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# **Appreciative Inquiry: Applying positive psychology in real world change.**

## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** To explain the Appreciative Inquiry Change Methodology and to demonstrate how it can be applied to a specific work challenge.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This paper first explains the Appreciative Inquiry Method and gives an account of how the approach was applied to a Sales Team Development Event.

**Findings:** Appreciative Inquiry is a change approach that is growing in popularity. This paper demonstrates the flexibility of this approach with in the context of change and development. In the case study under examination the incorporation of Appreciative Inquiry based practice enhanced both the development experience and post event performance.

**Practical Implications:** This paper gives clear guidance on the basic model of Appreciative Inquiry and how it can be practically employed in a familiar context.

**Originality/value:** Appreciative Inquiry offers an alternative approach to organisational development to either personality based or problem solving based development. By calling on the human facilities of imagination, emotion, conversation, engagement, orientation, and self-direction it offers a truly psychological approach to human group development

**Keywords:** Organisation development, Change management, Positive psychology, Appreciative Inquiry, Team Development, Sales.

## **What is Appreciative Inquiry?**

Appreciative Inquiry is a change methodology that has been developed in the United States over the last 25 years. Its initial and chief proponent is David Cooperrider (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987) of Case Western University who first developed the approach during his Ph.D studies. Since then practitioners interested in a truly different approach to change and development have enthusiastically adopted it.

## **Why appreciative?**

The fundamental difference Appreciative Inquiry brings lies in its basic premise: that an organisation is a living human system, not a machine, and that therefore its growth is nurtured through human growth processes. A key human process necessary for growth is that of recognition and appreciation. Psychologists highlighted the importance of human contact and interaction to human development over 50 years ago, discovering that food and water were insufficient on their own to promote healthy infant growth (Harlow 1962, Bowlby 1951). To thrive human infants need to experience being caressed, being looked at and spoken to; they need to receive love and attention. In the same way Cooperrider demonstrates that human systems such as teams and organisations grow through the process of being appreciated.

## **Why inquiry?**

The other fundamental difference Appreciative Inquiry offers is an understanding that we live in a socially constructed reality (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005). Social constructionism is the idea that we don't see or interact with the world 'as it is' but as we perceive it to be; we then act on the basis of our perceptions as reality. Interestingly this idea that the world we live in is a projection from our brains onto the world is increasingly being supported by neuro-psychology (Damasio 2000). However the challenge of sense-making extends beyond the individual. To live successfully in groups we need to co-create a shared sense of the world to be able to interact meaningfully together. In other words perception and sense-making are, at heart, social activities or processes. Asking questions is an important sense-making and developmental process. Questions do more than generate information, they are an important social process that direct our attention.

When our attention is directed in a particular direction it is like shining a high-powered light on a previously murky corner: we may have known it was there but we have never really looked at it before. In the same way questions that direct our attention towards unconsidered, unarticulated, less explored areas of our organisation, team or life can reveal hidden resources, strengths and possibilities. Within Appreciative Inquiry questioning is itself seen as a powerful tool for change, not just a precursor to change.

## **How do you do it?**

The AI literature provides a clear methodology which can be followed (Copperrider & Whitney, 2005). However, both the models and the language has developed within the USA and as such practitioners need to give consideration to how these models and the language translate to their own national and regional context. Some work has been done to explore these issues in the application to the UK and European Union (Lewis, Passmore, & Cantore, 2007).

## **Appreciative Inquiry Topic**

Initially the team, group or organisation needs to identify a topic for investigation. For many of us our default mode is to focus on a problem or problem area. Appreciative Inquiry encourages, indeed requires, us to focus instead on an area we want to grow. We need to identify and focus on what we want more of, not what we want less of. We don't want more problems therefore we need to focus our attention on something other than the problem. So if the problem is falling sales, we might want to focus on rising sales. If the problem is a lack of team-work, we might want to inquire into effective team-work. Appreciative Inquiry helps us to appreciate that the terrain is uneven, that is to say that while sales overall might be falling, there will be differentials for each person, each product and each client. By focussing on the sales that are rising, not falling, or falling more slowly we can start to see what we are doing that is having the effect we want. In essence it's about learning from our successes, learning from what is going right, and focusing on what we want.

Careful thought and reflection needs to go into the framing of the final topic and of the initial question. As Cooperrider, Whitney & Stravos (2005) note "the seeds of change are implicit in the first question asked". Once the Appreciative Inquiry topic has been identified there is a four-stage process for change.

## **Discovery**

The discovery phase is about discovering the organisation or team's key strengths and appreciating the 'best of what is'. This phase is about understanding what gives life to the group and what has brought it this far or to this point in its history. The discovery phase is about exploring and uncovering the unique qualities of the group, its leadership, its values and its resources, which have contributed to its life and success. In essence the group inquires into 'what is working?' to find 'the best of what is'.

The phase revolves around the capturing of this information initially through co-conducting interviews, then mapping the elements that emerge from the interviews to identify common themes and stories and from here communicating these stories and their meta-themes back to the wider group. In this way (by focussing attention and light on these areas) hidden resources and strengths are brought into focus and to the group's attention, becoming available for use.

## **Dream**

The dream phase is about bringing out the dreams people have for their future within the organisation or team that grow out from what they have already discovered they can do. By creating visions of the best possible futures that are clearly grounded in their experience of the possible, people are encouraged to create achievable visions of how things could be. These visions act as attractors for their behaviour. That is, as living systems we will orient our behaviour towards attractive futures.

Also, by encouraging people to talk about positive experiences and dreams, Appreciative Inquiry encourages people to feel more hopeful and optimistic about the future which releases another source of energy potential, that of positive emotional states (Seligman 2006, Snyder, Rand and Sigmon 2005, Fredrickson 1998.)

## **Design**

The design phase is concerned with making decisions about the high level actions that need to be taken to support the delivery of the dream. This involves moving to agree a common future dream and the actions to support this. At this point the organising question is 'how do we need to be, to be this future?' In a way this is an exercise in reverse engineering.

## **Destiny**

The destiny phase is concerned with planning, and forming action groups to take forward the actions identified during the discovery, dream and design phases. This involves a celebration of both the learning identified so far and of the start of a process to move forward. The development of detailed actions and the formation of groups are to help ensure the continuation of the process of real change begun in these four days.

## **Using Appreciative Inquiry to support a Regional Sales Team Development day**

### **Background**

The team was one of four regional sales teams that covered the UK for a conglomerate of manufacturing companies. The wider organisational strategy was to move towards more integrated selling. Team members were being asked to actively sell their sister organisations' people and product in when they had the opportunity. The team in question had also decided to set itself a very ambitious overall sales target. The Regional Manager approached HR about holding team day to help the team move towards a more integrated, cross-border complex way of working. He wanted to help his sales team change their behaviour from their habitual individual, self-contained, 'my patch' sales orientation to a greater team orientation in their selling behaviour.

This was a very exciting invitation for the HR department as sales teams are notoriously reluctant to take time away from 'on the road' selling. The HR director invited one of the authors to assist with the development and delivery of the day. It was decided to build a day that called on a number of essentially constructionist and positive methodologies to meet the needs of this action-orientated pragmatic group. It should be noted that the regional manager had recognised the need to support cooperative behaviour with cooperatively obtainable rewards. A team bonus was available if the team target was achieved. The account below will pick out particular parts of the day's activities that were informed by an appreciative inquiry approach.

### **Introductions**

As part of the initial introductions group members were asked to identify an opportunity they knew existed that required a co-operative approach, and the possible sales value of that opportunity. Each person was able to identify such an opportunity, and some gave examples of such work currently under way. Reflection on the list revealed that there were huge sales potential in these untapped opportunities. This question acted as a *Discovery* question. It revealed what was there but was unfocussed upon. It revealed hidden resource. It revealed 'hidden', in as much as not publicly shared, behaviour that existed and was already pointing in the desired future direction. It also started to create a *Dream* by creating an attractive future (potential sales there for the picking).

### **Orientation**

The regional manager in his orientation talk for the day was charged with creating a *Dream* of what they could achieve. The dream he chose to focus on was one of beating the current best performing region. Being top of the sales table was a vision that was powerfully attractive for this competitive bunch of people. He spoke with conviction of his belief that this was possible and about how satisfying it would feel. This again was a process of creating attractive visions of the future.

### **Us as a team**

Team members had been asked to bring an item that they treasured as a resource and to share its significance to them and how it related to other strengths they brought. Despite the fact that some participants had to make a hasty choice from what was to hand the exercise was powerfully revealing of the strengths and passions that people brought to the sales challenge. This can be seen as a further exercise in *Discovery*. The team discovered more about the resources they had to help them achieve their challenge.

### **Exercise debrief**

After a sales pitch and presentation exercise, the team were asked to reflect on how they had worked and how they had drawn on each other's strengths. The facilitators also fed in their observations of strengths. This can be seen as an extension of the

*Discovery* process. It became apparent that the 'technical expert' on a particular piece of kit was not necessarily the most engaging and persuasive speaker. The team were beginning to discover how to make more effective sales presentations – how to do more of what worked.

### **View from the mountain top**

Towards the end of the day the group were given the task of visualising how it would be to be standing on the top of their mountain looking down ('Climbing the Mountain' was a unifying theme for the day – they had constructed a collage of their particular mountain earlier in the day). Standing at the top of the mountain looking down on the other teams, dreaming of what the bonus money could buy etc. was clearly a fun, energising experience. This activity is effectively *Dreaming*

### **10% exercise**

Again towards the end of the day the group were given the task of identifying three relatively small practical and immediate things they could easily do that would help this dream become more likely. In this way *Design and Delivery* were addressed together. In this instance we weren't looking for large-scale change but more for a 10% adjustment that would grow as it became self-reinforcing over time.

### **Evaluation**

Despite the initial scepticism about the value of time away from the road from some experienced salesmen, all participants rated the day as being very productive, fun and useful. The Manager (commissioner) was very pleased with the way it had gone. The Manager reported shortly afterwards that more cross-boundary co-operative behaviour is happening in the team – in pockets and amongst particular pairings or groupings (that's the 10% change) and that they are well on their way to meet their target. Another sales team requested the same event shortly afterwards.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has outlined the methodology of Appreciative Inquiry and also given an account of using Appreciative Inquiry creatively in a Sales Team Development context. It has demonstrated the extreme flexibility and versatility of this approach. Further on through its use of conversation, creation and connection helps those in organisations to grow towards their vision for the future.

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