Conversation Process: Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry focuses on the positive that already exists in a team, organization or community. It invites people to discuss what is working in the system, to envision a future that builds on that success, to look at all the structures and procedures that would support such a future, and to develop a way forward.

Appreciative Inquiry was developed by David Cooperrider and his colleagues at Case Western Reserve University (Cooperrider et al., 2000). They became increasingly dissatisfied with the poor success rate of the organizational change processes prevalent in the 1980’s. They began to challenge people to ask “which is the better question.”

WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS? – Leads us to a problem-centered approach that focuses on solving problems that are part of the past.

–or–

WHAT WORKS AROUND HERE? – Leads us to a creative approach based on past successes and generates discussion that is hopefully future-oriented.

Cooperrider and his colleagues observed that people became enthusiastic about their work and their organization when an appreciative approach was adopted. Change was no longer a fearful threat; it was an opportunity to build on earlier successes.

Appreciative Inquiry is a philosophy as well as a process that is based on the premise that we create our world and we therefore need to consciously set about creating the sort of world – and organizations – that we want. Appreciative Inquiry is also grounded in the theory that humans generate meaning through shared experiences and conversation.

More and more science is coming around to support the premise that our thoughts are the organizing principle in coalescing energy into form (matter). This is by no means a new philosophy or premise. Many of the world’s major
spiritual approaches have long held that what we focus on becomes our reality. Appreciative Inquiry does not deny the existence of problems; rather, it invites people to inquire about and share the experiences they value and have learned from and to use this knowledge to shape a future together. Appreciative Inquiry assists us in appreciating each other’s worlds. It is about a cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around us. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives life (and thus constructive sustainable energy) to individuals and organizations.

THE ASSUMPTIONS UNDERPINNING APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY ARE:

- Focus on what works.
- What we focus on is what we see.
- Reality shifts constantly.
- How you ask a question influences the answer.
- Make sure that you take with you the best of your past.
- Create a preferred future through ongoing conversations.
- Language creates our reality.

THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT IN THE PROCESS OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

1. APPRECIATE. Value, acknowledge and respect both your own work contribution and the worth and contribution of other people in the process.

2. APPLY. Whatever you are working on needs to be applied. Meaning and action are intertwined.

3. PROVOKE. People are encouraged to explore new ways of thinking by asking questions of others and themselves to discover passions, hopes and creative ways to proceed.

4. COLLABORATE. We choose to believe that working together is better than working alone in organizational change. We see ourselves in the process as interdependent, providing diverse contributions and ultimately sharing a fate. The participants in change are central to the change process.

Albert Einstein stated that, “No problem can be solved by the same consciousness that created it.” Diversity, ambiguities and contradictions are crucial data for finding and managing new solutions. Simply collaborating with the “usual suspects” will not guarantee new perspectives or new solutions. Every organization has many things that work and that should be appreciated and built upon in creating the desired future. In addition, as soon as we ask, “What’s working around here?” our language changes, our images of what’s possible changes, and we generate meaning together as well as new possibilities for the future.
Because reality is continually re-created moment to moment and there are multiple realities, it is important to engage people in conversation to build a shared reality. It is also important to continually revisit how people are constructing their reality, as that too changes. As we discussed in the sustainability section, shifting our mindset is essential to fundamentally shifting how we operate.

During conversations, the very act of asking questions influences the direction taken. We need to think carefully about the questions we ask, as the very act of asking starts a process of attention.

One aspect of change that can cause anxiety and apprehension is the lack of stability or predictability. By carrying forward the positive parts of our past, people feel honored and feel as though there is a predictable base on which to build their new shared future.

**STORY: An Absolute Game-Changer**

Appreciative Inquiry can be used as a structured sequence of questions and it can also be used as an overall philosophical approach. A few years ago I was working with my colleagues Tim Dalmau and Jill Tideman in Santa Cruz County. The client was a secondary manufacturing firm based in the western United States. We were going to work with this group for about twelve days in three four-day sessions. Our focus was on building leadership skills and working on some of the leadership team dynamics.

The Santa Cruz meeting was the second of four sessions. We had a very productive four days. However, at the very end of the fourth day, one of the participants brought up a very serious matter. It was devastating to the group – it was like someone punched everyone in the stomach. It had the potential to destroy all the goodwill that had been established over the four days. Normally this would have been a real opportunity to go deep into an issue and create a breakthrough for a team, but we literally had forty-five minutes left before people had to catch planes to various destinations across the country.

The group contained about forty-five people and we were all sitting around in a big circle. Tim looked to me and I looked to Tim, wondering what to do. What we did was to pose an appreciative question to the whole group. The question was something like, “Recognizing what just happened and all the very positive things that have happened over these four days, what words of appreciation and encouragement would you like to share with each other as we end this session together?”

You might have anticipated that people would have thought that this was glossing over the dilemma, but in reality people were thrilled to express and hear all of the positive intentions that people actual held for each other and the work of the team. It was an absolute game-changer. People left feeling positive and assured that we would continue the work and resolve the dilemma.
Rational Outcome

The process can be used at almost every point of the Process Enneagram (see p. 57). However, when the focus is building on the positive as a single step, it is most effective at the level of intentions, principles, relationships and deep learning.

Experiential Outcome

This process almost always creates a sense of positive focus for a team. It is especially important to use an appreciative approach when a team has a pattern of focusing on the negative and feels itself to be a victim.

Process Tips & Reminders

*When using this with a team stuck in a negative frame, it is important to continually reframe the comments of the group.* Ask reframing questions to surface the hidden positive experiences within a team. It tends to be a difficult but essential process for such groups.

*Appreciative listening and story telling in the process will inform ideas and possibilities for action.* This will move a team and organization forward. Personal stories create a much more compelling experience and build relationship in the team by exposing commonalities in life experience.

*An appreciative approach will only work if the facilitator keeps the conversation focused on appreciative questions and responses.* One of the most common mistakes by a facilitator in any conversation, but especially when using an appreciative approach, is to allow the conversation to veer off into the negative or off the questioning sequence. Facilitation often needs to be an active process, not just one of posing a question and charting responses.
Appreciative Inquiry Method Using the 4-D Cycle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discover</th>
<th>Dream</th>
<th>Design</th>
<th>Destiny</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What gives life to an organization?</td>
<td>What might be? What is the world calling the organization to be? How do we want it to be?</td>
<td>How can we create our preferred future as articulated by the whole organization?</td>
<td>How can we continue to learn, adjust and innovate? How will we measure our progress and success? How will we hold ourselves accountable?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As a philosophical approach, the 4-D Cycle can inform our facilitation style in the way we frame our questions, the beliefs that we hold about what gives life to organizations, and what sustains organizational change efforts.

The Fishbowl Process

This process is designed so that a small group of people from a much larger team can have a focused conversation as stewards for the whole team.

Conversation Process: Fishbowl Process

This process is designed so that a small group of people from a much larger team can have a focused conversation as stewards for the whole team. The structure itself can allow the whole team to become directly involved in the Fishbowl conversation through what is called an “empty chair.”

The facilitator invites participants to self-select into the Fishbowl based on their passion and expertise on the chosen conversation topic.

People can also be selected as stewards from multiple small group conversations that lead into the Fishbowl conversation. The Fishbowl is located in the center of the meeting space with all other team members surrounding the inner circle.
RULES OF ENGAGEMENT:

- Participants are encouraged to build upon the ideas of others in response to the facilitator’s questions.
- Participants surrounding the Fishbowl have the role of being active listeners and, at times, recorders.
- Everyone in the Fishbowl is provided an equal opportunity to contribute to the conversation.
- When using the empty chair, participants from the larger group can individually contribute to the Fishbowl conversation when it is opened to input by the facilitator. The person taking the empty chair is encouraged to “speak to the unspoken,” to provoke the group to deeper thinking, or to add what is missing in the conversation.
- The empty chair participant speaks and then exits the Fishbowl. Fishbowl participants can respond to the empty chair input or choose to ignore the input without being considered disrespectful.

Rational Outcome

This process structure has a number of possible rational outcomes depending on how it is used. It can be used to connect and integrate the ideas from multiple small groups; it can be used to identify the big issues across a large group that can then be further developed through small groups; it can be used to explore any large group issue by using a small group to focus the conversation; or it can be used to facilitate an entire planning conversation using a small group in the presence of a large group.

Experiential Outcome

This process provides transparency and allows all members of a large group to feel a part of a conversation. It can also allow a large group to feel hopeful, and complex issues can be explored in an efficient and effective way.
Section 2: Facilitator Skills and Conversation Processes

Process Tips & Reminders

This is an excellent process when working in a group of 30 or more. It allows a whole group to get aligned around an issue and to identify sub-topics that can be delegated to small conversations groups. It is often best used when going from current state through intentions, principles and tensions. Strategies can then be done in sub-groups.

Tips and Reminders

The Fishbowl Process is a facilitation structure that allows a large community to engage in a conversation together in a completely transparent manner. The California Services for Technical Assistant and Training (CalSTAT) is a special project of the California Department of Education, Special Education Division, now located at the Napa County Office of Education.

Sharon Keating and I had the true honor of being affiliated with this project as co-designers and facilitators for their statewide learning community conferences for many years. The conferences brought together model school sites across California with aspiring school sites in a venue where people could truly learn from one another. As part of those sessions we traditionally used the Fishbowl structure to engage in critical conversations as a whole educational community. In some years we shared key insights, in other years we used the structure to share consistent input to the State of California and at other times to plan next steps as a learning community. The community size varied from 150 up to 400 people. The format allowed everyone to be in the conversation and learn together.

www.calstat.org