-eyed children, and being more negative to the browns. She also gave the blue-eyed extra privileges.

Within a day or so, the blue-eyed children had improved their grades, and managed tasks which had proved out of their grasp before whereas previously well-achieving brown-eyed children found even simple tasks hard. A few days later, Jane Elliott told her class that she'd got the eye-colour information wrong and that it was actually brown-eyed people who were superior. The situation quickly reversed.

Elliott's aim had been to give her children an experience of discrimination and show them how artificial it really is. But she also showed the power of positive reinforcement: the children whom she praised and who believed themselves to be gifted performed better

than they had previously—and this applied to both blue-eyed and brown-eyed children as the experiment singled out first one group and then the other.

Jane Elliott's work can be seen as just one example of what is sometimes known as *labelling theory*—the belief that we tend to act out the labels that others give us, or that we give to ourselves. Thus if we believe that we can achieve and start to label ourselves as 'winners', we are more likely to do so.

The Placebo Effect

The placebo effect is now widely accepted by doctors: the majority of people will experience relief of physical symptoms if they believe that they are taking an effective medicine even if the medicine is actually a completely inert substance. For instance, if people believe that they are taking a pain reliever then many will experience a reduction in pain even if they are actually taking a placebo. Furthermore, the brain has been observed to release opioids (natural pain relievers) in such cases.

The conclusion is clear: if we believe that something is going to happen, it is more likely to do so—certainly as far as our own bodies are concerned.

The Dynamics of High Performance Teams

The work of Marcial Losada is not as well-known as it should be. In the 1990s he observed business teams at work, recording and analysing their interactions. On the basis of their business results, customer satisfaction and the opinions of their managers and peers he divided the teams into high-, mid- and low- performers.

There were clear differences in the way they interacted. One key difference was what Losada called the 'emotional space'. In essence, emotional space is defined as the ratio of positive to negative comments. The high-performing teams had up to five times as many positive comments as negative, while the low-performing teams showed just the opposite—they were characterised by negativity.

Marcial Losada later worked with the psychologist Barbara Frederickson who has argued that positive emotions give us access to a wider range of ways of thinking and acting. Their research suggests that human beings flourish when the positive/negative ratio is 2.9 or higher.

Conclusions

This is just a brief sample of some of the work being done on the power of positivity. Two things come out of it: firstly, that positive thinking and believing lead to positive results, and secondly that this is largely a matter of choice—it's up to us whether we decide to adopt a positive approach. Appreciative Inquiry builds on this research to provide a way of engaging people in positive ways.

3: The Five Principles of Appreciative Inquiry

Some writers have discerned five principles which underpin the Appreciative Inquiry approach. They indicate what is distinctive about Appreciative Inquiry and show where its transforming power comes from.

i) The Constructionist Principle

How much influence do we have over the future? Some would argue that the future is largely determined by forces beyond our control; others claim that, within certain limits, we create the future together. Social Constructionism argues that the language and metaphors we use don't just *describe* the world, they actually *create* the world. Just as we saw in the blue eyes, brown eyes work, if we describe someone as clever, they will become clever; if we describe them as stupid, they become stupid.

The constructionist principle argues that what people focus on becomes their reality and that the language people use creates their reality. Appreciative Inquiry therefore takes particular care to encourage a positive focus and encourages the use of positive language because that will lead people to construct a positive future together.

ii) The Positive Principle

We have already looked at the power of the positive in some detail in section two. Together with the constructionist principle, the positive principle is at the heart of Appreciative Inquiry's claim that focusing on the positive can lead to effective organisational change.

The positive principle is expressed in action by always adopting appreciative language when conducting an Appreciative Inquiry; encouraging and supporting the people engaged in the inquiry; helping members of the organisation express the best that they have experienced; and building virtuous circles in place of vicious circles.

iii) The Simultaneity Principle

Classical, linear, approaches to change assume that first you diagnose, then you change. Indeed, the diagnosis stage can take a long time and cost a great deal of money. It is not unknown for 'change initiatives' to get stuck in the diagnosis phase and never get round to actually doing anything about change!

The simultaneity principle suggests that this is not a helpful model. Instead, we see inquiry and change as happening together—just by asking questions, we become engaged in a process of change. And the nature of the questions affects the nature of the change.

So in Appreciative Inquiry there is no separate 'diagnosis' phase; no time is spent looking at root causes or holding inquests into the past. Instead, the change is seen as starting as soon as the steering group gets together to start asking each other appreciative questions.

iv) The Poetic Principle

In classical change theory, change is seen as a move from one state to another (as in the much-discussed 'unfreeze-change-re-freeze' model). But the notion that organisations or

people are static (in a state) is problematic. Surely change is happening all the time, even if the large-scale patterns seem reasonably stable.

Appreciative Inquiry sees organisations and individuals more as a *story* than a state. Stories are powerful and both shape those who tell them and are themselves shaped by the storytellers.

Appreciative Inquiry taps into this power and encourages the sharing of positive stories, believing that this will itself change the way people think and act.

v) The Anticipatory Principle

The final principle underpinning Appreciative Inquiry is the anticipatory principle. Essentially it argues that images of the future can affect the way we behave in the present. In particular, if we have a particularly desirable image of the future we are likely to behave in ways that will bring it about.

4: Appreciative Inquiry and the 4-D Cycle

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was developed by David Cooperrider in the 1980s. When he was doing his PhD he interviewed leading clinicians at the Cleveland Clinic about their greatest successes and failures. He found himself drawn to the stories of success and focused exclusively on them. As he reported them back into the Clinic they had a huge impact—so much so that the Clinic board asked that the same approach be used throughout the whole 8000-person organisation.

Appreciative Inquiry is based on the premise that *organisations/people change in the direction in which they inquire*. So an organization/person which inquires into problems will keep finding problems but an organization/person which attempts to appreciate what is best in itself will discover more and more that is good. It can then use these discoveries to build a new future where the best becomes the norm.

As more and more people have used Appreciative Inquiry it has developed and new understandings have been gained.

The 4-D Model

It is helpful to think of an Appreciative Inquiry as having four distinct phases though in practice they often merge into one another. Each phase is given a name beginning with 'D' and the model is usually known as the 4-D model:



5: The Appreciative Interview: Practice & Practicalities

The appreciative interview is at the heart of the AI process. It forms the basis of the Discovery phase and provides the impetus for the rest of the inquiry. Although each Inquiry has its own tailored interview protocol, based on the affirmative topic choice that has been made, there is a fundamental structure which has been found to be very effective in a wide range of situations.

6: Affirmative Topic Choice

What should you inquire into? Your choice of topic for your inquiry is important and we will look at it briefly in this section. Because Appreciative Inquiry is based on the assumption that organisations/people change in the direction of the things they inquire into, you need to take some care with the focus of your inquiry.

Because of this we need to avoid inquiring into the things which are negative or problematic. Instead, we are looking to amplify those things which give life to the organisation/system. Sometimes these are immediately obvious but sometimes we need to do some research first.

7: AI for Strategy, Teams & Individuals

Although Appreciative Inquiry was developed as an approach to organisational change it can be used as an approach to developing strategy and also with small groups and as a basis of individual development.

An Appreciative Approach to Strategy

Since Appreciative Inquiry is fundamentally about co-creating the future it is no surprise that people have started using its principles in strategic planning. Organisations like BAE

Systems, John Deere and others have used an Appreciative approach to strategic planning and have found it very effective.

In classical strategic planning the SWOT tool is widely used. It invites us to look at the organisations strengths and opportunities but also at its weaknesses and threats. The AI principle that positive image leads to positive action challenges us to concentrate on the positive rather than spend half our time looking at the negative and sending mixed messages. In order to cope with this, the SOAR framework was developed by Jackie Stavros. Instead of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats, SOAR invites us to look at Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and (measurable) Results.

Appreciative Inquiry with Teams

A team is really just a small organisation. It can often benefit from appreciative development. For instance, if a team is new, invite team members to share stories about their best experience of working in a team. The shared stories will energise team members and help them to create a vision of how they would like their team to be.

AI can be effective with existing teams as well. If you are looking to develop an existing team it may be good to start by inviting them to share stories of their best experience in the organisation (if you ask them all to share 'best experience' stories from the team you may end up with everyone telling the story of the same occasion.) This will offer a wealth of material which can be used as a platform for the team to dream a new and more effective future together.

Or perhaps an existing team is facing an issue. Using an appreciative approach you can work with them to explore the issue in a way which gets away from blame and other entrenched patterns of behaviour. For instance, if the issue is poor communication, ask members to share stories of a time when they experienced good communication in a team (not necessarily this current team). Help them to draw out the positive core of these experiences so that they can start to dream of a way of moving forward.

References & Further Reading

Author	Title	Publisher
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