

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

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Appreciative Inquiry is a radically alternative approach to organisational change. If the thinking behind traditional change management strategies can be summarised as, 'Let's look for the problems around here and fix them', an AI approach would be 'Let's find out what's already working around here and allow these positive experiences to influence the rest of the organisation.'

The assumption of AI is that there are already lots of good things going on within most organisations but because it's ad hoc and unrecognised, it has little influence. AI brings these positive influences out into the open in the form of stories that can be shared and whose positive influence can spread in a viral way.

The term Appreciative Inquiry is based on the interviews between members of organisations which deliver these positive stories, the first step in any AI engagement. But of course it's far more subtle than simply accentuating the positive because the whole mindset changes when you turn away from a re-engineering mentality and focus on people's achievements.

The concept of AI was developed by two American organisation behaviour professors, David L. Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva, his doctoral supervisor. Their paper, *Appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), a theory of organizing and method for changing social systems*, is regarded as one of the more significant innovations in action research. Action research is distinguished by the fact that researchers involve their 'subjects' as co-researchers and is surely a progression from the more detached approach embodied in time and motion studies. Action research is now a cornerstone of organisation development practice.

Gervase R. Bushe of the Simon Fraser University in Canada sums up AI as a method of changing social systems as *"an attempt to generate a collective image of a new and better future by exploring the best of what is and has been. These new images, or "theories", create a pull effect that generates evolution in social forms"*

Directing energy

The thing that caught my imagination when I first went to a presentation about Appreciative Inquiry by Organisational Consultant Ann Radford, is the simple notion she described of how one's 'energy' can be directed by negative assumptions, *"If you talk about negative stuff, that's where people's energy will go."* Energy in this sense refers to the process of engaging and focusing ones attention towards a particular subject.

For example, if I describe a system, organisation or team in terms of its dysfunctional qualities, then you will immediately have a generally pessimistic and guarded approach towards that system. On the other hand, if I describe that system in terms of its successes but suggest that

there might be ways to make it work even better, you will see it in a more positive light. The way you frame things completely changes the context and hence people's attitudes and expectations.

This principle also applies to corporate communication, which is why it tweaked my cord. There's more than a subtle difference between a communication that has been sanitised and one that sets out to accentuate the positive. The assumptions we make about things in the way we describe them and the type of questions we ask about them become part of that thing's reality. So before you open your mouth on any issue, consider where you want people's energy to go and think about the assumptions implied in your approach.

Eight assumptions of AI

In Sue Annis Hammond's *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry* she talks of the Eight Assumptions of AI:

1. In every society or organisation, something works.
2. What we focus on becomes our reality.
3. Reality is created in the moment, and there are multiple realities.
4. The act of asking questions of an organisation or group influences the group in the same way.
5. People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known).
6. If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what are best about the past.
7. It is important to value differences.
8. The language we use creates our reality.

Margaret Philips specialises in organisational development and change and has used the AI for several years, though now she tends not to label it as such. *"The way AI differs from change processes that are more interventionist is that the research is conducted by the participants themselves and the discoveries that emerge are their own. We start by putting people into pairs with a list of questions. They interview each other for about twenty minutes and then summarise their partner's responses to the rest of the group. Great care goes into formulating the questions which are designed to help people build up a comprehensive picture of their role within the organisation and how they have contributed to its success"*. From these revelations about positive behaviours, the group chooses those they would like to prioritise for wider implementation.

The overall process used is called the Appreciative Inquiry '4-D' Cycle:

Discovery: The Appreciative Inquiry approach to personal or organisational change is to begin by looking for what is working. You APPRECIATE the best of your experience. This discovery is based on interviews and stories designed to discover strengths.

Dream: This where you ENVISION what might be by creating bold statements that describe ideal possibilities, no holds barred.

Design: You start to turn the dream into reality you agree; CO-DETERMINE what should be the ideal, establishing principles and priorities.

Destiny: You take sustained action to INNOVATE in order to create what will be. But of course you don't stop here; AI is an ongoing process and you will always be on the lookout for new discoveries to feed into the mill.

If all this sounds a bit happy clappy, especially to the hard boiled cynical Brit (to which tendency I belong), I suggest you suspend your disbelief. If you are in the business of leadership and organisational change, and haven't already come into contact with AI, then you may well find it to your advantage. As Margaret Philips and many other AI practitioners have discovered, the effects of AI are sustained because ownership starts and ends with the individuals in the group. There is never a stage at which a big idea, formulated in part by an outside consultant, is then tossed back to the team for implementation. *"The ideas for change are all theirs as are the processes for delivering them. It all happens there in the room, they own the whole process."*

Applications of AI

Here are some examples of the types of change initiative for which AI is appropriate:

- ◆ Team development
- ◆ Organisational culture change
- ◆ Leadership development
- ◆ Work process redesign
- ◆ Diversity initiatives
- ◆ Strategic planning initiatives
- ◆ Developing partnerships and alliances
- ◆ Career planning

AI has survived the test of time and unlike many change methodologies there's a mountain of academic research that proves its effectiveness. The main challenge is that AI is not something you can easily do at the office unaided, not at least in the first instance. It is essentially a facilitated change process that relies on a skilled practitioner to take the organisation/team through the process step by step. There will be many cynics and disbelievers to be brought on board. Some will find it hard to recognise the good and positive behaviours that surround them. It takes a good facilitator to sustain the momentum not to mention a certain amount of courage for a manager to expose his people to such ideas. AI is an idea from which there is no going back and it has to involve the whole workforce else, what's the point?

AI was born during the era when the corporate grip was being loosened and rigid hierarchies swept away. Perhaps in the post dotcom era where

the future is less secure, managers will be less inclined towards more liberal strategies. But the underlying principle of directing people's energy towards the good and the positive, cannot be regarded as a passing fashion.

References

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Do you have a message to articulate, a business to develop, people to train? Do your marketing communications reflect your true value? If not, it may be time to get creative with your communication.

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