What is Appreciative Inquiry?

DEFINITION: "A process, philosophy, and life practice grounded in research demonstrating that focusing on what's working and aspirations for the future achieves more and does it faster and more sustainably than solving problems."

Excerpted from an article by Sue Hammond

Appreciative Inquiry is a way of thinking, seeing and acting for powerful, purposeful change in organizations. **Appreciative Inquiry works on the assumption that whatever you want more of, already exists in all organizations.** While traditional problem-solving processes separate and dissect pieces of a system, Appreciative Inquiry generates images that affirm the forces that give life and energy to a system.

Appreciative Inquiry is a complex philosophy that engages the entire system in an inquiry about what works. The inquiry discovers data that is then analyzed for common themes. The group articulates the themes and dreams of "what could be" and "what will be." *What will be* is the future envisioned through an analysis of the past. The entire system maintains the best of the past by discovering what it is and stretching it into future possibilities. This differs from other visioning work because the envisioned future is grounded in the reality of the actual past.

The assumptions of Appreciative Inquiry are:

1. In every society, organization or group, 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 organization or group influences the group in some 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 is best about the past.
7. It is important to value differences.
8. The language we use creates our reality.

This set of assumptions may look reasonable to you but the application of the set may be a challenge. For example, #4 counters the traditional social research model that the researcher can remain a neutral observer or interviewer. I believe that our very presence in the group changes the group dynamics in some manner.

Appreciative Inquiry truly honors the past and that is another reason it is a wonderful way to help people manage change. Those of us who use it often use the word "magical" when we describe the power we have experienced. The magic comes from the great relief from participants that the message isn't about what they've done wrong or have to stop doing. It is an affirmation that much is well and ready to be nurtured.

For More Information

Appreciative Inquiry Commons Website: http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu

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Miller, C. J., Aguilar, C. R., McDaniel, D., Maslowski, L. (2004). *The Nonprofits' Guide to the Power of Appreciative Inquiry.* Denver, CO: Community Development Insitute.

Watkins, J. M., Mohr, B. J. (2001). *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.

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Instructions to Interviewers Engaging in Appreciative Inquiry

Whether you are conducting the interviews in pairs, triads, or a go-round (one big circle), here are some guidelines to keep in mind.

• Be a generous listener.
• Do not have more than one person share stories at the same time, rather take turns to actually conduct an interview. Also, let the interviewee tell their story without laying your opinion on them.
• Use the interview questions as a guideline; you can ask further clarifying questions to draw out the person's experiences, such as:

Tell me more.
What made it memorable?
What was going on that caused you to feel that way?
What makes that important to you?
How did that affect you?
What was the organization doing that helped you do this?
What were other people doing that helped?
What do you think was really making it work?
How has it changed you?

• Be genuinely curious about their experiences, thoughts & feelings.
• If someone wants to skip a question, that's fine; see if you can come back to it later.
• Before starting the round of interviews, take a moment to read the questions and think of what you might want to say when it's your turn (maybe even make a few notes on the back of the sheet if you want, to help you remember). Then you can give full attention to the person whose turn it is.

If you get "negative input,"
1. Use the data: What is the unhappiness telling you about what the person ideally wants?
2. Gently redirect: After a short time, guide them back.
3. Postpone: Lay that input aside temporarily, making a note to return to the topic later in the interview
4. Listen: If someone has strong feelings and really needs to be heard, let them get that out.

Options for How to Apply A.I. in an Organization

(adapted from *The A.I. Summit,* by Ludema et al., Berrett-Koehler, 2003)

AI Summit: Organizational members participate in a 3-5 day face-to-face process.
Core Team: A small group interviews a bunch of other people in the organization and draws from their experiences.
Project Team: A small group (for example, a process improvement or evaluation team) conducts an AI process focused on a specific project or topic.
Progressive AI Meetings: An organization or team goes through the phases over the course of 10-12 meetings that are each 2-4 hours long.
Whole System Dialogue: Everyone in the system engages in the phases over an extended period.
Positive Change Network: Members of the organization are trained in AI and provided with resources to initiate projects and share materials, stories, and best practices, in order to diffuse change capacity throughout the organization and foster an appreciative learning culture.
Mass Mobilization of Inquiry: Large numbers of interviews (thousands to millions), on a socially responsible topic, are conducted throughout a city, community, or the world.