Appreciative Inquiry Characteristics and the Four-D Model

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is based on five characteristics and is practiced using the Four-D Model as a process to help an organization to help an organization consider what is inherently best about itself and to create a new and positive image to guide its self-organizing process.

By mBridge Solutions

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has five important characteristics that enable the creation of new futures in support of the organization's highest values and aspirations: strength-based, artful search, collaborative, inclusive, and generative.

Strength-based	an AI approach begins with the assumption that every human system already has strengths. It involves searching for the antecedents, catalysts, and supporting factors that embolden and promote an enduring spirit – the central strengths and competencies that contribute to the exceptional potential and vitality of the system.
Artful search	the 'art of appreciation' is the art of discovering and valuing those factors that give life to any organization or group. Primarily through interviewing and storytelling, the best of the past is discovered to set the stage for effective imagining of what could be.
Collaborative	AI is a collaborative effort – people together discover and create that which is healthy, successful, and positive in organizational life.
Inclusive	AI invites a widening circle of voices, creating opportunities and forums for surfacing inspirational stories. This voicing of new possibilities and new conversations of hope and inspiration unleashes a vocabulary of positive possibilities that challenge the status quo.
Generative	any system's imagined future is embedded in the everyday conversations and stories articulated in meetings, hallways discussions, etc. AI fosters a dialogue that cultivates scenarios and theories about what leads to the 'good;' to more cooperation, to higher performing work teams, or to higher margins, for example. This generates new words, categories, images, supportive activities, and positive energy to work together.

Appreciative Inquiry Four-D Model

Appreciative Inquire consists of four steps: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny.

All four steps are linked to an important affirmative inquiry topic that provides direction for the inquiry. Emphasis is placed on an affirmative inquiry rather than problem resolution as found in deficit-based approaches.

The AI inquiry question should be framed such that it generates hope, interest, positive anticipation, and innovation. For example, rather than inquiring on what employees don't like about their work environment, an appreciative inquiry would focus on what excites employees about their work, their teams, and their company.

Discovery Step

The Discovery step concentrates on the best of the past as it relates to the chosen affirmative topic. Participants conduct interviews to identify strengths and positive aspects of the organization. Through an intentional protocol, questions are asked to solicit stories and experiences of when an organizational factor was at its very best, most effective, most prevalent, etc. The search is for what the organization does well at its core.

Participants consider the distinctive strengths that given the organization life and the underlying causes for the life-giving factors. The collective interviews begin the positive outlook and excitement for the future. In addition, they provide a platform for creative and innovative thinking that is not as easily achieved through a deficit, problem solving approach.

Dream Step

The Dream step takes the best of what the organization already is from the Discovery step and expands participants' thinking to what could be in the future. Through discussion, possibilities and dreams begin to form and are expressed as vision of a better world, a powerful purpose, and a compelling statement of strategic intent.

The participants create a story of images to describe what the desired future state looks like. They are asked to imagine what they would see, what would be happening, and who would be involved as if they were living in that future state. From their imaginings, participants can identify the common elements of their desired future state.

Design Step

The Design step defines the structural form necessary to support the future vision developed in the Dream step. It creates the core structural elements—leadership, reward systems, and so on—generate principles and propositions that become the foundation that support projects and activities. In essence, the participants transform their stories, dreams, ideas, and images of the future into aspirational statements of possibilities of what the organization could become in order to achieve their dream. These statements or propositions are vital in that they serve as guides, even motivating tenets, for expanding the system's current cooperative capacity to new heights in order to achieve what is now collectively desired.

Destiny Step

The objective of the Destiny step is to inspire people to create a shared, positive vision of the future that guides their actions toward constructing their future. Participants develop action plans and initiatives to create and deliver their dreams for their desired future state. The continued connection among the AI participants is important during this step.

To find out more about Appreciative Inquiry and how it can help your organization, 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