Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry
Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was developed by David Cooperrider in the 1980s. The model is based on the premise that organizations change in the direction in which they inquire. So an organization that inquires into problems will keep finding problems but an organization that attempts to appreciate what is best in itself will discover more and more good. It can then use these discoveries to build a new future where the best becomes the norm.

Inquiry into organizational life should have four characteristics. It should be:

- **appreciative**—AI looks for the “positive core” of the organization and seeks to use it as a foundation for future growth;
- **applicable**—AI is grounded in stories of what has actually taken place in the past and is therefore essentially practical. It is not a “pie in the sky” approach but instead seeks the best of “what is” in order to build the best of “what might be;”
- **provocative**—AI invites people to take some risks in the way they imagine the future and redesign their organization to bring it about. With the security and energy gained from exploration of the best in the organization, people feel able to respond with “provocative propositions” for the future; and
- **collaborative**—AI is a form of collaborative inquiry. It always involves the whole organization or a representative cross-section of the whole organization. In this way all voices can be heard and everyone’s contribution valued.

Change: Why is it So Difficult?
We all experience change, whether at the personal or organizational level. 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.

Today, more and more organizations are trying to address this by using forms of collaborative inquiry as the way to involve as many people as possible in the change process. Appreciative Inquiry is a form of collaborative inquiry in which lots of people can become involved.

Change initiatives often bring up negative feelings. They ask us to look deeply into the causes of ‘failure’ or to discover the reasons why we have so many problems. This is an inherently demoralizing approach, which rarely leads to lasting improvement.

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

The Power of the Positive
Appreciative Inquiry builds on what is positive in organizational 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.
The Five Principles of Appreciative Inquiry
Five principles underpin the Appreciative Inquiry approach. They indicate what is distinctive about Appreciative Inquiry and show where its transforming power originates.

The Constructionist Principle
What people focus on becomes their reality and 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.

The Positive Principle
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 organization express the best they have experienced; and building virtuous circles in place of vicious circles.

The Simultaneity Principle
Classical linear approaches to organizational change assume 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 around to doing anything about change.

The simultaneity principle suggests that we see inquiry and change happen together. Just by asking questions, we become engaged in a process of organizational change; and the nature of the questions affects the nature of the change. So in Appreciative Inquiry there is no separate ‘diagnosis’ phase. Instead, the change is seen as starting as soon as the steering group gets together to ask each other appreciative questions.

The Poetic Principle
Classic organizational theory talks in terms of the state of an organization; change is seen as a move from one state to another. But surely change is happening all the time, even if the large-scale patterns seem reasonably stable.

Appreciative Inquiry sees organizations more as a story than a state. The continual conversations and negotiations between people lead to them stories about the organization’s past, present, and future. 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.

The Anticipatory Principle
The final principle underpinning Appreciative Inquiry is the anticipatory principle, which argues that images of the future can affect the way we behave in the present. In particular, if we have a desirable image of the future we are likely to behave in ways that will bring it about.
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 known as the 4-D model.

Discover
People talk to one another, usually via structured interviews, to discover the times when the organization is at its best. These stories are told as richly as possible and from them people start to discover the “positive core” of the organization, what gives life to it when it is at its best. People start to appreciate themselves and their colleagues and some quite significant transformations start to occur.

Dream
The dream phase is often run as a large group conference where a cross-section of the organization is encouraged to imagine and co-create the future. They are encouraged to envision the organization as if the peak moments discovered in the “discover” phase were the norm rather than the exception. “What would things be like if…?” Working in small groups, they try to put as much “flesh” as possible on their visions as possible. These are then “creatively presented” to the rest of the group and worked on further.

Design
In this collaborative design approach, the group first derives a design possibilities map that contains, in three concentric circles, the dream for the organization, the key relationships that have an impact on the dream, and key organizational
design elements needed to deliver the dream. In small groups, participants then “sign up” to explore particular design elements and the groups craft “provocative propositions,” which challenge the organization to adopt a new and healthier future. These are shared with the large group and further refined.

**Deliver**
The final phase is to deliver the dream and the new design. Because the term “deliver” has a rather mechanical feel, many AI proponents now prefer the term “destiny,” which continues the future-facing theme. Whichever term is chosen, the final phase is one of experimentation and improvisation, sometimes described as “organizational jazz. Small implementation teams will be formed to follow up on the design elements and to continue the appreciative process. The deliver phase may itself contain more small-scale Appreciative Inquiries into specific aspects of organizational life.

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