

# Appreciative Inquiry: A Transformative Paradigm

by  
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## WHAT IS IT?

Appreciative Inquiry, a concept and approach conceived and described in the work of Dr. David Cooperrider and his colleagues at Case Western Reserve's school of Organization Behavior, is a worldview, a paradigm of thought and understanding that holds organizations to be affirmative systems created by humankind as solutions to problems. It is a theory, a mindset, and an approach to analysis that leads to organizational learning and creativity.

Used in place of the traditional problem solving approach — finding what is wrong and forging solutions to fix the problems — Appreciative Inquiry seeks what is "right" in an organization. It is a habit of mind, heart, and imagination that searches for the success, the life-giving force, the incidence of joy. It moves toward what the organization is doing right and provides a frame for creating an imagined future that builds on and expands the joyful and life-giving realities as the metaphor and organizing principle of the organization.

The 20th Century habit of mind, heart and imagination in Western thought reaches the depths of cynicism. Metaphorically, in much of the world today, the glass is half empty. Indeed, cynicism is considered reality so much so that the terms "Pollyanna," "unrealistic," and "naive" are used to describe those who approach life from the perspective of the glass as half full.

Appreciative Inquiry is an articulated theory that rationalizes and reinforces the habit of mind that moves through the world in a generative frame, seeking and finding images of the possible rather than scenes of disaster and despair.

## WHY DO IT?

Why do we need to look for the positive, for the life-giving forces, for those moments of joy and satisfaction? One might argue that such a vantage point at least guarantees a good night's sleep. However, the habit of seeking and finding the generative rather than the destructive image appears to have far more power than simple peace of mind.

In the early parts of this century, Western thought, based on the work of Freud and Jung, believed that human behavior was caused by the events of one's childhood and family reality. To change behavior, a person had to delve into this "historical reality" and find ways to resolve those issues in order to change behavior. Mid-century, behavioral scientists such as Skinner and Lewin suggested that the past was mostly irrelevant. What controlled human behavior was the environment and circumstances of life in the present moment? Human behavior, they believed, was shaped by "current reality."

As we approach the end of the century, scientists are beginning to understand the impact on human behavior of "anticipatory reality." Who among us has not experienced a quickened heartbeat and other physical symptoms of anxiety as we approach a person that we imagine is angry or upset with us? It is the anticipation of the behavior of the other that generates a physical response in us. In the same way, we have the power to create the positive events in our lives such as the joy we experience in anticipation of a pleasurable experience.

There is much research going on today, and much to be observed that suggests that we human beings create the future that we imagine. As leading nations of the world more and more imagined the terrible destruction of nuclear war, each armed itself to the edge of financial collapse. Images of violence and destruction became the organizing principle of society. Today, the streets of American cities are rife with violence and destruction. The arms of war are even in the hands of children who slay each other in gang wars or by accident in their homes playing with guns bought by fearful and cynical people living in a paradigm of fear. It is not hard to imagine how such a world might end.

There is, however, an opposing force, a shift in the wind. The time of change is upon us. Beneath this blanket of cynicism and fear, movements are afoot across the globe that say "enough!" Women are changing their roles; environmentalists are organizing to regenerate the planet; non-traditional spiritual communities and movements are reaching beyond the customary in search of more hopeful belief systems, more creative symbols and rituals.

In organizations across government, non-profit, and the private sector there are signs of change. The literature is beginning to reflect some of the new habits of mind, heart, and imagination —Total Quality Management, a learning organization, valuing diversity. Appreciative Inquiry as a system of thought is based on social science research that affirms these trends and movements by demonstrating the power of generative images to create a world of hope and possibility. This is not about denying the negative and destructive. It is, rather, about focusing on the positive and creative as a force for building a more positive future.

The knowledge base that supports this approach comes from widely diverse fields such as medicine, sports, behavioral science, and anthropology. For example, since the mid-fifties, Western medical science has become aware of the power of the mind to heal the body. This concept has always been the basis of healing in Eastern cultures, but the split in mind and body that began with the Greeks and dominates Western thought and behavior is rediscovering this mind/body connection using scientific experimentation and documented data.

The widely documented placebo studies beginning in the mid 1950's have shown that people given "sugar" pills, believing that they are taking "real" medicine, get well at about the same rate as those taking the medicine.

Though the placebo phenomenon has been controversial for some twenty years, most of the medical profession now accepts, as genuine, the fact that anywhere from one-third to two-thirds of all patients will show marked physiological and emotional improvement in symptoms simply by believing they are given an effective treatment, even when that treatment is just a sugar pill or some other inert substance. (Beecher, 1955; White, Tursky, and Schwartz, 1985.) *For a comprehensive discussion of the research*

*in this and the following fields cited in this paper, see "Positive Image, Positive Action: The Affirmative Basis of Organizing" by David L. Cooperrider.*

Norman Cousins popularized this notion in his book about his recovery from a life threatening illness. Currently, a whole series of books, including **Quantum Healing** and **The Mind-Body Connection** by the Western trained physician, Deepak Chopra, an Indian by birth, articulates the reasons for and the power of the mind/body connection and its importance in keeping well. Simonton (**Getting Well Again**) at his clinic in Texas, documented an unusually high rate of recovery from "terminal" cancer by patients who worked with resolving their psychological issues and practiced positive imagery. Bill Moyers created a whole series for the Public Broadcasting System on the power of the mind to heal the body.

In another set of studies, behavioral scientists looked at the ratio of positive as opposed to negative thought patterns in people facing major heart surgery. The studies demonstrated that those who approached the operation with a feeling that the doctor was the best, the medical techniques proven and safe, and their chances of being well again were excellent, recovered at a much greater rate than those who approached the operation with fear and concern. In these studies, it was concluded that the desired ratio of positive thoughts to negative thoughts is approximately 2 to 1. With a 2 to 1 ratio, there is a marked difference in the level of well being that a person experiences.

A set of experiments called the Pygmalion studies, carried out in classrooms with school children, demonstrated the power of another person's image of us in shaping our performance. In these studies, teachers were told that one group of students were not very intelligent, tended to do poorly and were often not well-behaved in the classroom, while the second group was bright, hard-working, and successful. The teacher believed these to be the facts while in actuality, the division of students into the two groups was entirely random. Within one semester, however, almost without exception those labeled poor students were performing poorly and those labeled good students were excelling.

Further study showed that the effects of this image held by the teacher affected the students far into the future. (By inference, the same effect can be anticipated with images held by parents, bosses, and other authority figures.) Furthermore, it was proven that the image that the teacher held of the student was a more powerful predictor of how well the child would do than IQ scores, home environment, or past performance. So damaging were these experiments to the students labeled "poor," that the scientific community discontinued them. Who among us would want our child in such an experiment?

Finally, there are many examples in the sports arena of the power of the positive image in creating success for athletes. Books such as Jack Nicklaus's **Golf My Way** argue that the positive affirmation ("I'm going to hit it down the middle of the fairway," rather than "Don't hit it into the woods.") causes the whole body to respond to what the mind imagines is possible. Paradoxically, most of us believe that elimination of failures (negative self-monitoring, i.e., No, not the woods) will improve performance when exactly the opposite appears to be true.

One particularly interesting experiment used video to record a bowling match. For one team, the experimenters edited out all of the mistakes and showed the team the film of everything they had done right. For the second team, they edited out everything done right and used the more traditional training method of showing the team its mistakes and strategizing how to correct them. While both teams

improved, the team seeing what they did right had 100% greater improvement than did the team that was shown its mistakes.

The mind, it seems, does not know how to negate a negative; i.e., when we say to a child, "No, do not go into the swimming pool," what the mind records is the swimming pool. Tape recorders on the backs of a group of three-year-old children showed that over 80% of the messages they got were of the NO, NOT variety.

With this kind of scientific evidence emerging, it makes sense to rethink our approach to organization development. Appreciative Inquiry is not, however, just another technique for organizational business as usual. It requires an enlargement of the current paradigm of linear thinking and a rational, logical, and all too often cynical view of the world, to one that includes the creativity and seeming chaos of a multi-faceted approach to "knowing" that includes body and spirit as well as mind. The power of the Western way of knowing is not in dispute. What is up for examination is the limitations of that approach. Appreciative Inquiry provides an intellectual construct and practice that gives organizations an expanded way of viewing reality and a practical rationale and method for creating a desired future.

## **HOW TO DO IT.**

Because Appreciative Inquiry calls for a sea change in attitude and thinking patterns, it is far more than a technique or methodology for "fixing" organizations. As a concept, it requires an organization to make a commitment to continuous learning, growth, and generative change. Step One must always be an internalization of the theory and concepts of this worldview. Once that is achieved, organizations have the ability to apply the concepts in innovative ways to achieve a healthier and more creative environment.

As one way of using Appreciative Inquiry in an organization, a small work-group might gather to study the concepts in order to gain an in-depth understanding of Appreciative Inquiry. This is often followed by a dialogue process with members of this group interviewing each other as well as other members of the organization asking questions that elicit the creative and life-giving events experienced in the workplace. These dialogues often begin with 3 or 4 general questions such as:

1. Looking at your entire experience with the organization, remember a time when you felt most alive, most fulfilled, or most excited about your involvement in the organization.
  - What made it exciting?
  - Who else was involved?
  - Describe how you felt about it.
  
2. Let's talk for a moment about some things you value deeply; specifically, the things you value about yourself; about the nature of your work; and about this organization.
  - Without being humble, what do you value most about yourself as a person and as a member of this organization?
  - When you are feeling best about your work, what about the task itself do you value?
  - What do you value about the organization?

- What is the most important thing this organization has contributed to your life? To the world?
3. What do you experience as the core factors that give life to this organization? Give some examples of how you experience those factors.
  4. What three wishes would you make to heighten the vitality and health of this organization?

The interviews are not soliciting facts and opinions so much as examples, stories, metaphors. In the search for the generative and joyful moments, the interviewer elicits the particular rather than the general. The purpose is to find those moments, events, stories of the best there is.

Using the data from these original dialogues, the workgroup looks for the themes and topics that run through the stories. These topics become the focus of a more specific interview protocol that seeks to enlarge and learn more about the chosen topics. For example, if the original data suggests that COMMITMENT is an important factor in many of the stories about the best of times in the organization, then the workgroup might choose to ask more questions from others in the workplace about their experiences with commitment.

This second round of interviews produces information about 4 to 6 topics that become the basis for building "Provocative Propositions" that describe how the organization will be in the future. Each topic or theme can be fashioned into a future statement. And these statements become an integral part of the vision for the organization.

Often, this process is completed with a future search conference that uses the Appreciative Inquiry data as a basis for imaging a positive and creative future for the organization.

### **EXAMPLES OF APPLICATIONS:**

Over the past two years, we have been involved with a team (funded by a USAID grant and directed by Ada Jo Mann and Claudia Liebler) in designing and delivering an appreciative inquiry process to management teams of International Development Agencies, known in the US as Private Voluntary Organizations or PVO's. Teams from selected organizations include the CEO and the senior managers (from 3 to 9 people) who commit to be involved in all facets of the project.

#### **The process includes:**

- Step 1:** A consultant trained in appreciative inquiry is assigned to an organization and spends a full day explaining the theoretical basis for the work and helping the team construct an Appreciative Inquiry interview protocol.
- Step 2:** The team uses the protocol to interview all or a significant majority of the people in their organization often including stakeholders outside the staff in the process.
- Step 3:** The team brings the data and attends a week long Institute of PVO/CEO Excellence where they engage in experiential processes of management culminating in a set of Provocative Propositions written from the collected data.

**Step 4:** The consultant is available for 4 days of follow-up meetings with the organization as it works to incorporate the Provocative Propositions into its mission and vision.

**Step 5:** An evaluation team visits the organization to assess what impact the institute has had.

A second model is one created by Schiller and Associates for an Appreciative Inquiry into gender issues with a major corporation whose aim is to include women at top levels of management. Instead of the usual models of confrontation, identification of problems, and strategies to improve the situation, we designed a method for seeking the creative and successful partnerships of women and men working together in that organization. Taking those examples, the organization is constructing principles and possibilities for creative and generative working relationships between women and men.

In a second Schiller contract with a major corporation, studies are also being made of successful practices in other organizations, a process akin to Benchmarking best practices.

Finally, the use of this methodology in a division of a US Government agency led to the construction of a reorganization strategy that was useful to that agency during the "reinventing government" phase of the Clinton/Gore administration. The division moved from fear that their programs would not survive into a pro-active mode of creating an ideal environment in which their programs could thrive.

These are only a few examples of the uses of Appreciative Inquiry in a variety of organizations. Appreciative Inquiry is not a methodology. It is a way of expanding our vision to include the possible. In each incidence of use, the model is constructed to fit the needs of the organization. There is no right or wrong method, no perfect process. Some groups begin slowly and others jump in headlong. The work of the consultant is to help the organization find its own way, its own path. Appreciative Inquiry is an inquiry process, a continuous learning paradigm that seeks the most creative and generative realities.

Consultants working within this paradigm are reporting amazing transformations of organizations including renewed commitment, released energy of the workforce, far less complaining and the attendant hopeless affect, and innovative, creative images of the future that become the driving force for the organization. It is not an easy transformation. The ingrained beliefs and models that come from the dominant paradigm are not easy to examine. Often people have a high stake in rationalizing what they have always believed, finding it hard, if not impossible, to expand their vision to include a larger reality.

The key to the successful use of Appreciative Inquiry is not to say that the current way of seeing the world is wrong; rather, it is to help people realize that we can be limited and constrained by our inability to see larger and more expansive realities that are often right under our noses. It is no longer new news that we simply don't see what doesn't fit into our concept of what is real or true. Appreciative Inquiry is about freeing ourselves to explore beyond what we already know and understand. Such freedom can feel threatening and frightening. But once embraced, it is often thrilling!

Finally, Appreciative Inquiry is not new. Much that is happening today and much of history has been impacted by those who see the possible even in the most desperate of times. A powerful example of a leader using the appreciative approach is found in Isaiah Berlin's account of Winston Churchill's leadership during the Second World War:

In 1940 he (Churchill) assumed an indomitable stoutness, an unsundering quality on the part of his people. . . He idealized them with such intensity that in the end they approached his ideal and began to see themselves as he saw them: "the buoyant and imperturbable temper of Britain which I had the honour to express" — it was indeed, but he had the lion's share in creating it. So hypnotic was the force of his words, so strong his faith, that by the sheer intensity of his eloquence he bound his spell upon them until it seemed to them that he was indeed speaking what was in their hearts and minds. Doubtless it was there; but largely dormant until he had awoken it within them.

After he had spoken to them in the summer of 1940 as no one else has ever before or since, they conceived a new idea of themselves. . . They went forward into battle transformed by his words. . . He created a heroic mood and turned the fortunes of the Battle of Britain not by catching the (life-diminishing) mood of his surroundings but by being impervious to it. . . .

As Cooperrider notes in the "Positive Image, Positive Action" article cited previously, "Churchill's impact and the guiding images he helped create were the result of his towering ability to cognitively dissociate all seeming impossibilities, deficiencies, and imperfections from a given situation and to see in his people and country that which had fundamental value and strength. His optimism, even in Britain's darkest moment, came not from a Pollyanna-like sense that 'everything is fine' but from a conviction that was born from what he, like few others, could actually see in his country. . . . The appreciative eye, we are beginning to understand, apprehends 'what is' rather than 'what is not' and in this represents a rigorous cognitive ability to bracket out all seeming imperfections from that which has fundamental value."