



Appreciative Inquiry

— A Paradigm Shift for Social Systems —

“Appreciative Inquiry” is an organizational development theory

where catching people doing right is more important than solving problems or fixing responsibility.

“The emotional structure of “organ”- izations replicates the emotional structure of the organisms we call families because, frankly, it’s the only way we know how to do it.” (Edwin Friedman)

1. What is A.I.? — A Bit More Than "Mom and Apple Pie"¹

- 1.1. Appreciative Inquiry (A.I.) is an imaginative approach to organizational study and transformation. It is intended to discover, understand and foster innovation in the internal social relationships and processes of an organization (church, family-run business, other organization).
- 1.2. Appreciative Inquiry is a paradigm shift (from a problem-focused model which usually creates more problems) for creating organizational or system change.
- 1.3. Appreciative Inquiry is designed to focus on creative conversations between people. A.I. is a process that seeks to bring all the relevant voices into a conversation. It involves all levels of a community who work together to co-create a desired future. A.I. is uniquely intended to discover, understand and foster innovative change.
- 1.4. “Seeking the Light” — A basic belief of Appreciative Inquiry is that organizations and individuals, like plants are “heliotropic” in nature, that is they move toward the light or the positive image. Results from research (placebo studies, the Pygmalion effect studies, positive imagery for athletes) confirm this: positive images create positive futures.
- 1.5. Appreciative Inquiry is a helpful intervention for marriage counselling (caring days procedure), child guidance (“blessing” nor “cursing”) or skill building for spiritual gift training.

2. “Dreaming” — Appreciative Inquiry as Creative Conversation

- 2.1. Appreciative Inquiry asks people to tell their stories about what works, to share their connections with others where they have been at their best, to talk about what is life giving and equitable. It assists people to imagine their organizations and communities in more affirming ways and to envision policies, practices and behaviors that promote equity and that enhance the life giving forces in relationships.

1 Appreciative Inquiry originated at the Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University by faculty members and graduate students (Suresh Srivastva, John Carter, David Cooperrider, Rita Williams and others).

- 2.2. Key questions in Appreciative Inquiry include (note: there are no “why” questions in A.I.):
- What are you doing now that is working well?
 - What assets do you and your colleagues bring to your mutual task?
 - How are you most resourceful when work is threatening or stressful?
 - What positive changes are you contributing to by being yourself within this system?
 - What are the best things about your relationships within your system?
 - Describe a circumstance in your family system or work community that made you feel loved.
- 2.3. Appreciative Inquiry seeks out the “best of what is” to help ignite the collective imagination of “what might be.” The aim is to generate knowledge that expands the realm of the possible. This helps people envision a collectively desired future and to carry forth their possibilities in ways that translate intention into reality.
- 2.4. Members are empowered and freed to create the processes they wish to use in order to put belief into practice and acquire their goals.
- 2.5. A.I. has at its core the belief that systems and organizations are affirming and that people in these systems want to see the institution thrive and succeed. (Boeing Aerospace chairman who has 350 managers reporting to him: “I have never had a manager who did not want to succeed” — What does this say about his leadership style?)

3. The Appreciative Inquiry Process

- 3.1. The A.I. process asks people to reflect on selected areas (usually presented as the designated problem or conflict) and dialogue with each other to discover when they and others have been at their best.
- 3.2. Participants in the inquiry describe the factors that they see that give life to the system and activate members' competencies and energies.
- 3.3. The dialogue does not solicit facts nor opinions. It looks for examples, stories and metaphors. Each person helps others draw out the particular and specific moments, events and stories of the best that already exists in the area under study.
- For example – “Bob is the best manager that this department ever had” is an opinion that puts life into Bob but takes it from the system. The Appreciative Inquirer responds, “Give me a picture of what Bob did that made the system work.” The intervention puts the power back into the system.
- 3.4. The approach also allows space for people to name how they would envision the best in what ever topic is being studied.
- 3.5. The ideals are grounded in reality (what is) and this combination of ideals and reality open the status quo to transformational change in the system. With the preferred future defined

it becomes possible to describe, develop and create the systems and support to actualize the plans.

4. Appreciative Inquiry and Conflict Theory

- 4.1. Appreciative Inquiry sees conflict (or “stuck-ness”, etc.) as an opportunity to expand the realm of the things possible to what is preferred (the “preferred future”).
- 4.2. Conflict is an opportunity for change. Therefore conflict is an advantage to be appreciated by the inquirer.
- 4.3. Appreciative Inquiry believes that people change pursuing their strengths rather than putting their energy into solving their weaknesses. Therefore the inquirer seeks to discover what works, what is healthy, and what allows people to be at their best rather than focus on the problem that is creating the conflict.
- 4.4. Participants in an inquiry have rediscovered dynamic memories of moments of success and as a group or family have created new, positive and affirming energy for the work at hand.
- 4.5. The process is iterative and generative, and people leave the inquiry with a sense of commitment and confidence in themselves and the future. They learn how to build more successes on the successes they have already had.
- 4.6. It is this energy and commitment to being more than conflict managers that distinguishes the generative process of an Appreciative Inquiry.
- 4.7. It is a living process that continues in new, daily choices and activities in which people engage in their personal and organizational lives.

5. From the Culture of Criticism to Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry is a reality-based theory in organizational development that stands on 4 basic principles.

- 5.1. Appreciative inquiry rather than corrective rule: The consultant or leader is responsible to explore the life-giving force or strength of the organization (or church) by focusing on what is good, being accomplished, or the strengths (appreciative rather than corrective in focus).
- 5.2. Applicable outcomes rather than theoretical learning: The consultant or leader is required to be practical and to provide consultation or leadership that is applicable and doable. The purpose is change not insight.
- 5.3. Provocative interventions rather than reinforcing moralisms: The consultant or leader is responsible to make change through provocation rather than predictably reinforcing the status quo or theoretical moralisms.

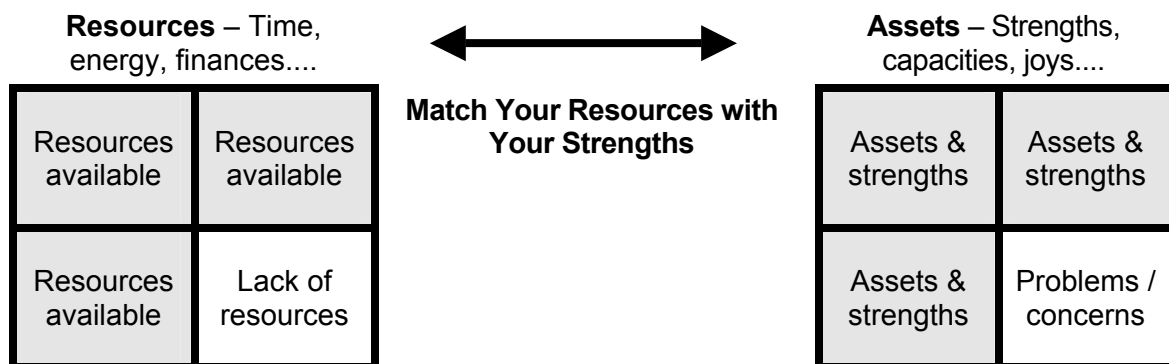
- 5.4. Collaborative and consultative rather than dictatorial or telling: The consultant or leader works collaboratively with stakeholders and constituents alike.

6. “Org” Theory and A.I. – Looking With an Appreciative Eye

- 6.1. The creators of this human / organization development theory outline the basic premise of Appreciative Inquiry this way:

“Organizations are centers of human relatedness, first and foremost, and relationships thrive where there is an appreciative eye — when people see the best in one another, when they can share their dreams and ultimate concerns in affirming ways.”
- 6.2. The focus of Appreciative Inquiry is not the righting of wrongs but the building of strengths. It is not problem / conflict focused but solution / resource oriented.
- 6.3. Consultants and leaders in organizational development usually focus on problem-solving and assessing what’s lacking or going wrong in churches, private societies, mission organizations, etc. Appreciative Inquiry is the opposite of this.
- 6.4. Appreciative Inquiry is a form of organizational study that selectively seeks to locate, highlight, and illuminate the "life-giving" forces of an organization’s existence.
- 6.5. Appreciative Inquiry is a selected perceptual process which collects / apprehends what is instead of what is not. In contrast to reengineering, which seeks to create "ideal" processes that may not grow from an organization's existing strengths, Appreciative Inquiry seeks to identify those strengths and then to capitalize on them.
- 6.6. It draws a picture of these strengths through discussions and interviews with people in the organization, who, by the nature of this interaction, are invited to talk about those elements they most value and have been most successful exploiting.

7. A Factoid – Problem Finding and Problem Resolving



- 7.1. Put the maximum % of your resources (left side of the graph above) into the maximum percentages of your assets (right side of the graph above).

- 7.2. If 75% of your marriage / church / mission is pretty good, then put 75% of your resources (left side of the graph) into the 75% of your assets or strengths (right side of the graph). And ... put 25% of your resources into the 25% of the problems or concerns.
- 7.3. If you put maximum % of resources into your problems – you will continually find more problems and solve less of them.
- 7.4. If you focus the greater percentage of your resources towards your assets or strengths, you will solve more problems and you will work to build a preferred future.
- 7.5. It is a truism in the therapy world, that problem focused families / couples find more problems to **not** solve than do solution oriented families / couples.
- 7.6. Solution oriented systems that make any constructive change increase energy to increase positive resources in life.

8. Transition Stress — Appreciative Inquiry in Succession Planning

- Succession planning is when leadership transitions from the established to the unknown. The change to new leadership or a preferred future, is intensely stressful all the while the change might be good. Please note that there is a difference between the goodness of the change and the costliness of the transition. It is in these highly potentiated situations that conflict arises and where Appreciative Inquiry is most helpful.

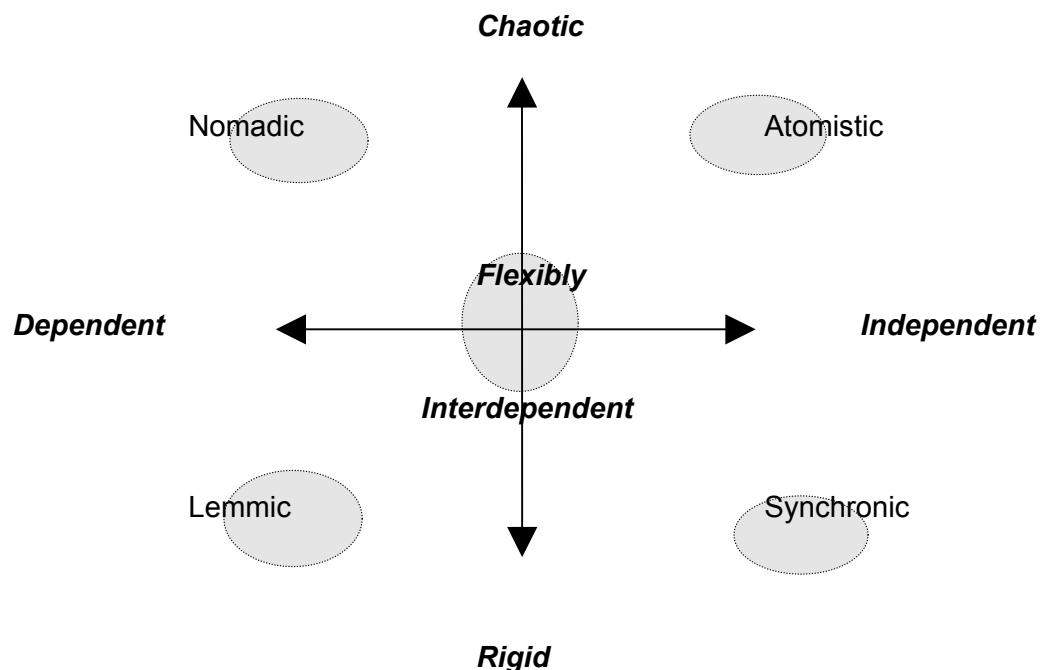
How Appreciative Inquiry assists in succession planning:

- 8.1. Highlights Values: Appreciative Inquiry is an intervention that highlights the values of an organizational system and helps build consensus around what is important to individuals in the organization.
- 8.2. Ideals of the System: Appreciative Inquiry is designed to elicit the ideals of the human system and to give substance to those ideas through a concrete interactive process.
- 8.3. Heightens Commitment: Appreciative Inquiry mobilizes the maximum amount of commitment and increases members' confidence in what it is doing.
- 8.4. Adaptation: Appreciative Inquiry permits adaptation to the complexities of environment change and structural change in the organization.

9. Differentiation: The Successful Environment of Appreciative Inquiry

- Appreciative Inquiry works effectively in undifferentiated systems (where “I-ness” is sacrificed for “we-ness”) especially in church or missions systems where the greater “family” or team goal is primary over personal or individual goals.
 - 9.1. Undifferentiation occurs (and Appreciative Inquiry is especially effective) when there is a high degree of emotional interdependency (enmeshment or over-closeness) in the relationship system.

- 9.2. Undifferentiation occurs (and Appreciative Inquiry is especially effective) with the extent to which its business is defined as “life.”
- 9.3. Undifferentiation occurs (and Appreciative Inquiry is especially effective) an organization or church will mirror in its own life the emotional process of the leadership family. This is especially true in small town churches (or rural churches) or multi-generational churches (e.g. “father to son” churches).
- 9.4. Undifferentiation occurs (and Appreciative Inquiry is especially effective) with work systems that deal with the basic stresses of life (medicine, law, labor unions, psychiatric hospitals, school systems, as well as churches). All of these systems are particularly susceptible to the rules of family process — including those rules that govern who is to become sick, who is good / bad, who succeeds / fails, etc.
- 9.5. Undifferentiation occurs (and Appreciative Inquiry is especially effective) when the consultant / leader can identify a clear “I.P.” meaning the identified problem person. This may be a rebellious teenager in an angry family, or a chronically late employee in a business, as examples.
- 9.6. Undifferentiation occurs (and Appreciative Inquiry is especially effective) where the clergy leader(s) is especially unable to distinguish between home life and professional life. The question for these leaders is always “how to turn off” or “how to not care so much.” The spouse and congregation are worried about “burn out” (or what might be called, in other circles, a “reactive depression”).



- 9.7. Undifferentiation occurs (and Appreciative Inquiry is especially effective) to the extent to which some lay people become involved (over-involved or enmeshed; under-involved or cut-off) in their church system. Appreciative Inquiry helps these “D.P.s” (displaced persons) find their place again. This may have more to do with unresolved family of origin issues than it does with any other issue (e.g. that this pastor is the best / worst).

- 9.8. Undifferentiation occurs (and Appreciative Inquiry is especially effective) when interlocking emotional triangles between personal / family life and congregational life run amok. (This is the natural consequence of emotional displacement.)
- 9.9. Undifferentiation occurs (and Appreciative Inquiry is especially effective) when desiring to understand differentiation between openness and closedness in the church, family or business system.

10. **“Solving Problems” Using Appreciative Inquiry (Not “Problem-Solving”)**

- 10.1. Appreciative Inquiry requires a skill building orientation in the process of organizational transformation and leadership. Solving problems is not achieved by problem-solving but by adding essential skill sets.
- 10.2. Appreciative Inquiry focuses on developing new change processes where there will be high value added. The focus is on adding value rather than subtracting problems. (Note: there will always more problems to subtract if problem-solving is the leader’s focus.)
- 10.3. Appreciative Inquiry establishes “truth” by systemic consultation; that is, leading and listening along the channels of the hierarchy and not stopping at the front / top of the hierarchy.
- 10.4. Appreciative Inquiry builds consultancy groups or learning partnerships in areas of competency and responsibility. Solving problems with the end in mind is best achieved by those who know the end in mind.

11. **The Four Steps of an Inquiry**

- 11.1. Begin with appreciation — "Inquiry into the art of the possible in organizational life begins with appreciation."
- Every system works to some degree, and a primary task of management and members in organizations is to discover, describe and explain those “exceptional moments” which give life to the system and activate members competencies and energies.
 - The appreciative approach takes its inspiration from “what is.” Valuing, learning, and inspired understanding - these are the aims of the appreciative spirit.
- 11.2. Application — "Inquiry into what is possible must be applicable."
- An important focus of organizational study is to lead to the generation of knowledge that can be used, applied and validated in action.
 - A central component of management is to know organizations. Knowing sets the stage for the practical decisions required of members of the organization.
 - The aim of an appreciative inquiry is to generate new knowledge which expands the "realm of the possible" and helps members of an organization envision a collectively

desired future and to carry forth that vision in ways that success-fully translate images into possibility, intentions into reality and belief into practice.

11.3. Provocative Propositions — "Inquiry into what is possible is provocative."

- An organization is an open-ended, indeterminate system capable of becoming more than it is at any given moment and of learning how to actively take part in guiding its own evolution.
- Appreciative knowledge of "what is" becomes provocative to the extent that the learning takes on a normative value for members. In this way appreciative inquiry allows us to use systematic management analysis to help the organization's members shape an effective future according to their own imaginative and moral purposes.

11.4. Collaborative Interaction and Action — "Inquiry into the human potential of organizational life must be collaborative."

- This principle assumes an inseparable relationship between the process of inquiry and its content. A unilateral approach to the study of social innovation is a direct negation of the phenomenon itself.
- In its most practical construction, appreciative inquiry is a form of organizational study that selectively seeks to locate, highlight and illuminate what are referred to as the "life-giving" forces of the organization's existence.

12. Appreciative Inquiry: Some Crucial Assertions

- Knowledge and organizational destiny are interwoven. To be effective -- as leaders, managers, or as agents of change -- all of us must be adept in the art of understanding, reading and analyzing organizations as living human constructions. Knowing (organizations) stands at the center of any management task. The way we know is fateful.
- The seeds of change are implicit in the first questions asked. The questions we ask set the stage for what we find, and what we find (data) becomes the material out of which the future is imagined and constructed. Since energy flows where attention goes, it is not too strong to say: the first question is fateful.
- The most important resource we have for generating constructive organizational change is our cooperative imagination and mind (and our capacity to unleash the imagination and mind of groups) Appreciative Inquiry is a way of reclaiming our imaginal competence.
- Unfortunately, the conventional "habitus mentalis" — habitual styles of thought, preconscious background assumptions, root metaphors and rules of analysis by which we come to define our organizations in a particular way -- has constrained our managerial imagination and mind.
- Building On Strengths — Larry Rosenthal was an athlete who faced criticism and came back to prove his detractors wrong. "He grew up on the sand lots in baseball's early years and eventually made it all the way to the mighty New York Yankees, playing eight years for them in the outfield. However, in the battle for the 1944 pennant race, the Yankees traded him to the lowly Philadelphia Athletics. But, as any good story would have it, he had the last laugh. It was a ninth-inning home run for the A's by Rosenthal that knocked the Yankees out of the pennant race, giving the pennant that year for the first

and only time to the St. Louis Browns. Rosenthal built on his strengths and found success even with a disappointing trade. Taken from "The Issachar Factor," by Glen Martin and Gary McIntosh, published by Broadman and Holman Publishers, Nashville, Tennessee, 1993 (p. 75)

- Trouble — We should never attempt to bear more than one kind of trouble at a time. Some people try to bear three kinds - all they have had, all they have now, and all they expect to have.
- Service — Where the heart is willing it will find a thousand ways, but where it is unwilling it will find a thousand excuses. (Unknown)
- God Is At Work In Your Life — Have you ever watched an artist painting a landscape in oils? While he's working, while you're standing up close to the canvas, it doesn't look like much at all. Just splashes of color that don't have much purpose or connection with reality. But when he's finished, when he adds those last brush strokes, and we step back to look, we can see what he had in mind all the time. And it's beautiful. . . . God has a plan for our lives, and when He's done with this particular landscape, it's going to be wonderful and perfect. We'll be able to see His hand in all of it. (Robin Lee Hatcher, "The Forgiving Hour," Waterbrook Press, 1999).
- Success, Stewardship — "[My wife and I] measure the success of the year on how much we give away. The bulk of it goes to church and related activities." (John Grisham, in USA Today, 2/11/99)

References and Reading —

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- Cooperrider, DL, "Positive Image, Positive Action: The Affirmative Basis of Organizing" in Srivastva & Cooperrider & Associates, *Appreciative Management and Leadership*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco. 1990.