



APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AS AN ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT TOOL

by Charles F. Martinetz, PhD

Appreciative inquiry can get you much better results than seeking out and solving problems. That's an interesting concept for me—and I imagine for most of you—because telephone companies are among the best problem solvers in the world. We trouble shoot everything. We concentrate enormous resources on correcting problems that have relatively minor impact on our overall service performance. When used continually and over a long period of time, this approach can lead to a negative culture. If you combine a negative culture with all the challenges we face today, it could be easy to convince ourselves that we have too many problems to overcome and to slip into a paralyzing sense of hopelessness. And yet if we flip the coin, we have so much to be excited about. We are in the most dynamic and the most influential business of our times. We ought to be excited, motivated, and energized. We can be if we turn ourselves around and start looking at our jobs and ourselves differently. If we kill negative self-talk and celebrate our successes. If we dissect what we do right and apply the lessons to what we do wrong, we can solve our problems and re-energize the organization at the same time. In the long run what is likely to be more useful? Demoralizing a successful workforce by concentrating on their failures or helping them over their last few hurdles by building a bridge with their successes? Don't get me wrong. I'm not advocating mindless happy talk. Appreciative Inquiry is a complex science designed to make things better. We can't ignore problems, we just need to approach them from the other side. (Mohr & Watkins, 2001a, p. 7).

—Statement by Thomas H. White, President, GTE Telephone Operations

Simply stated, appreciative inquiry (AI) is both a process and a philosophy. As a process, AI has a number of steps, phases, or cycles that an AI practitioner follows in working through the process with an organization.

As a philosophy, AI emphasizes collaboration and participation of *all* voices in the organization and approaches change as a journey rather than an event. It has a systems orientation that focuses on changing the organization rather than the people.

The term AI can be looked at as two separate words, each with its own meaning:

- **Appreciate:** valuing; recognizing the best in people and organizations
- **Inquiry:** the act of discovery, exploration, examination, looking at, investigation, and study

Taken together, then, AI is a way of looking at a person, an organization, and the world and saying, "Let's look at the best that there is. Let's define and study that, and then use the data to build on what is working." AI is a change process. It is not another organizational development intervention; rather it is a new approach to existing organizational development interventions such as strategic planning, business process redesign, teambuilding, organization restructuring, individual and project evaluation (valuation), coaching, diversity work, and so on.

AI is different than problemsolving. The steps in problemsolving are as follows:

1. Identify the problem.
2. Conduct an analysis of the causes.
3. Analyze possible solutions.
4. Plan some action or treatment.

The steps in AI are different:

1. Appreciate and value the best of *what is*.
2. Envision *what might be*.
3. Dialogue about *what should be*.
4. Innovate and create *what will be* (Hammond, 1998).

There are a number of assumptions in AI:

1. "In every society, organization, or group, something works.
2. What we focus on becomes our reality.
3. Reality is created in the moment, and there are multiple realities.
4. The act of asking questions of an organization or group influences the group in some way.
5. People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known).
6. If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what are best about the past.
7. It is important to value differences.
8. The language we use creates our reality" (Hammond, 1998, p. 20).

Background

In the mid 1970s, David L. Cooperrider, a professor at Case Western Reserve, conceived the notion that interviews or investigations that looked for problems (what was wrong with the organization, and what was not working well) adversely affected the organization (Mohr & Watkins, 2001a). In an experiment, he had two teams interview the

same organization. Half of the organization was interviewed in the traditional way of looking for problems (problem-solving focus); the other half was interviewed by asking what was working well, who the heroes in the organization were, and other positive questions.

When the data were collected and fed back to the organization, the two halves that read both reports did not believe that the data were from the same organization. David concluded that the act itself of asking positive questions affected the organization positively; asking negative questions affected the organization negatively. Thus, asking for problems created a mindset of problems in the interviewees, while asking for success created a mindset of successes in the organization. This began Cooperrider's work with the concept of AI.

In his landmark article "Positive Image, Positive Action: The Affirmative Basis of Organizing," he presents very cogent arguments for the validity of AI. The following are key points from the article (Cooperrider, 1990).

Cooperrider makes a case for *imagery* and how it affects our lives, our culture, and our organization. He refers to a 1987 *New York Times* headline that stated, "Research Affirms Power of Positive Thinking" (Cooperrider, 1990, p. 93). Bernard Mohr and Jane Magruder Watkins in their book *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*, argue that AI is a far more complex and exciting process than the simplistic *positive thinking* approach with which it is sometimes confused (Mohr & Watkins, 2001b). For this reason, it is important to understand the origin of the theories that form the basis for AI. The major theory underlying AI is the belief that what we believe to be real is a construction of our own making through our anticipatory thinking: expectations, hopes, dreams, and beliefs about what will or won't happen. To the extent that our expectations, hopes, and dreams are positive, our human systems will turn in that positive direction.

Cooperrider presents the following definitions for the power of imagery (Cooperrider, 1990):

- **Placebo:** Healing based on the belief that it will occur. In past studies, 30%–60% of subjects responded positively to placebos.
- **Pygmalion:** When teachers are told that certain children (randomly selected) are gifted, the children begin to have superior performance (due to the differences in the teacher's behavior as influenced by expectations).
- **Positive Affect and Learned Helpfulness:** Investigators are now convinced of the reciprocal connections between high negative affectivity and the following: experiences of life stress, learned helplessness, the development of depression, and the triggering of physiological responses. On the other hand, positive affectivity has the opposite effect and enlarges our focus on the potential good in the world.

- **Imbalanced Inner Dialogue:** We all have an inner voice going continuously, projecting both optimistic and fearful images. Unhealthy people have 1:1 ratios of good to bad images. Healthy people have 2:1 ratios of good images to bad images.
- **The Positive Image as a Dynamic Force in Culture:** Guidance for the future only exists in the internal dialogue of the people. One can predict the rise and fall of a culture by the internal dialogue of the culture itself. For example, a culture that speaks and advocates violence and has no value for life will act accordingly, and this becomes a symbol of that society's perception of the future.
- **Affirmative Competence:** Positive images spur positive development. Evidence for this can be found in the areas of athletics and imagery, psychotherapy and imagery, and healing and imagery.
- **Selective Self-Monitoring:** Eliminate "failure" from our vocabulary. Focusing on successes rather than mistakes results in substantially enhanced learning. The mind cannot negate negative images.

Cooperrider provides the following in his paper under the title *Some Implications for Management: Toward a Theory of the Affirmative Organization* (words in parentheses are my additions):

1. "Organizations as made and imagined are artifacts (objects) of the affirmative mind. An understanding of organizational life requires an understanding of the dynamics of the positive image as well as of the processes through which isolated images become interlocked images and how nascent (budding) affirmations become guiding affirmations.
2. No matter what its previous history is, virtually any pattern of organizational action is open to alteration and reconfiguration. Patterns of organizational action are not automatically fixed by nature in any blind microdeterminist way—whether biological, technological, or environmental.
3. To the extent that organizations' imagination projections are the key to their current conduct, organizations are free to seek transformations in conventional practice by replacing conventional images with images of a new and better future.
4. Organizations are heliotropic (when presented with the option, organizations will move toward light, that is, affirmative imagery) in character in the sense that organizational actions have an observable and largely automatic tendency to evolve in the direction of positive imagery. Positive imagery and hence heliotropic movement is endemic (prevalent) to organizational life, which means that organizations create their own realities to a far greater extent than is normally assumed.
5. Conscious evolution of positive imagery is a viable option for organized systems as large as global society or as small as the dyad or group. Also, the more an organization experiments with the conscious evolution of

positive imagery the better it will become; there is an observable self-reinforcing, educative effect of affirmation. Affirmative competence is the key to the self-organizing system.

6. To understand organizations in affirmative terms is also to understand that the greatest obstacle in the way of a group and organizational well-being is the positive image, the affirmative projection that guides the group or the organization.
7. Organizations do not need to be fixed. They need constant reaffirmation. More precisely, organizations as heliotropic systems need to be appreciated. Every new affirmative projection of the future is a consequence of an appreciative understanding of the past or the present.
8. The executive vocation in a post bureaucratic society is to nourish the appreciative soil, from which affirmative projections grow, branch off, evolve, and become collective projections. Creating the conditions for organization-wide appreciation is the single most important measure that can be taken to ensure the conscious evolution of a valued and positive future" (Cooperrider, 1990, p. 115).

The Change Process of AI

Various AI practitioners and researchers have defined phases or cycles in the change process. The Five-D Phase Cycle is the most widely published cycle (Mohr & Watkins, 2001a).

- Define (Setting the stage)
- Discover (Valuing the best of *what is*)
- Dream (Envisioning *what might be*)
- Design (Having a dialog about *what should be*)
- Deliver (Innovating *what will be*)

Define

During this phase, we define our area of inquiry and study. A fundamental concept of AI is that we will choose the positive as the focus of the inquiry. These topics of inquiry are identified qualities that an organization chooses to guide the formulation of questions for the interviews that will be done during phase 2, Discover. Usually three to five areas for inquiry are chosen. They can be areas of concern such as safety, customer satisfaction, teamwork, and so on. Choosing the topics to study is the most critical step of the process.

This phase is complete when—

1. A planning group in an organization has clear agreement on the topics that they want to see grow and flourish in their organizations.
2. A prepared interview guide is developed to explore these topics.
3. A clear decision is made about who will be interviewed and who will do the interviewing.
4. A decision is made for who will be involved in the Dream and Design phases.

Discover

During this phase, we conduct interviews to discover what gives life to an organization—that is, what is happening when the organization is performing at its best. This is the phase where we inquire into stories that give the organization its life force. These stories are about exceptional accomplishments, for example, inspired leadership, generative relationships and partnerships, technologies that make work go more smoothly, structures that support innovation and creativity, planning that encompasses new ideas and diverse people, and opportunities to learn.

Dream

During this phase, we dream about what might be. We look for themes that appear in the stories. For example, if we are talking about outstanding customer service stories, we may find themes such as: took responsibility, had the authority, had the expertise, and so on. Participants are asked to challenge the status quo by envisioning a preferred future for the organization. People are asked to think great thoughts and to create great possibilities for their organizations.

During this phase, the group also creates *provocative propositions*. Provocative propositions are possibility statements—clear statements that define the shared visions for the organization's future. It is this collection of propositions that provide clear direction for all the organization's activities. In this phase, the provocative propositions are written at a macro level. A macro level means that the propositions are broad, general statements, such as, "Our organization is one that is dedicated to serving both the internal and external customer in a highly professional manner."

Design

During this phase, we create shared images of a preferred future. The provocative propositions from the previous phase are examined and then written at a micro level, that is, very detailed. An analogy is taking two-dimensional drawings of a house and making a three-dimensional model. Both the Dream and the Design phases involve positive images of the future. In practice, the two often happen in conjunction with each other.

Both the socio system components and the technical system components of the organization are examined. The socio components include the set of roles, jobs, relationships, the organizational structure and the management systems and policies, and the governing beliefs and assumptions that exist to support the core work of the organization. The technical components of the organization include the business processes that transform inputs into outputs and the technology used in those processes. The kinds of questions asked during this phase include: What kind of leadership structure is needed and what is the preferred behavior of the

leaders as they do their work? What is the organization's strategy and how does it get formulated and carried out? What are all of the structure elements needed?

Deliver

This phase is also called the Destiny phase. During this phase we look at innovative ways to create the future. This phase is ongoing. Both the overall visions of the Dream phase and the more specific provocative propositions of the Design phase are put into action. The key here is to build an appreciative eye into the organizations' systems, procedures, and ways of working. An example would be to drop the "e" from the word "evaluation" and its negative connotations to "valuation."

Summary

AI is an approach to the development of human systems that recognizes that we choose to approach human systems with the view that either:

- Human systems are primary collections of problems and obstacles to be analyzed and overcome. This is the traditional approach to problemsolving. Or,
- Human systems contain life-giving forces to be studied and understood.

Since we can decide what to focus on in our conversations, we have a choice. If we are focused on improving an organization, a team, a family, or a relationship, for example, we can choose to focus on what is broken, what is a problem, what is frustrating us. Or we can choose to focus on that which is life giving, energizing, and valuable to us. In other words we can choose to focus on what is good, on what is working, on our strengths, and on what we do well.

The choice is fateful!

AI recognizes that whichever assumption we make about the nature of reality, that choice will lead us to a certain focus in our conversations. And those conversations will lead to certain images being dominant in our minds, and those images will in turn lead to action at both the conscious and unconscious levels.

AI uses the power of inquiry to engage our imagination, which influences our actions. By focusing through inquiry what is life giving, what is energizing, what is joyful and fun, and amplifying those qualities by involving the whole system in co-construction and co-innovation based on the findings of the inquiry, AI enables systems to transform themselves (Mohr & Watkins, 2001a).

Final Thoughts

The negative is seductive. Talking about the negative causes us to focus on what is wrong rather than on what is right.

If I cannot see change in something, then I must recognize that I am part of the problem.

If I see things as bad, what do I have to change in me to see things that are good?

Interviews are a powerful intervention. Interview questions themselves will affect the organization. If our interview questions ask for what is wrong in the organization, we will set this negative tone in the organization.

When we conduct employee attitude surveys, we analyze the data and focus on what is bad rather than what is good. AI practitioners do not particularly favor written surveys. One-on-one interviews are more powerful.

If we conduct an analysis of our customer satisfaction ratings and find that 95% of the time we have good customer satisfaction, what do we typically do? We focus on the five percent to find out what is not working instead of focusing on the 95% that is working well.

The system starts in individuals. Change begins at any level, which in turn will affect the organization in some way. We cannot wait to start at the top; we can change small pieces that then affect the whole system.

AI suggests that we look at the language we use. Language creates our reality. Do we use a lot of negative words (we can't, ain't it awful, it won't work, that's terrible.) or do we use a lot of positive words (that's great, isn't it wonderful, let's try it)?

When we support each other, we function better.

AI is not difficult. AI is not new. AI exists in many cultures and organizations.

Qualitative data are as important as quantitative data. After all, it is all data.

The "positive" can be just as contagious as the "negative."

It's all right to acknowledge the "pain", but don't dwell on it.

Our "culture" is the stories that we tell about ourselves.

"Freud felt that our reality is our history. Skinner felt that our reality is our current environment. AI believes our reality is our anticipation" (Mohr & Watkins, 2001a).

When we meet and work with clients in a change process, we have to meet them where they are, but we do not have to stay there.

How do companies and organizations that appear to be broken still get the job done? Let's look at companies that

appear to be broken and consider them a mystery to be solved.

If you are called into an organization to investigate, for example, gender bias, don't ask for examples of gender bias. Instead, reframe the question to ask for examples of gender equity.

Benchmarking and looking at best practices in world-class companies is AI. Consider doing benchmarking and looking for best practices internally.

Think about the next two statements. "If I see it, I'll believe it." versus "If I believe it, I will see it."

Double-loop thinking versus single-loop thinking is important to the concept of AI. An example of both is: "I must follow rules and regulations in all situations" (single loop). "I must examine the rules and regulations to see if they make sense in this situation" (double loop).

AI can be used without explanation. For example, at the end of a meeting ask, "What was really great about this meeting?"

Think about all the negativity we bring to the table at home. Think about all the negativity about our day that we voice to our spouse or our children. ☹

Note: For more information about AI, visit www.AIConsulting.org or www.TaosInstitute.org.

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Related Readings

- Bushe, G.R. (1998, July). *Five theories of change embedded in appreciative inquiry*. Paper presented at the 18th Annual World Congress of Organizational Development, Dublin, Ireland. The author reviewed five different theories of