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*This chapter argues that Appreciative Inquiry has potential in some circumstances if evaluators can successfully implement the difficult group processes and sustained engagement that it requires.*

## Appreciating Appreciative Inquiry

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Appreciation is not just looking at the good stuff. In this chapter, we set out to appreciate Appreciative Inquiry—to develop a rounded understanding of its strengths and limitations from different perspectives and to increase its value for evaluators.

Appreciative Inquiry offers considerable promise as an addition to the evaluator's repertoire, particularly for those of us who work with a range of programs and organizations with an eye on the ultimate impact of our work, but the descriptions of Appreciative Inquiry in this volume tell only part of the story. Appreciative Inquiry can be a useful and valuable technique in the right circumstances and when well implemented, but it is not always appropriate and it requires special skills and abilities to be done properly. Nor is it only about finding nice things to say about a program.

Even for those who are not interested in adopting Appreciative Inquiry, there is much to be learned from this issue about what is needed for evaluation to effectively incorporate techniques and approaches from other disciplines and professions. Overenthusiastic promotion of any new approach to evaluation risks oversimplifying the processes involved and the demands it makes on those who seek to use it.

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## Evaluating Approaches to Program Evaluation

Our first task is to identify desiderata for evaluating an approach to program evaluation and to be clear about our expectations for evaluation approaches. Unlike Stufflebeam (2001), we do not expect any single evaluation approach or model to be sufficient for a given evaluation and do not evaluate them in terms of their comprehensiveness. We see different evaluation approaches as components in our repertoire that can be combined as needed, not as mutually exclusive commercial products that should be adopted or rejected in their entirety. Nor do we expect any approach to be suitable for all programs, all evaluation purposes, all countries, and all organizations.

We have developed three criteria for evaluating approaches to program evaluation (Rogers, 1995). The first is the plausibility of its theory of intended impact. Program evaluation is intended to contribute to improved programs in some way (whether through formative improvement or through summative selection). What is the process by which this is expected to happen (for example, better-informed decision making, more motivated staff, engaged power brokers), and how plausible is this? The second criterion is practicality: this considers whether the technique can be successfully implemented and offers sufficient guidance for evaluation practice. The third criterion is the extent to which there is evidence that the approach works, meaning that it contributes to improved programs. On all three criteria, Appreciative Inquiry has a mixed score.

### Plausibility of Its Theory of Action

Appreciative Inquiry is based on a seductively plausible causal model: that by highlighting the positive, we can help bring about the positive outcomes we describe. This is a popular and largely credible theory and the basis of many self-help books, starting with *The Power of Positive Thinking* (Peale, 1952). More recently this approach has been applied to individuals, families, organizations, and even entire countries. For example, Lundy and Visser (2003) urged South Africans to take a positive attitude to their country, arguing that attitudes shape perceptions, which shape reality. The influence of attitudes on perceptions and of perceptions on performance has been widely recognized even among nonconstructivist researchers. For example, in the Rosenthal effect (Rosenthal and Jacobsen, 1968), students randomly identified to their teachers as talented went on to improve their actual performance, despite concerns about the original study (Wineburg, 1987)—an effect of importance in learning (Murphy, Campbell, and Garavan, 1999). This appealing theory is not, however, universally appropriate or useful.

For some people, a more effective strategy is defensive pessimism, where they imagine the worst possible outcome and plan how they would cope with it (Norem, 2001). While this may seem a depressing approach,

when people who use this strategy are prevented from doing so and urged to focus only on the best-case scenario, their anxiety escalates and their performance deteriorates.

In other circumstances, there is a risk that Appreciative Inquiry may encourage unrealistic and dysfunctional perceptions, attitudes, and behavior. It risks encouraging unjustified and intemperate optimism, which Lovullo and Kahneman (2003) have pointed out has undermined the quality of many executives' decisions, to the detriment of their companies. It also risks encouraging avoidance of known problems, which is rarely an effective response.

Appreciative Inquiry is based on the heliotropic principle: that people and organizations move toward those things that give them energy and life. Just as plants can grow lopsided as they reach for the light, there is a risk of distortion in what Appreciative Inquiry evaluations focus on and the activities they encourage. By seeking as explicitly for positive features as Appreciative Inquiry does, it runs the very real risk of papering over substantive problems and in fact colluding with the powerful people who want the unexamined to remain so. The original sources on Appreciative Inquiry are more thoughtful in this regard. When Cooperrider and Whitney (2000) outlined the Poetic Principle, they did not suggest that people are entirely free in the topics they choose to investigate in organizations, but acknowledged that "the topics are themselves social artifacts, products of social processes (cultural habits, typifying discourses, rhetoric, professional ways, power relations)" (p. 16). We believe that the chapters in this volume have not adequately addressed this serious issue. There is some suggestion in the cases presented here that Appreciative Inquiry can help people in organizations to face up to previously identified problems, but the evidence is sparse.

We are also concerned about the overemphasis on how perceptions affect reality without due concern for how reality can intrude on people's lives. There are many aspects of lived reality that are not invented and exist despite our mental state; grinding poverty, gender inequality, violence, and disease are some examples.

Given these limitations on the universality of Appreciative Inquiry, in which contexts is Appreciative Inquiry's theory of action most likely to be appropriate and effective? It seems that Appreciative Inquiry is likely to be most useful when the purpose of the evaluation is not to identify unknown problems but to identify strengths (both those that are known and unknown) and build courage to attend to known problems.

Appreciative Inquiry can help to identify and make explicit areas of good performance and to communicate and institutionalize what is already known about good performance so that it gets continued or replicated. Appreciative Inquiry seems less likely to be useful when bad performance is not yet known and needs to be discovered. It is important to note that in all the cases in these chapters, previous evaluation work had identified

problems. This suggests that Appreciative Inquiry might be a useful complement to deficit-focused evaluations, which can leave organizations frayed and distressed. In such a context, Appreciative Inquiry may be a useful strategy to remind stakeholders of the value the initiative offers and to suggest ways of capitalizing and building on what is good. It may also be particularly useful and invigorating for staff whose day-to-day work has become disconnected from their ultimate goals and who can use the resulting information to revise planned activities, objectives, and targets and reconnect them with their deep aspirations. Instead of seeing program evaluation as a process of generating and communicating new knowledge, Appreciative Inquiry suggests that it might be fundamentally a process of “locating the energy for change,” as one Appreciative Inquiry publication is titled (Elliott, 1999).

### **Guidance for Practice**

It is difficult to provide sufficient guidance for practice when introducing a new approach that is based on substantial literature and requires high-level skills. Nevertheless, we are concerned about the quality of guidance that is provided for evaluators in this collection. The version of Appreciative Inquiry that is described here treats appreciation as involving an exclusive focus on the positive, which does not do justice to the complexity of Appreciative Inquiry. That important features of Appreciative Inquiry and the difficulties in successfully implementing the approach are not adequately described worries us. Evaluators may underestimate the skills needed to implement this approach effectively and thus not be prepared for dealing with potential problems should they arise. It may be that evaluators need to team with experienced and skilled organizational development facilitators to implement this approach effectively.

We would urge readers who are interested in Appreciative Inquiry to read more broadly, in particular Elliott’s account (1999) of using Appreciative Inquiry in a project working with street children in Africa. Elliott makes it clear that Appreciative Inquiry involves developing a deeper understanding of the program, which requires prolonged engagement, a commitment to empirical investigation, and progressive investigation of different perspectives. His frank discussion of the difficulties they faced provides useful guidance to evaluators attempting to use the technique.

Elliott also argues that the appreciative approach should be collaborative across as broad a spectrum of stakeholders as possible rather than be confined to one dominant group. It should issue provocative or challenging propositions that stretch the mind of everyone in the organization to new vistas of the possible rather than being a rehash of groupthink.

Evaluators need more guidance on how to effectively engage a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including addressing the power issues that will necessarily be involved. One of our main concerns around Appreciative

Inquiry is its potential to involve and include program staff (who are better able to participate in more of the processes) at the expense of program beneficiaries, and in this way to deepen and widen the gap between those who are already empowered and those who are not. Smart and Mann (Chapter Five, this volume) described their difficulties in successfully engaging program beneficiaries in an Appreciative Inquiry exercise.

### **Evidence That It Works**

In addition to the evidence from the cases and other published accounts of Appreciative Inquiry, we have had personal experience of the positive energy generated by Appreciative Inquiry. A presentation on Appreciative Inquiry by Hallie Preskill at the Evaluator's Institute in Washington, D.C., in 2001 generated tremendous excitement and enthusiasm. The questions were about peak experiences doing evaluation, and the buzz across the room as we discussed these in pairs was electrifying. The experience of that energy and enthusiasm was very powerful. The challenge, however, is not in generating the energy but in sustaining it and directing it in useful ways. Appreciative Inquiry is not a brief exercise with program staff but a sustained and difficult process, involving diverse stakeholders and empirical investigation of the program.

The cases in this volume provide varied evidence of the feasibility and utility of Appreciative Inquiry. McNamee's account in Chapter Two of an Appreciative Inquiry intervention in a private high school in the United States details a very developed version of Appreciative Inquiry. The case described sustained engagement and genuine efforts to understand different perspectives and share these with the affected group, as well as a commitment to following through with subsequent planning and implementation of changes. What emerges clearly from the account is that care, extensive preparation, and great sensitivity are needed to make the technique successful. We were particularly impressed with the way the critical comments of staff were gathered at the beginning of the process and included later in the process, while maintaining confidentiality and the focus on the positive. It is important to note, however, that two important groups of stakeholders—students and their parents—were not apparently included in the process.

Catsambas and Webb's case study in Chapter Three of their work with the International Women's Media Foundation documents the care they took to follow the right procedures, including important components such as careful regular reporting back and postevaluation follow-ups. This case shows very clearly that Appreciative Inquiry is not an easy way to make people feel uncritically good about their programs but is instead a challenging and demanding approach to program evaluation. There are clearly limits, however, to the extent to which evaluators are willing to frankly discuss difficulties and limitations in their work, and any account that depends on

only retrospective accounts by evaluators risks accusations of being self-serving.

Jacobsgaard's case study in Chapter Four of the Family Rehabilitation Centre in Sri Lanka is one in which the appreciative process was left unfinished, though the exercise appears nevertheless to have had a positive impact. In this case, elements of Appreciative Inquiry were used with other methods to support and promote healing in an organization previously bruised by insensitive and damaging evaluations that had undermined participants and staff (it is interesting how often an evaluation parallels the type of program the organization runs). Appreciative Inquiry returns here to its roots in organizational development, where it clearly has enormous positive potential. This case suggests that the process of Appreciative Inquiry helped people in the organization to address known problems. However, more information and more discussion of the subsequent activities would have added to the weight of evidence that this case provides.

We were less convinced that Smart and Mann's case in Chapter Five on Girl Scouts Beyond Bars provides evidence of the implementation or impact of Appreciative Inquiry. The program being evaluated was clearly a valuable one, but the study reduced Appreciative Inquiry to a simple matter of including some open-ended questions in an interview schedule, neither discussing how this fell short of comprehensive Appreciative Inquiry nor explaining why this was done. We do not advocate purism, but to categorize a study as an exercise in Appreciative Inquiry requires more than the use of a few basic procedures.

## **Using Appreciative Inquiry for Evaluation**

The cases in this collection suggest that Appreciative Inquiry is likely to be at its most useful in long-standing programs that have become depleted or exhausted and require an infusion of positive energy and recognition in order to be revived and that have also completed more usual evaluations that have identified the problems that exist. Appreciative Inquiry is particularly valuable in programs that are highly complex, where the technique can serve to restate and reframe what is valuable, useful, and important.

Appreciative Inquiry is a good choice if the necessary skills and capacities are in place to manage and guide the process. When multidisciplinary teams are being assembled, consideration should be given to including members who have the affirming types of skills needed to apply the technique properly and to include elements of the approach in their evaluation strategies. Without the necessary facilitation and group work skills, we suspect that Appreciative Inquiry could go dangerously wrong, leading to vacuous, self-congratulatory findings (by avoiding hard issues

and uncomplimentary data); even worse, Appreciative Inquiry could provide a platform for airing vengeful and destructive sentiments by drawing implicit comparisons between ideal performance and the performance of those present.

### **More General Lessons for Evaluation Practice**

These accounts of Appreciative Inquiry offer important lessons for evaluation practice, even for those who do not adopt it. One of its major strengths is its fundamental recognition that an evaluation is an intervention that causes ripples in the life of an institution. Many evaluators operate without recognition of this fact, and they proceed with their assessments in ways that are insensitive to the impact their questions and investigations have on the life of an organization or institution. Anxiety, tension, and even serious forms of dishonesty can be triggered by insensitive evaluations and can have long-term effects on initiatives, directly and indirectly. It is important that the impact that evaluations have on organizations be considered and factored in when selecting techniques to be used to gather, analyze, report, and use information.

More generally, these accounts raise issues about the way in which we should develop, implement, document, and report new approaches to evaluation. One of these issues is how comprehensive and faithful to key principles a case needs to be in order to be considered an example of that approach.

Bushe (2000) makes the important point that as Appreciative Inquiry becomes fashionable, “any inquiry that focuses on the positive in some way gets called appreciative inquiry. . . . The result will be that the unique power of this idea gets corrupted and lost and Appreciative Inquiry becomes just another discarded innovation on the junk heap of ‘failed’ management effectiveness strategies” (p. 99).

Implementation fidelity is an important issue in any evaluation that seeks to generalize about an approach. It is made more difficult when evaluating evaluations, which might quite reasonably combine elements of different approaches or adapt to local conditions. We need to decide what elements of an approach need to be in place for it to be considered an example of its use.

The cases also raise issues about presenting new approaches and accounts of evaluation practice. Ideally, discussions of new approaches should not present a straw man of other approaches or oversimplify the new approach. Ideally accounts of evaluation practice should provide more evidence of sustained benefits and corroboration from people other than the evaluators.

We do not need more narratives of the evaluator as hero, and we do not need evaluation models to be marketed as if they were competing commercial

products. Rather, we need better documentation of accounts of evaluation practice, and we need to see evaluation models as being based on and using complementary skills and ideas.

## Conclusion

This volume is a valuable and constructive contribution to program evaluation because it offers examples of good practice as well as how Appreciative Inquiry can fall short. Noting these lessons and learning from the experiences of others puts us in a better position to improve our own practice and to contribute to performance improvement in meaningful ways.

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