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APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY: CHANGE BASED ON WHAT GOES WELL

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SUMMARY

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was initially developed as a research method, aimed at generative theory-building and inquiry. However, over time people started using AI for organisational change. AI is a process of discovery, aimed at building change based on the strengths of an existing team or organisation. There are five principles that underpin AI: 1) constructionist principle; words create worlds, 2) simultaneity principle; inquiry creates change, 3) anticipatory principle; image inspires action, 4) poetic principle; what we focus on grows and 5) positivity principle; positive questions lead to positive change. AI consists of five distinctive steps, the 5-D cycle. Steps include: 1) definition, 2) discovery, 3) dream, 4) design and 5) destiny. This toolkit explains the underlying principles and the 5-D cycle, and presents potential questions that can be asked during each step of the 5D-Cycle. Finally, this toolkit shares some examples of how AI has been used in hospitals in India and the tourism sector in Nepal.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| WHAT IS APPRECIATIVE ENQUIRY | 3 |
| APPRECIATIVE ENQUIRY PRINCIPLES | 4 |
| Constructionist Principle | 4 |
| Simultaneity Principle..... | 4 |
| Anticipatory Principle | 5 |
| Poetic Principle | 5 |
| Positive Principle | 5 |
| Emergent Principles | 6 |
| <i>Wholeness Principle</i> | 6 |
| <i>Enactment Principle</i> | 6 |
| <i>Awareness Principle</i> | 6 |
| THE 5-D CYCLE..... | 6 |
| Definition | 6 |
| <i>Questions to ask during Definition phase</i> | 7 |
| Discovery | 8 |
| <i>Questions to ask during Discovery phase</i> | 8 |
| Dream..... | 9 |
| <i>Questions to ask during Dream phase</i> | 9 |
| Design | 9 |
| <i>Questions to ask during Design phase</i> | 10 |
| Destiny | 10 |
| CASE STUDIES | 10 |
| Tourism in Nepal | 10 |
| Postpartum infection in India | 12 |
| CONCLUSION..... | 12 |
| REFERENCES..... | 13 |




WHAT IS APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY?

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a social research method, first proposed by David Cooperrider in his 1986 thesis (1). In the early 1980s, Cooperrider conducted a research project on physician leadership at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio. While he was interviewing physician leaders in the clinic, he became excited by the organisational processes and forms of governance that had evolved in a large and successful partnership of more than 300 physicians. The first idea for AI however emerged after an argument ensued during a meeting regarding the project and Cooperrider's thesis advisor wondered if the meeting participants were in fact asking the correct questions. This led Cooperidge to adapt his research towards analysing the power of asking the right questions, which led to research into the power of questions themselves and the limited nature of most questions. Additionally, they looked at how questions themselves can be the beginning of change, and inquiry as the engine of change. This subsequently led to the development of AI (2).

AI thus started as a research method aimed at more generative theory-building and inquiry; AI's initial aim was not to pursue change. However, Bliss Browne, a community development organiser in Chicago, began using AI to conduct interviews with citizens of Chicago. With the help of AI the interviews allowed citizens to imagine the future of Chicago and to create positive change within communities. The AI method was subsequently copied by many others pursuing community or organisational change (2).

AI is a process of search and discovery, aimed to value, prize and honour teams or organisations. AI assumes that organisations are networks of relatedness, and AI aims to touch the "positive core" of organisational life (3). This aim is achieved by asking positive questions and building on existing strengths of teams or organisations. While traditionally organisational change is often seen as problem-based, and focused on solving issues, in AI the focus is shifted to a positive inquiry based on possibilities. Organisational development with the help of AI is thus based on affirmation, appreciation, and dialogue. AI seeks what gives life to a living system, and searches for the best in people, their organisation, and the world around them(4). Detailed knowledge of problems at hand is



identified, while successes, strengths, resources, and positive choices are usually not prioritised.

AI has been shown to be effective in generating organisational and management change, cultural change, team building, professional and leadership development, and capacity building. Additionally, it has been used to reframe research and for community change (4).

APPRECIATIVE ENQUIRY PRINCIPLES

There are five theoretical principles underpinning AI, woven into every stage of the process. Additionally, some emergent principles have materialised over the years that AI has been practiced.

Constructionist Principle (5, 6)

Words create worlds

AI is grounded in social constructionism, a formative idea of the post-modern era in which the notion of an underlying structure or truth for reality is rejected. According to social constructionists the world we live in is shaped through the conversations we have with one another, which help us make sense of things and create our reality. However, social

constructionists note that this reality is not *the* truth, just a perspective on truth.


For AI, social constructionism means that there is power in the dialogue held during the inquiry as the dialogue will help shape the AI participants as well as the wider organisation. Practically, the constructionist principle means that the questions asked during an AI inquiry will shape the inquiry and the participants in it. As a practitioner, notice the language that is used and how this language impacts you and the AI participants. Additionally, there is no right or wrong reality, just different perspectives.

Simultaneity Principle (5, 6)

Inquiry creates change

The simultaneity principle involves the notion that as soon as a question is asked, a reaction to the question is initiated. This entails that the way in which questions are phrased is important. How questions are asked also matters because the tone or intention of a question may steer the process.

The simultaneity principle implies that, for an AI practitioner, it is important to not only focus on the answers provided to questions, but to also consider the effect of the questioning process itself



and to spend some time planning how to most appropriately phrase the questions.

Anticipatory Principle (5, 6)

Image inspires action

The anticipatory principle poses that we are constantly anticipating the future, and that we make decisions about the future based on our anticipations and ideas about it. The image of the future we hold, thus, impacts and guides it. This means that a positive image of the future will generate positive action, while a negative image will do the opposite. For example, when you anticipate that you will enter into a conflict with a friend, the meeting will likely be different from when you anticipate that you will share a nice evening together. When participants in an AI process imagine a positive future, the decisions made in this process will help them reach this future. It is thus important for the AI practitioner to help participants create a positive future.

Poetic Principle (5, 6)

What we focus on grows

We make sense of our lives with the help of the stories we tell and hear. This philosophy underlies the poetic principle. In practice, this means that when we perceive our surrounding through a filter, stories that do not fit with our perception of an organisation or

situation are filtered out, leading to a confirmed image of that situation or organisation. People can choose how to view certain situations, and they can choose to find the good or the bad in them.

For the AI practitioner this means that when there is a focus on things that are going right in an organisation and stories about what goes right are shared, the perception of the organisation performing well will grow. All participants in an AI process bring their stories and perceptions to the table and will influence each other to create new stories and perceptions. It is important to realise that there is no right or wrong story, but the AI process can be impacted with the help of provocative language and stories that question people's stories and perceptions, and potentially shows them a different world view.

Positive Principle (5, 6)

Positive questions lead to positive change

More positive feelings lead to more positive outcomes. While this may sound a bit touchy-feely, some research has shown that positive emotions lead to increased resilience as they help broaden our thought-action repertoire,



upon which we build during moments of stress (7).

It is important that the AI practitioner looks at the strengths and attributes of the organisation or team and AI participants, which will allow for action to be taken into a positive direction. As opposed to a negative direction when the focus is on what is not going well.

Emergent Principles

Wholeness Principle (5, 6)

People in organisations do not exist in isolation; they are constantly influenced by and influence a greater whole. In the AI process, it is thus important that the AI practitioner brings diverse people together to potentially stimulate creativity and build collective capacity.

Enactment Principle (6)

This principle regards people's willingness to be the change they want to see. Living in alignment with the desired future, thereby acting as if this desired future will happen, can be self-fulfilling. Additionally, enactment encourages AI participants to live with the intent to be appreciative and to make the change happen.

Awareness Principle (6)

Being aware and reflective of interactions during the AI process and beyond can help AI participants take full responsibility of how to relate to each other, and the wider organisation. Additionally, awareness can support learning and help shift and reframe actions.

THE 5-D CYCLE

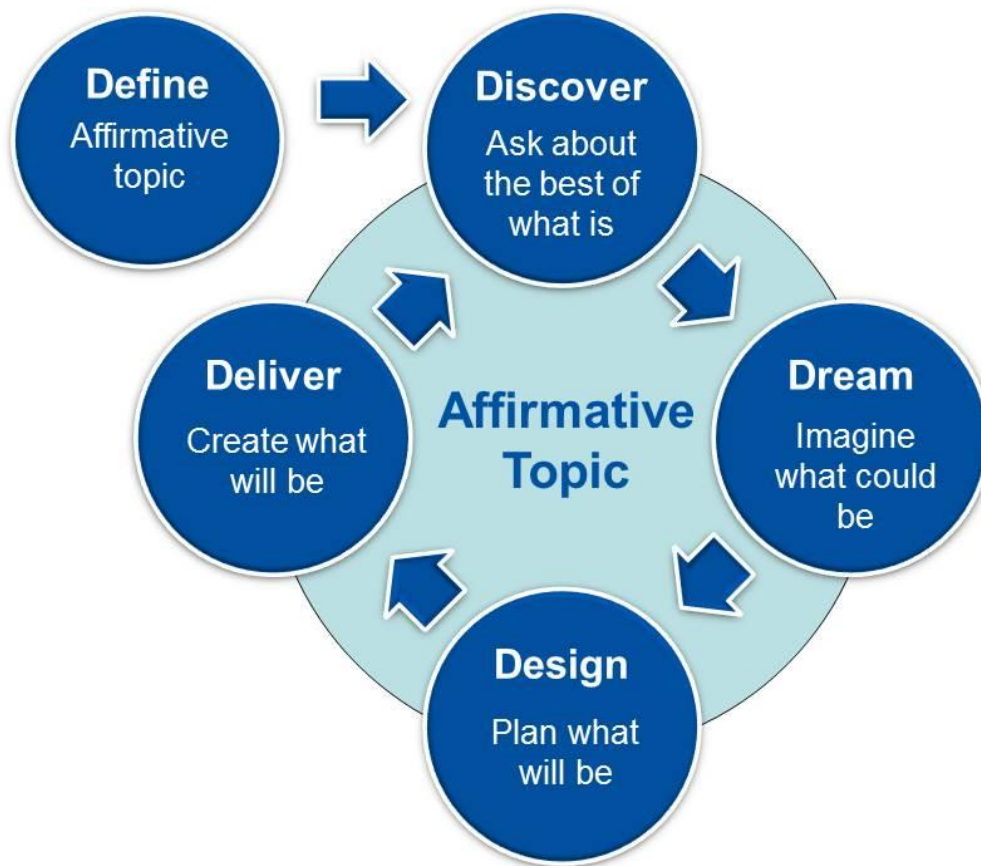
AI is conducted in five steps, aimed at identifying the area of inquiry, exploration of the topic, imagining new opportunities, creating structures to achieve imagined opportunities, and embedding these structures into the team or organisation.

Definition

Definition is the first D of the 5-D cycle and was later added to the 4-D cycle as originally proposed by David Cooperrider. In the definition stage, the project's purpose, content, and what needs to be achieved is defined. It can be seen as the stage in which the right area to inquire into is identified and defined. This is done by exploring and then describing an initial issue. In the definition stage, AI practitioners ask participants about topics and help



Figure 1 Overview 5D-Cycle (8)



participants reframe from positives to negatives, which helps move the project in a more positive direction. Additionally, interviews with various key actors within the team and/or organisation in which the AI process is taking place can help define the inquiry at hand as well as help with buy-in. While a topic is defined in this stage, it is not set in stone. Throughout the process, the AI practitioner as well as participants are encouraged to be open-minded and open to change.

Questions to ask during Definition phase

- Can you share a story about a time or experience when you were proud of what you achieved?
 - What did you achieve?
 - Can you share what factors helped you achieve this?
 - What did this feel like?
- Can you share a story about a time when you made a difference?



- What difference did you make? How did this make you feel?
- Can you share factors that helped you make this difference?
- What did this feel like?

- Can you share a story about a time when you/your team/your organisation was at its best?
 - What went well?
 - What made this possible?
 - What difference did you make? How did this make you feel?
 - Can you share factors that helped you make this difference?
 - What did this feel like?

- Can you share a story about a time when you/your team/your organisation was at its best?
 - What went well?
 - What made this possible?
 - What did this feel like?

Discovery (9)

Stories about the best of what is

During the discovery phase, the defined topic is further explored through AI conversations and/or interviews in which

strengths, skills, and capabilities of organisations, teams, and/or individuals are identified. With the help of the identified information, key ideas, stories, and experiences are captured and clustered into themes.

The discovery stage can take quite some time and practitioners are encouraged to take their time. AI practitioners are encouraged to include a wide variety of participants during the discovery phase to get a full overview of processes occurring in the team and/or organisation.

In the discovery phase, the negative aspects of the topic at hand should not be ignored, but it will be good to look at these aspects from a positive, strength-based angle.

Questions to ask during the Discovery phase

- Can you share a story about a time or experience when you were proud of what you achieved?
 - What did you achieve?
 - Can you share what factors helped you achieve this?
 - What did this feel like?

- Can you share a story about a time when you made a difference?



- What difference did you make? How did this make you feel?
- Can you share factors that helped you make this difference?
- What did this feel like?
- Can you share a story about a time when you/your team/your organisation was at its best?
 - What went well?
 - What made this possible?
 - What did this feel like?

Describe your/your team's/your organisation's top five strengths, including an example of when you have used one of these strengths.

Dream (9)

Imagining the best of what could be

In the dream phase, the identified strengths and capabilities are used to imagine new possibilities for the future. Participants are encouraged to share their dreams for their team/organisation. The dream phase is aimed at amplifying a positive core and stimulating a more energised and inspirational future. Creativity is encouraged in the dream phase. Participants can be asked to share their dreams in various ways, for

example, with the help of art and collage materials or through storytelling. The AI practitioner should encourage participants to describe their dreams and to describe how challenges can be overcome. Additionally, they should encourage participants to share their dreams as this is often helpful for the next phase.


Questions to ask during Dream phase

- If we are meeting on this day next year and reviewing progress, what would be your team's/organisation's successes?
 - What would be different?
 - How have potential challenges been resolved?
- Imagine you wake up tomorrow and everything is as it should be. How did you get there?
 - What made it possible?
 - What are you/your team/your organisation doing differently compared to now?

Design (9)

Statements of intention

In the design phase, the stories of what is working best in the team or organisation, as identified in the discovery phase, are



brought together with the imagination as shown in the dream phase, which creates structures that help to move forwards. During the design phase, a future working environment is designed. This can be done with the help of models and prototypes, as used in other design activities. In this phase, most challenges are identified and need to be overcome for future change. Prototypes can be adapted, implemented, and subsequently changed again. It is important that the designed product/process is grounded in existing strengths, as identified in the discovery phase.

Sometimes AI practitioners used SOAR for strategic planning in the design phase: strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results. SOAR is an alternative to the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) approach, which focuses on weaknesses and threats. Additionally, instead of being analysis-oriented, the SOAR approach is very action-oriented, focusing on possibilities.

Questions to ask during Design phase

- What is one small step and one big step that could be taken by your

team/organisation that would make a difference?

- What are your three wishes?

Destiny (9)


Action planning

In this phase, the designed process/product is embedded into the team and/or organisation. In this stage, momentum must be sustained in order for the individuals and organisations to build their capacity and to keep doing the work they set out to do. As this is a transformation process, improvisation, adaptability, and flexibility are required. AI practitioners are encouraged to not stick to action-planning, monitoring, and evaluation processes, but instead to focus on innovation, learning and reflection, which is expected to increase the momentum for long-term change. It is important that there is sufficient buy-in across the organisation.

CASE STUDIES

Tourism in Nepal (10)

Nyaupane et al. conducted an AI process to identify how tourism can help conservation of biological diversity and livelihood improvement in Chitwan National Park in Nepal. The national park



attracts many tourists every year, but tourists tend to visit only one area, leading to a limited distribution of tourism revenue. This is an issue because those living near the National Park are expected to support conservation efforts, despite living in poverty and not sharing in revenue. The study was set up to identify how to better share revenue. AI methodology was chosen because a broad range of stakeholders, from various backgrounds and with diverse interests, had to be brought together and researchers worried that traditional problem-solving approaches would generate conflict as participants would blame each other for the problems. In the initial phase of the project, rapport was built through various informal meetings with key stakeholders and participants for the AI process were selected. This extra step was introduced as many members as possible of the various communities were initially reluctant to participate in research due to negative previous experiences. Identified stakeholders included government. All individuals were asked to list and discuss stories of what they considered exemplary work. The focus was not on finding facts or opinions but to identify stories. During the discovery phase the researchers aimed to identify positive forces in tourism, biodiversity, and livelihood interaction that contributed to

the interests of stakeholders. The discovery phase helped uncover positive outcomes of tourism, biodiversity, and livelihood interaction, and helped participants to realise that combined effects can help uncover interests of stakeholders. In the dream phase researchers asked participants to think about the ideal tourism, biodiversity, and livelihood interaction. Ideal interactions were subsequently shared in stakeholder groups to create a group dream. While no complete agreement was found, all stakeholders came up with a common ideal, involving conservation-friendly infrastructure and tourism development that helps to build thriving communities around a well-protected national park. In the design phase participants were asked to establish milestones that track the progress towards realising the ideal. The outcome included a detailed plan of activities, aimed at achieving set goals. Finally a reflection session was held to evaluate what participants learnt for taking part in the AI. Participants mentioned AI helped them work together to achieve common goals, and helped create mutual trust, respect, and appreciation.



Postpartum infection in India (11, 12)

Researchers identified that infection control committees, which consist of health workers from various hospital departments and aim to improve patient safety and patient care by implementing infection control activities, do not always function well due to lack of collaboration with staff members from different hierarchies. The researchers hoped that AI would break down hierarchal barriers and improve team working, and thus bring down infection rates. In the discovery phase of AI, hospital staff shared women's lived experiences during childbirth and appreciated the contributions of their colleagues. Staff from different levels of hierarchy were paired up and asked to interview each other to identify what works well. In the dream stage staff were subsequently asked to develop aspirations for being recognised as 'The Best Hospital for Infection Control'. Additionally, steps were identified that could lead to becoming 'The Best Hospital for Infection Control', including general improvements in hygiene, use of gloves and masks, and hand washing, amongst others. In the design phase, action plans were drawn up and each hospital formed 3-4 teams to plan and monitor tasks, including training and implementation of

standard practices. Finally, in the destiny phase, trainers held a discussion regarding the means to sustain efforts taken by the hospitals. While no statistically significant changes in infection rates were identified, people perceived better infection control practices, better staff knowledge of infection control, and more regular meetings among members of different hierarchy.

CONCLUSION

AI is a method for organisational change built on strengths. With the help of the 5D-Cycle, consisting of the five steps for AI, participants are encouraged to identify strengths and determine how they can develop their team or organisation based on these existing strengths and successes. Problems are not dismissed but they are not used as the basis for analysis and action. Researchers can use AI to investigate, and implement, opportunities for change based on strengths, as shown in the case-study examples above.



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