

Organizational Change Management: Principles of Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is about changing social systems, which naturally evolve towards positive images they hold of themselves. The underlying effectiveness of AI lies within a simple approach that helps an organization consider what is inherently best about itself and to create a new and positive image to guide its self-organizing processes.

By mBridge Solutions

AI begins with the assumption that every organization has strengths and capabilities that give life, support vitality, and lead to successful outcomes.



Emphasis is placed on socially constructing what individuals want to achieve rather than on what problems need to be fixed.

Through social construction, an organization can enact a positive reality to achieve its desired future.

A much better outcome than focusing on deficits and fixing problems, which is less likely to sustain organization change. AI overcomes limitations and creativity stagnation, which are the hallmark of deficit-based organization change approaches where the objective is to close gaps and achieve a predefined status quo. With AI, the focus is on organizational strengths, creativity, and innovation.

The purpose of this article is to describe how AI can guide organizations to a more positive approach toward change; an approach which

allows an organization to focus and build upon the best of what it has to offer.

Appreciative Inquiry Approach to Change

How is AI different from other organization change approaches? One primary difference is that AI promotes connections among positivity, inquiry, vocabulary, hope, and life-giving forces.

With AI there is a basic belief that how we talk about organizing influences how we organize. And the words we use to talk about organizing are influenced by the questions we ask.

Hope is an integral component of organizational transformation. It develops within an organization when its members build cooperative relationships with one another, feel able and empowered to shape their future, and can work together to understand and define shared values and aspirations. Stories are collected to provide context and richness – much more than simple objective data collected during deficit-based approaches.



When we focus on problems that need to be fixed, we are in reality approaching change from a deficit perspective. We focus on what is wrong or lacking. With a deficit-based approach, we identify a problem, gather data, analyze it, define alternative solutions to resolve the problem, and then develop a plan of action.

The tendency to engage in deficit discussions keeps us from being creative, innovative, and collaborative.

Approaching change from a deficit perspective results in a slow process that emphasizes correcting the problem in order to reestablish the ideal state. It does not result in creative outcomes and is likely to create a defensive response within the organization to deflect blame for the cause of the problem.

Many people and organizations find themselves motivated to change only when their problems are bad enough to cause them to change. This works for a while, but the change process runs out of steam as soon as the problems driving the change become less pressing.

Principles of Appreciative Inquiry

AI, at its core, represents a generative approach toward creating something new. It suggests that individuals create their own sense of reality.



The collaborative approach of AI, to include as many participants as possible, contributes to building strong relationships among the participants and a sense of co-ownership of the positive future they have constructed together.

The questions we decide to ask ourselves will direct the change we decide to make. Different questions can lead to different paths. The questions selected will determine the change that creates, or constructs, the future reality.

Through asking different questions, we can reconsider our goals and what to focus on. We are prompted to look at things differently. AI shifts our focus from the problems of an organization we need to fix toward looking for the best in an organization in order to focus and drive positive change.



The ability to create a new and positive image of a future is part of the generative aspect of AI. It highlights the value and effect of positive thinking and energy.

A positive focus creates energy that is sustaining rather than draining. "Building and sustaining momentum for change requires large amounts of positive affect and social bonding – things like hope, excitement, inspiration, caring, camaraderie, sense of urgent purpose, and sheer joy in creating something meaningful together" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000).

This drives individuals toward change and goal achievement.

Human beings have an intrinsic need to create value and are driven toward attaining goals. Victor Frankl suggested that "man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a 'secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives."

The goal of AI is to create a future vision of a life-giving organization for individuals to work toward achieving. To accomplish this, AI does not dictate a formal work plan of activities to measure progress toward achieving a desired change. Instead, AI emphasizes the future vision itself. Individuals are given the flexibility to determine the best course of action to achieve the vision.

AI reminds us that ...

- we can create our own reality,
- the questions we inquire about will influence what we decide to change,
- we should be creative and look at things differently,

- we can look to an image of the future to guide our actions today, and
- we can gain energy from positive thought.

Collectively, they tell us we can create our own positive future and guide our actions toward achieving it.

To find out more about Appreciative Inquiry and how it can help you, check out these resources:

Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change by David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney

Case Western University, Weatherhead School of Management

Weatherhead.case.edu/centers/fowler/business/appreciative-inquiry