

Appreciative Inquiry: a powerful approach for the 21st century communicator

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Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an approach to organizational transformation that looks at successes, rather than the problems; examines the excellence in an organization, rather than the dysfunction. Applied for a number of years in the area of academic research and in organization development (OD) circles, *Appreciative Inquiry* is beginning to germinate elsewhere. Communicators and others are now discovering how they too can use this powerful approach to engage employees, building a sense of community and trust and fostering lasting change.

As a communications professional for the last 15 years and a committed AI practitioner for the last 4, I am eager to share with you “Appreciative Inquiry in a nutshell” and hopefully stimulate your interest to explore the topic further, and also see the possibilities for your own organization!

What is Appreciative Inquiry?

Appreciative Inquiry is a strength-based approach to change. As the term implies, it focuses on appreciating and then leveraging an organization’s core strengths rather than seeking to overcome or minimize its weaknesses. It focuses on exploration and discovery of moments of excellence in the organization through deep inquiry, and an openness to seeing new potentials and possibilities from that collective knowledge.

AI invites people to engage collaboratively – one-one, in teams and in some cases hundreds and even thousands of people – first in discovering what makes the organization most effective – in economic, ecological, and in human terms. From there people weave that knowledge into the fabric of the organizational processes and systems, building the kinds of organizations and communities that everyone wants to work and live in. Perhaps most of all, AI strengthens the organization’s capacity to capitalize on people’s energy and passion, and create new kinds of conversation that help the organization realize its full potential.

One of the most important underpinnings of *Appreciative Inquiry* is a deceptively simple premise that “organizations grow in the direction of what they repeatedly ask questions about and focus their attention on” Most of us have grown up in organizations that were comfortable (some addicted to!) identifying and analyzing problems. AI suggests that there is another, more powerful model for organizational change, that treats organizations as mysteries to be embraced rather than problems to be solved. This alone is a powerful shift in thinking.

Paradigm 1: Deficit-Based Research Identification of Problems	Paradigm 2: Strength-Based Research Appreciating the Best of What Is
Analysis of Root Causes	Envisioning What Might Be
Analysis of Possible Solutions	Dialoguing What Should Be
Plan of Action (Treatment)	Innovating What Will Be
Organizations are Problems to be Solved	Organizations are Mysteries to be Embraced

How does AI work?

People often ask “just what happens in the AI process?” First, one does not go out and “do” Appreciative Inquiry. Rather one approaches the work they need to do by taking an appreciative approach. It’s important to understand that AI is first and foremost a philosophy with some key underlying principles.

- The Constructionist principle** *Words create worlds.* What we believe to be real in the world is created through our social discourse.
- The Principle of Simultaneity** *Change begins the moment we ask questions.* The first question we ask is fateful. There really is no neutral ground.
- The Anticipatory Principle** *Image inspires action.* Our behaviour in the present is influenced by the future we anticipate.
- The Poetic Principle** *We can choose what we study.* An organization is an open book with

stories waiting to be told. There is huge value in story telling as a way of gathering holistic information – fact, feeling, experience.

The Positive Principle

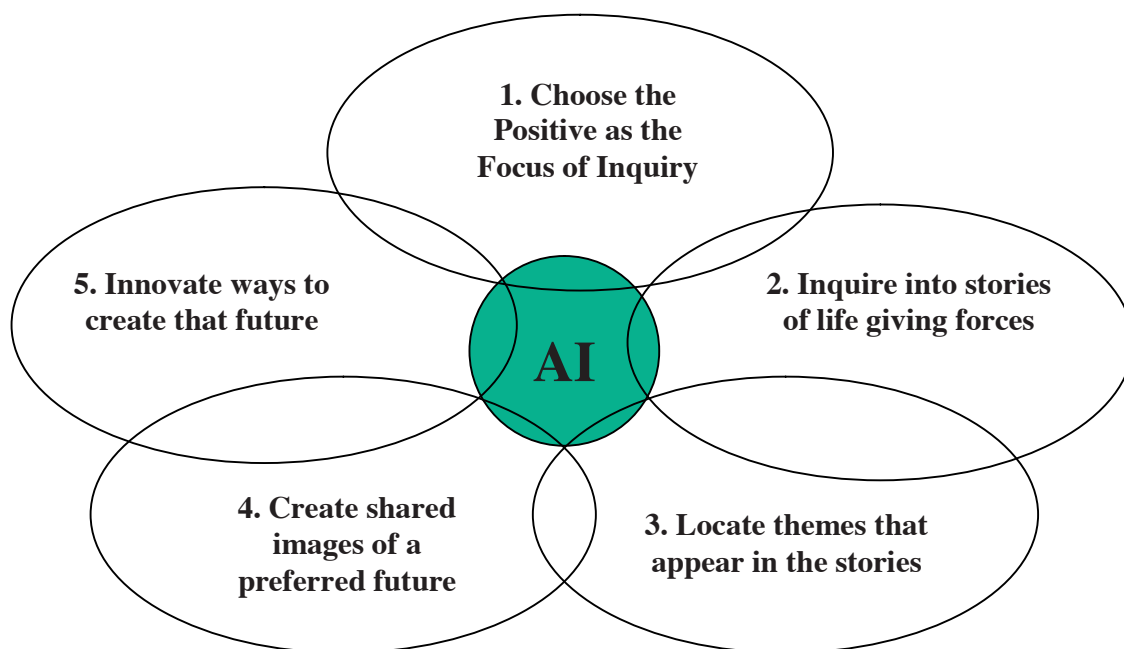
Positive questions lead to positive change. A positive approach to any issue is just as valid as a basis for learning as a negative or deficit-based approach.

The Wholeness Principle

Wholeness brings out the best. Using a whole-systems approach stimulates creativity, commitment and builds capacity at every level.

The 5 Generic Processes shown in the diagram help practitioners integrate Appreciative Inquiry into their work. This simplified way of looking at the approach was authored by colleagues Bernard Mohr and Jane Watkins (*Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*, Jossey Bass/Pfeiffer, 2001). Whether you are an external communications consultant or an employee communications manager, you can consider these processes a *roadmap* to guide you, rather than a prescription. Every situation will be unique.

The Core Processes of Appreciative Inquiry



How might communicators apply AI?

There are many wonderful examples of AI at work in leading organizations around the world. I have engaged clients in this approach for many initiatives, including

- Communication audits, focus groups, surveys
- Strategic planning
- Planning events
- Teambuilding
- Solving operations issues
- Developing and launching vision and values
- Designing recruitment and exit interview protocols



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Creating a vision for your own team is a good way to begin – personal experience of AI is a key to seeing the value. What really triggered my own passion for the approach was a profound belief that organizational communication is *all* about conversation, and that everyone has a responsibility to create a conversation that works. Since then, Appreciative Inquiry has led me into projects and relationships that I never would have expected to have encountered in a 'traditional' communications role! So, once you embark on this journey, be prepared to be surprised.

I invite you to learn more about this powerful and increasingly sought after approach to change by visiting the Appreciative Inquiry Commons – one of the best portals to AI links <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu> . I have no doubt that January 2006 will find one of you writing an article about how *Appreciative Inquiry* has made a positive difference for you!

Sue Anderson is an independent communications consultant, coach and facilitator operating in Toronto as Clockwork Communications. Sue also conducts public workshops in the Foundations of Appreciative Inquiry. She has been a member of IABC since 1991 and is an Associate of a worldwide consortium of AI practitioners known as Appreciative Inquiry Consulting, LLC.