Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative inquiry focuses on the desired future, not on problems

Appreciative inquiry (AI) assumes that there are examples of success in our past that we can learn from to create greater success in the future. Specifically, AI seeks to determine the state that the system aspires to. The inquiry itself sets out to find examples of achievement of this desired state – even if this has occurred only rarely or briefly.

Typically, information is gathered when people interview each other. When sharing the stories elicited by the interview process, several things happen. Firstly, participants describe their own personal highpoints, which are often stories about how the organization or system has moved forward. Secondly, closer analysis of the highpoint stories reveals the factors that enabled the positive outcome to occur. Thirdly, the interviews are conducted in an appreciative spirit provoking motivation of interviewers and interviewees.

Turning this motivation into action begins with a visioning process that builds on the success stories and their enabling factors. The visioning process produces "provocative propositions" that describe how the system would look if the exceptional performance described in the highpoint experiences became the norm. Participatory planning and implementation follow, charting how the provocative propositions will be accomplished. Ideally, the appreciative cycle then starts again by identifying and sharing highpoints during implementation, tracking how the members bring further successes to the system.

The five steps of an appreciative inquiry

Figure 1 depicts the five steps that are typically followed in a classic AI.

1) Definition: establishing the focus and scope of the inquiry
   This phase defines the scope of the inquiry – what is the focus, who is to be interviewed and by whom? Some choices will be governed by the resources available (people, time and money). The definition phase may also include building awareness among key stakeholders. The focus of the appreciative inquiry flows from discussions of what the system wants to become (ideally, a cross-section of system stakeholders should participate). This involves reframing problem statements into desired outcomes, for example:
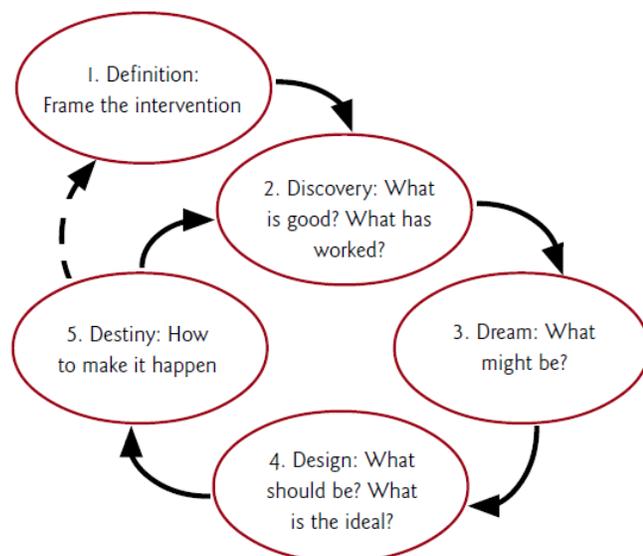
- Problem statement: poor coordination among network partners leads to duplication and/or gaps in service provision.
- Desired state: effective coordination leverages each partner's capabilities while enabling synergies across all partners to achieve shared goals.
- Core ideas/inquiry topics to pursue: leveraging the best features of a networked system.

Selecting the focus or topic of the inquiry is important because it will determine the kind of data elicited, which in turn will affect the ways in which participants see themselves and the system. AI holds that, whatever the focus of inquiry, asking questions heightens awareness of a particular aspect of the system. Asking questions begins a process of change, so it is important to get the questions right.

2) Discovery: eliciting stories of the system at its best
   The second phase consists of interviewing the people selected in Phase 1. The standard AI interview protocol consists of four open-ended questions to elicit stories of highpoint experiences related to the inquiry topic. Interviewers are often asked to capture "gems" or key quotes from their conversations. Participants generally find sharing highpoint stories very motivating.

   AI interviews have two important features. Firstly, they focus on the interviewee's views, with the interviewer using basic skills of active listening and probing to elicit further details. Secondly, AI interviews seek stories rather than opinions. Stories provide the raw material from which opinions can be derived. By going back to the original data, people can connect with the richness of their experience, rather than with the conclusions that have been drawn. Stories remind us of the context, who was involved, the enabling circumstances, the prior history and the subsequent outcomes.

   Both the interviewer and interviewee generally find that the interview allows for deep connections, unexpected learning, and, above all, a sense of empowerment. In retelling their success stories, interviewees often see themselves as being able to make a difference. This can be very empowering, especially in situations where the individual has felt marginalized.

   The next step is to look for common themes and outstanding insights, often by involving small groups of interviewers who share summaries of their interviews and any gems they have captured. Each group then identifies common themes and insights to share in plenary. Participants are often surprised and excited to see the same themes coming up repeatedly. These themes are then shared with the interviewees and with others in the system.

3) Dream: collecting the wisdom and imagining the future
   In the dream phase, participants create a vision of their ideal future, based on what they learned in the discovery phase. They can be guided by asking: Imagine waking up 5 or 10 years in the future and discovering that your organization has made its highpoint experiences the norm. Your organization has become so successful that a journalist is about to interview you on how your organization is working. What do you say?

   In this way, participants begin to see their preferred future in concrete terms, based on what they have discovered in the previous phase. They then share their dreams, first in small groups and then in plenary, to derive common themes.

4) Design: bridges to the future based on the best of the past and present

The design phase maps the steps that will turn the dream into reality. Participants are asked to formulate "provocative propositions", i. e. what needs to happen to support their vision of the future. The process of generating provocative propositions may be helped by identifying different domains of a system that need to be aligned in a new way to bring the dream into being, and then generating provocative propositions for each. For example, Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) propose the following organizational dimensions that might be considered when developing provocative propositions:

- vision and purpose
- strategy
- structure
- leadership
- decision-making processes
- communication

- systems
- roles and relationships
- knowledge management
- policies and procedures
- products and services

5) Destiny: making it happen

Experience with AI suggests that implementation is accomplished most effectively by implementation teams, comprising committed individuals and groups. They continue to use the AI cycle to enact change; in particular, by continually seeking and sharing success stories that illustrate progress towards the dream. It is also important to foster a supportive environment for the AI change process. Ultimately, one will know if AI has really taken hold when the "appreciative eye" is used with increasing frequency, beyond the initial pilot phase.

Situations in which AI has been applied

Numerous case studies describing the applications of AI can be found on the website of the Appreciative Inquiry Commons (http://appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu) and in Watkins and Mohr (2001) and Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003). AI has also been applied in community development, strategic planning, collaborative (project) planning, strengthening partnerships, organizational change management, organizational learning, conflict resolution, and others.

Prerequisites for a successful AI intervention

AI can work in a diversity of settings and is especially appropriate for situations where there is conflict or a lack of progress. However, it needs support and commitment from the leaders of the community, organization or team. Most importantly, leaders need to trust the process and support the ideas that emerge from it. They need to let go a certain amount of control. If they do not, the participants may feel that AI is being used to manipulate them towards the ulterior motives of the management. AI also needs support from the participants. If cynicism seems to prevail, it is better to start small and let the results convince people, before scaling up the initiative.

Specifics of AI

Several characteristics of AI differentiate it from other change management processes:

- The change process begins with interviews in which participants reflect on their positive experiences and discover their own capacity to make a difference. For some, the AI interview

may be the first time anyone has asked about their unique contributions, and being allowed to voice these can have a notable empowering effect. Sharing the stories that emerge from the interviews builds appreciation for the value and potential to contribute that is inherent in all human resources.

- Accumulating positive stories has the effect of changing the grand narrative or self-image of a system.

- The dream phase raises the sights of the system by enabling it to see the significant contributions and achievements it is uniquely capable of making.

- The most powerful seeds of change are contained in stakeholders' ownership of the dream and provocative propositions. If stakeholders buy into the dream and design statements, they will organize themselves and build change into their own agendas, above and beyond other formally planned actions or large-scale interventions.

Perhaps most importantly, AI makes system change processes remarkably pain-free compared to traditional processes. Innovation emerges by fostering both continuity and transition from the best of the past and present into the future. The vision sells itself because it emerges from the collective aspirations of the system's members. The principle of self-organization allows individual members of the system to sign up for the things they care most about. The energy and excitement generated by the process makes it difficult for anyone to remain on the sidelines (Head et al., 2000).