



Appreciative Inquiry – Focus on What's Working

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How often have you heard yourself or others ask – what is the problem or issue ? We apply this problem solving approach to most everything in our own life as much as in our organisations. It is part of our language and education. I know from my own experience that engineering and project management taught me to solve problems. We look for a “need” or “gaps” or what is missing to help individuals, managers, teams and organisations solve their problem.

My challenge to you is to instead ask “what is going on well around here ?” or “what worked in the past that I/we can leverage off”.

Allow me to introduce you to an approach to change and improvement known as Appreciative Inquiry (AI). The approach is a conscious positive search for what is working well, the successes and high points of experience and service together with an analysis or understanding of the “root causes of success”. Literally, it is asking questions about what we value or appreciate in order to “improve” and to build on what we have discovered.

Appreciative Inquiry facilitates positive change in human systems be they individuals, teams, organisations, groups, and communities.

Fundamentally what is different is that typically we focus on what is wrong and work on the “what do we need to do to fix it”. Appreciative Inquiry however works from the simplest of assumptions that states: Every human system has something that works right, things that give it life when it is vital, effective, and successful. Following from this, how do we leverage from this to address the identified goal or intended outcome.

For example – consider lack of motivation in an organisation, Appreciative Inquiry asks whether we would rather do a survey into low morale *or* magnify and learn from moments of highest engagement and enthusiasm? I know where I would rather spend my energy and time.

Appreciative Inquiry was pioneered in the 1980s by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva, two professors at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University. Appreciative Inquiry is being used increasingly to bring about collaborative and strengths-based change with individuals, community groups, schools, government, profit and nonprofit organisations.

Imagine the Possibilities

Examples of how Appreciative Inquiry can and has been used to:

- Assist organisations to find out what they are good at and help them to take action to do more of what they do well
- Structure a career on what one does well instead of trying to change who they are
- Support a team or organisation to create a common vision and strategy for the future
- Improve communications
- Demonstrate positive intent and trust with stakeholders
- Achieve defined outcomes or goals

Appreciative Inquiry works to create a better workplace or lifestyle by looking at what works and determining to do more of what works. When you do more of what works, the stuff that doesn't work goes away. Appreciative Inquiry does not ignore the problems being presented by the individual or organisation. It simply shifts the mind set from which we tackle these issues. Appreciative Inquiry is a shift from problems to solutions.

People and organisations are not problems to be solved, but rather as living systems alive with infinite possibilities. Appreciative Inquiry can support you to re-focus on the positive, the possible and the mystery



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that surrounds us, our organisations and our everyday life.

At the core of changing our focus to what's working is the power of positive questions. Consider the following as examples to reflect upon.

- When you think about your life, relationship, career, organisation - what do you think are some of the "best practices" or things you do well ?
- Which forms of communication in your relationships or organisation work in ways that are mutually satisfying and inspiring ?
- Imagine that it's ten years from now and your life (self, relationships, career, organisation) has become everything and more than you could have ever dreamed. If you had three wishes for this future, what would they be?
- What one thing could you do right now, no matter how small, which would help move you in the future of this ideal life you described?

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