

Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has come together under the guidance of David Cooperrider. When he was doing his PhD he interviewed leading clinicians at the Cleveland Clinic about their greatest successes and failures. He found himself drawn to the stories of success and focused exclusively on them. As he reported them back into the Clinic they had a huge impact—so much so that the Clinic board asked that the same approach be used throughout the whole 8000- person organization.

Appreciative Inquiry is based on the premise that *organizations change in the direction in which they inquire*. An organization that inquires into problems will continue to find problems, but an organization that attempts to appreciate what is best in itself will discover more and more of what works and can work. It is in these discoveries organizations build a new, sustainable norm.

Cooperrider contrasts the commonplace notion that, “organizing is a problem to be solved” with the appreciative proposition that, “organizing is a miracle to be embraced”.

Inquiry into organizational life, he says, should have four characteristics. It should be:

1. *Appreciative*—AI looks for the “positive core” of the organization and seeks to use it as a foundation for future growth.
2. *Applicable*—AI is grounded in stories of what has actually taken place in the past and is therefore essentially practical. It is not a “pie in the sky” approach but instead seeks the best of “what is” in order to build the best of “what might be”.
3. *Provocative*—AI invites people to take some risks in the way they imagine the future and redesign their organization to bring it about. With the security and energy gained from the exploration of the best in the organization, people feel able to respond with “provocative propositions” about the future.
4. *Collaborative*—AI is a form of collaborative inquiry. It always involves the whole organization or a representative cross-section of the whole organization. In this way all voices can be heard and everyone’s contribution valued.

With Appreciative Inquiry you move your strategic and talent management strategies from “buy in” to commitment, understanding, and ownership.

As more and more people have used Appreciative Inquiry it has developed and new understandings have been gained. Although every AI intervention is unique to the organization concerned, a number of common themes and approaches have emerged.

AI has now been used in large organizations and in small; in commercial and not-for-profit; for large-scale organizational transformation and to look at specific issues in particular parts of an organization. The results are nearly always strikingly positive.