

# Appreciative Inquiry

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## Overview

Appreciative inquiry (hereafter, AI) has been described as a way of thinking, specifically when focused on the task of achieving organizational change. The premise of AI is that whatever one desires to have more of, it already exists within organizations. As an act of aspirational cognition, AI obliges users to focus on increasing the supply of things they desire rather than confront error via conventional problem solving.

The power of AI is that it taps into the stories of what an organization's members believe is best (Bushe, 2001) and those stories can be used to create new futures for the organization, presuming sufficient will. This idea was expressed by Cooperrider (1990) as the "heliotropic hypothesis" – that organizations evolve toward the most positive images they hold and articulate about themselves (Bushe, 2001).

Categorically, AI falls within the domain of action research (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987). It is also tied to the emerging field of positive psychology. Philosophically, AI is an interpretivist approach relying on situated cognition.

As organizations have an inner dialogue composed of information exchanged by members, often through the form of stories, any changes to the content of these stories (i.e., framing or focusing them) changes the inner dialogue and hence the trajectory of the organization. This happens because, as Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros (2003: 29) note, "...organizations move toward what they study."

Insofar as design research is concerned, AI does reveal patterns of preference within an organizational population. AI values inquiry, dialogue and reflection – so long as they lead to clearer delineations of instances in which positive deviance has been beneficial.

AI emerged from the doctoral research of David Cooperrider at Case Western Reserve University. He studied the factors that contributed to the effective functioning of an organization (the Cleveland Clinic). In his dissertation, Cooperrider presented a set of AI principles, rationale and phases of inquiry. The main principles of AI are:

**Constructionism:** Organizational destiny and social knowledge are intimately connected, and "reality" is a product of the social interaction of organizational members.

**Simultaneity:** Inquiry and change occur simultaneously, hence all forms of inquiry are interventions. This places special emphasis on the selection and use of questions.

**Poetry:** An organization's destiny is written by its members, and the choice of their inquiry influences the direction of the organization.

**Anticipatory:** A vivid image of the future will enable an organization's members to decide how to realize that future.

**Positive Direction:** To change an organization needs to generate positive affect through social bonding. The latter are supported by efforts that tap into hope, inspiration and the joy of co-creation.

**Wholeness:** The inclusion of all stakeholders in a group process stimulates creativity and creates collective capacity.

**Enactment:** Positive change occurs when an organization's members have a vivid and shared model of a desirable future state, and serve as exemplars of the most prominent characteristics associated with that future state.

**Free Choice:** Performance is enhanced when individuals choose what and how to contribute to a collective effort.

In practice, AI reflects a set of core understandings about organizational and human dynamics (Hammond, 1996).

- First, that in every organization, there are some things that are known to work.
- Second, that what members focus on becomes the organization's reality.
- Third, that reality is created interactively with social groups and that differences are valuable.
- Fourth, that the questions asked of and by an organization's members influence the direction of the group by altering the group's beliefs and indeed, its shared mental models.
- Fifth, change is made more acceptable if an organization's members choose to carry forward the best parts of their past.

## **Use When**

An organization and its stakeholders contemplate direction within a context of uncertainty. I have found no limitations cited in the literature that preclude AI's use in non-Western cultural settings.

## **Use For**

Securing organizational change in a wide variety of settings. AI has been used successfully in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors.

Distilling and thereby uncovering deeply held organizational beliefs about shared values, practices, hopes and goals. These can all be inputs into the design of future products, services or experiences.

## **Advantages**

The definition of a future state and how to achieve it are rooted in organizational members' collective knowledge about what has worked well in the past based on the organization's strengths and assets.

AI works because it takes advantage of a well-known principle in psychology: that individuals have increased intrinsic motivation to act when they focus on past successes.

## **Limitations**

AI tends to be less effective in situations where an organization's members hold deeply seated and unexpressed resentments (Bushe, 2001). This limits their ability to imagine a positive future, especially if the resentment is associated with an element of real or perceived, and unredressed unfairness.

AI forgoes the prospective value of negative images and affect, which are eliminated from discussion by a methodological focus on those items deemed positive (Bushe, 2001). In other words, AI relies on a subset of all information as a basis for making choices.

In some organizations, imagining different futures may be seen as "fanciful thinking". Hence, a normatively rational organizational culture may serve,

inadvertently, to limit future prospects by muting the articulation of its' members most vivid hopes.

## Process

The basis of AI is the group and its collective beliefs and knowledge. Such a group can be homogeneous (e.g., an organization's members) or heterogeneous (an organization's members along with its stakeholders).

Cooperrider described the four distinct phases of AI:



**Discovery:** Participants engage in paired interviews with a colleague they interact with least, using a semi-structured interview guide. The guide generally focuses on three areas of discussion:

1. **Peak experience:** what were the conditions that contributed to the time in which an organizational member felt most alive, engaged and energized while performing the organization's work?

2. **Values:** What does the member value most about him/herself, the organization, and the work they do in their domain?
3. **Wishes:** What three things do members aspire to so that their organization is able to thrive and prosper in the future?

The importance of discovery is to remind participants of what success looked and felt like by activating vivid memories of experiencing it. Discovery also reminds participants that they are powerful – they are capable of experiencing success.

Thereafter, participants share their partner's stories in slightly larger groups. The idea here is that hearing one's story told by another deepens one's own understanding of the essence of the experience and enables one to see linkages with the stories of other organizational members. The stories contain vital information about success definitions and root causes, actual experience of organizational life, some subtleties associated with lived organizational culture, the nuances associated with shared experiences, standards for judging those experiences, and recommendations for action.

Thereafter the main themes are defined to initiate group reflection. These themes should be considered root causes of organizational performance that are used throughout the subsequent steps of AI.

**Dream:** In this step, participants imagine an idealized future state for the organization. A sample question that could prove valuable here might be:

*“Imagine that it is three years from now. You’re preparing for an awards ceremony that has recognized the value of the organization’s work. The Globe and Mail has asked you for an interview. You are quite proud to be part of your organization’s program, so you must be ready to answer a short list of their questions: what is happening that makes you proud? What are others talking about? What is happening inside your organization? What changed that has made this success possible and indeed, exemplary?”*

Participants are encouraged to be bold and realistic, though in all cases to stretch their imaginations by enlisting creative faculties to explain projected futures by building on known strengths and imagining the consequences of extraordinary efforts. This is often referred to as “visioning”.

The benefit of visioning is that it allows participants to collectively create a picture of a desirable shared future. The act of creation prepares participants for the challenges associated with implementation.

**Design:** Here the participants are asked to create statements, phrased in the present tense, that bridge between the current (known) state of the organization and the future (imagined, desired) state of the organization in three years' time. The point here is to connect "what is" with "what might be" through the concept of social architecture – those things present within an organization that are necessary for implementing its desired future state. Cooperrider et al. (2003) suggest that the following items be considered and represented in the statements of participants:

- Business processes
- Communications systems
- Culture
- Customer relations
- Education and training
- Leadership
- Management practices
- Policies
- Shared values
- Social responsibility
- Strategy
- Structure
- Systems
- Technology
- Beliefs about power and authority
- Relationships
- Governance structure
- Systems of knowledge management
- Practices and principles

This is considered to be the most challenging phase of AI. Consequently, researchers have developed guidelines for creating effective statements:

- Is it provocative (does it stretch, change, or interrupt the status quo)?
- Is it grounded in the organization's reality?
- Do the organization's members desire it?
- Is it stated affirmatively?
- Does it rely on others to be realized (here, reflecting Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development)?
- Is it participative?
- Can it stimulate intergenerational learning?

**Destiny:** This is the true translation of intent to action through implementation. Participants choose a topic to pursue based on their own preferences and motivations. Similar to a BarCamp-style conference, participants declare interests around key themes and group with like-minded others to develop plans

for implementation. This phase encourages participants to celebrate as well as build upon the work they have accomplished in the earlier phases.

Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) suggest that the following questions receive attention during this phase:

1. How will we learn about the gains we've already made? What tools will we use to sustain that learning?
2. How will we celebrate? What must happen to keep awareness of achievements and excitement about the future high? How could recognition inspire ongoing action?
3. What constrains and enables our ability to self-organize and take action (time, resources, decision rights, etc.)?
4. How shall we organize?
5. How do we support success once it emerges?

From my own experience working with organizations undertaking change initiatives, I suggest strongly that considerable attention be paid to communications and as well to changes in the configuration of the organization's resources so as to support and sustain change.

### **Analyzing the Data**

Vital in using this method is the search for commonly-shared views, which will recur throughout the AI process as themes or core ideas. Such themes must have the consent of a group to move forward to the next phase of the AI process. Analysis, such as that normally conducted using SAS or SPSS in quantitative settings, or qualitative analysis relying on software such as NVivo, does not pertain to this technique.

### **Other Uses**

- Strategic planning
- Cultural transformation
- Organizational redesign
- Increasing customer satisfaction
- Leadership development
- Post-merger integration
- Building alliances and partnerships
- Economic and social development
- Any initiative in which generative learning features

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## Sources

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- Hammond, S.A. 1996. *The Thin Book on Appreciative Inquiry*. Plano, TX: Thin Book Publishing.
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## Other Resources

[www.aipractitioner.com](http://www.aipractitioner.com)

<http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/>

<http://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/3684.html>

<http://www.appreciative-inquiry.org/AI-Life.htm>

<http://www.stipes.com/aichap2.htm#DocInfo>

<http://www.gervasebushe.ca/aiteams.htm>

<http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/practice/toolsFilm.cfm>

<http://www.taosinstitute.net/>