

## The Appreciative Inquiry Model

The theory's central management insight is that teams, organizations and society evolve in whatever direction we collectively, passionately and persistently ask questions about.

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Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a method for studying and changing social systems (groups, organizations, communities) that advocates collective inquiry into the best of what is in order to imagine what could be, followed by collective design of a desired future state that is compelling and thus, does not require the use of incentives, coercion or persuasion for planned change to occur. Developed and extended since the mid 1980s primarily by students and faculty of the Department of Organizational Behavior at Case Western Reserve University, AI revolutionized the field of organization development and was a precursor to the rise of positive organization studies and the strengths based movement in American management. The following entry describes the principles of AI, the most common methods, and the impact of AI.

### FUNDAMENTALS

Appreciative Inquiry is a response to the centrality of problem-solving in managerial work and the classical action research approach to organizational inquiry and

change. The originator of AI, David Cooperrider, emphasizes the limitations of problem solving for expanding human horizons and possibilities. Pointing out that the most powerful force for change is a new idea, Cooperrider argues that we need forms of inquiry and change that are generative: they help us discover what could be, rather than try to fix what is. Responding to the postmodernist argument that all social research is inherently biased by the positioning of the researcher, he suggests this is not a reason to give up the pursuit of knowledge. On the contrary, it frees us to take the idea that organizations are made and imagined to its logical conclusion: that what we choose to study and how we study it creates, as much as it discovers, the world. Therefore a wide field of creative, positive, possibility beckons to us.

The AI model is based on the assumptions that organizations are socially constructed phenomena, which have no tangible reality, and that ways of organizing are limited only by human imagination and the agreements people make with each other. It seeks to create processes of inquiry that will result in better, more effective, convivial, sustainable and vital social systems. It assumes this requires widespread engagement by those who will ultimately implement change.

## Principles of Appreciative Inquiry

For the first 15 or so years after the publication of his seminal 1987 paper on Appreciative Inquiry, Cooperrider resisted calls to write a book on how to do it. Instead he wanted people to focus on the principles of the model and encouraged widespread innovation in methods. As a result, many ways of doing AI have proliferated and it is inaccurate to say there is any one way to do it. The initial set of principles for AI was that the inquiry should begin with appreciation, should be collaborative, should be provocative, and should be applicable. Later, Cooperrider and Diana Whitney published a set of five principles that are widely cited and applied.

1) The **constructionist principle** proposes that what we believe to be true determines what we do, and thought and action emerge out of relationships. Through the language and discourse of day to day interactions, people co-construct the organizations they inhabit. The purpose of inquiry is to stimulate new ideas, stories and images that generate new possibilities for action.

2) The **principle of simultaneity** proposes that as we inquire into human systems we change them and the seeds of change, the things people think and talk about, what they discover and learn, are implicit in the very first questions asked. Questions are never neutral, they are fateful, and social systems move in the direction of the

questions they most persistently and passionately discuss.

3) The **poetic principle** proposes that organizational life is expressed in the stories people tell each other every day, and the story of the organization is constantly being co-authored. The words and topics chosen for inquiry have an impact far beyond just the words themselves. They invoke sentiments, understandings, and worlds of meaning. In all phases of the inquiry effort is put into using words that point to, enliven and inspire the best in people.

4) The **anticipatory principle** posits that what we do today is guided by our image of the future. Human systems are forever projecting ahead of themselves a horizon of expectation that brings the future powerfully into the present as a mobilizing agent. Appreciative Inquiry uses artful creation of positive imagery on a collective basis to refashion anticipatory reality.

5) The **positive principle** proposes that momentum and sustainable change requires positive affect and social bonding. Sentiments like hope, excitement, inspiration, camaraderie and joy increase creativity, openness to new ideas and people, and cognitive flexibility. They also promote the strong connections and relationships between people, particularly between groups in conflict, required for collective inquiry and change.

### **The Appreciative Inquiry Method**

In the late 1990s the “4D” model emerged and has become strongly associated with AI. This model identifies four phases in AI that occur after the “affirmative topic” is chosen. The affirmative topic is the focus of the inquiry (e.g., increased customer satisfaction, improved health and safety, more effective operations) but phrased in lively, inspiring language (e.g., inspiring fanatically loyal customers).

**Discovery.** During this stage participants reflect on and discuss the best of *what is* concerning the object of inquiry. Most often, and this appears to be a key innovation of the AI method, participants are interviewed about their own “best of” stories (e.g., tell me about the time a business most inspired fanatical loyalty in you). Another important innovation has been to have organizational members and stakeholders act as both interviewers and interviewees, that is, to fully engage all affected parties in the act of inquiry itself. Telling and listening to meaningful, personal stories is considered central to creating widespread engagement and building relationships in the early stage of the change process. The affirmative topic is turned into a question (e.g., how do companies inspire fanatically loyal customers?) and answers stimulated by the stories are identified and shared.

**Dream.** During this stage participants are asked to imagine their group, organization or community at its best in relation to the

affirmative topic. An attempt is made to identify the common aspirations of system members and to symbolize this in some way. The dream phase often results in something more symbolic, like a graphical representation, than a mission statement.

**Design.** With a common dream in place, participants are asked to develop concrete proposals for the new organizational state. Initially Cooperrider called these “provocative propositions” - a phrase linked to generative theory that still appears in some models. More commonly, social architecture processes are employed where a model of design elements is used to identify categories for participants to organize around and create change proposals, often called possibility statements or design statements.

**Delivery/Destiny.** In the initial 4-D model the fourth stage was called Delivery but this was subsequently changed by Cooperrider to Destiny as he found that Delivery evoked images of traditional change management implementation. Exactly what ought to happen in this phase has provoked the most confusion and the least consensus amongst AI theorists who recognize that using the outcomes of Design to create new targets, gaps to fill, and objectives to achieve may be counter to the very philosophy of Appreciative Inquiry. The most innovative applications have taken an improvisational, as opposed to implementation, approach. Widespread agreement for the design statements are sought, an event is

orchestrated where participants make self-chosen commitments to take action consistent with any design element, and leadership makes clear that there will be no action plans or committees – instead everyone is authorized to take those actions they believe will help bring the design to fruition. Leadership’s role is to monitor and support those innovations they want to nurture and create events and processes to energize emergent and self-organizing change.

Many different approaches to AI have been identified, ranging from interventions where a sole consultant or a small representative group of people do the AI on behalf of a larger group of people, to those where most or all of the whole system is engaged in the entire 4-D process in a compressed time span. The majority of published studies of transformational change have been of the latter variety, leading to an increasing emphasis in the AI literature on widespread, synchronous engagement as central to successful AI change efforts. One particular variant, the Appreciative Inquiry Summit, has become the most often advocated form of engagement - ideally a four day event in which all system members complete all four phases. There are some voices, however, that caution against seeing AI as an “event”, however large scale, and argue that it is more effective to think of AI as a long term process punctuated by events. They suggest that as much or more change comes from daily interactions at work as

people discuss the inquiry, trade stories, and are impacted by new conversations, as it does from new ideas or plans.

## IMPORTANCE

AI has had a profound impact on organization development practice around the world in business, non-profit, and governmental organizations as well as communities. AI produces transformational change without crises or “burning platforms”. Hundreds of significant appreciative inquiries have been documented and described at conferences, in journals and books, in the *AI Practitioner* (a quarterly magazine), and through the *Appreciative Inquiry Commons* (a website). Some outstanding examples include the use of AI to create the United Nations Global Compact; Imagine Chicago, an AI inspired community development process copied around the world; Wal-Mart’s use of AI for its global sustainability initiatives; and the US Navy, which created a Centre for Positive Change and has run a dozen or so large scale appreciative inquiries.

Empirical assessments of AI are limited, but are more plentiful than for most organizational change strategies. There is a growing body of longitudinal and critical research that is identifying moderating and mediating conditions that effect how AI is best done and under what conditions, opportunities and limitations. AI does not magically overcome any of the requirements for effective leadership,

resourcing and skilled facilitation of any other Organization Development or Large Group intervention. Its unique significance has been in bringing social constructionist theory into widespread consideration in managerial practice, identifying the power of possibility centric versus problem centric change strategies, forcing an examination

of the impact of positive emotions on change processes, and offering generativity, instead of problem-solving, as a way to address social and organizational issues.

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**See also:**

Action Research, Large Group Interventions, Organization Development, Social Construction Theory, Strategies for Change

**Further Readings:**

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