

Appreciative inquiry: An approach for learning and change based on our own best practices

Anne Acosta and Boru Douthwaite

Since it was conceptualized in the late 1980s as a research methodology and change paradigm, the technique of 'appreciative inquiry' (AI) has proved to be highly effective for capturing the positive features of an organization or social system and energizing the members to strive for higher levels of performance. This Brief outlines the basic principles and methods of AI, describes various domains in which it has been undertaken and provides a recent example of its use in a centre affiliated with the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR).

Introduction

"Tell me a story, if you will, of a time when this team/organization/community has been at its best – when people were proud to be a part of it. What happened? What made it possible for this highpoint to occur? What would the system look like if that example of excellence was the norm?"

So begins a typical process of appreciative inquiry, a way of thinking and working with groups, organizations and communities that assumes all human systems have at least some positive features, i.e. something is working well. By fostering reflection on the system's strengths and best practices and sharing stories of highpoints, organizations can shift perceptions of the situation from being problem-ridden to being resource-rich. It is then possible to envision a future in which the conditions that existed during the highpoint become the norm. Since members have experienced a peak performance moment, they know it is possible. They also know what conditions are required to maintain this level of achievement and, motivated by their aspirations, pride and excitement, they can begin to change the system.

Perhaps this sounds too good to be true? Well, appreciative inquiry (AI) often meets with initial scepticism, since many of us believe that our most powerful learning comes from analysis of past mistakes. We are conditioned by years of using a problem-solving approach. However, the problem-solving approach is based on a principle that limits our ability to achieve breakthrough results. It assumes that we are beset by problems due to a fundamental lack of something: resources, ingenuity, goodwill, political support, leadership, knowledge/education, roads, technology, etc. The more we enquire into the causes of our problems, the clearer it becomes that we live in a state of deficit.

The AI shift: from problems to desired futures

Appreciative inquiry starts from a different premise. It assumes that there are examples of success in our past that we can learn

from to create greater success in the future. Specifically, instead of dissecting problems, AI seeks to determine the state that the system aspires to. The inquiry itself sets out to find examples of achievement of this desired state – even if this has occurred only rarely or briefly.

Typically, information is gathered when people interview each other. When sharing the stories elicited by the interview process, several things happen. Firstly, participants describe their own personal highpoints, which are often stories about how the organization or system has moved forward. This immediately directs thinking away from problems and deficits and towards opportunities and assets. Secondly, closer analysis of the highpoint stories reveals the factors that enabled the positive outcome to occur. Once an organization begins to realize that it already knows how to perform better, people become highly motivated to change.

Turning this motivation into action begins with a visioning process that builds on the success stories and their enabling factors. The visioning process produces 'provocative propositions' that describe how the system would look if the exceptional performance described in the highpoint experiences became the norm. Participatory planning and implementation follow, charting how the provocative propositions will be accomplished. Ideally, the appreciative cycle then starts again by identifying and sharing highpoints during implementation, tracking how the members bring further successes to the system.

The five steps of an appreciative inquiry

Figure 1 overleaf depicts the five steps that are typically followed in a classic AI. The box on page 3 describes its recent implementation at the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT).

1. Definition: establishing the focus and scope of the inquiry

This phase defines the scope of the inquiry – what is the focus, who is to be interviewed and by whom? Some choices will be governed by the resources available (people, time and money). The definition phase may also include building awareness among key stakeholders. The focus of the appreciative inquiry flows from discussions of what the system wants to become (ideally, a cross-section of system stakeholders should participate). This involves reframing problem statements into desired outcomes, for example:

ILAC Brief 6

- Problem statement: poor coordination among network partners leads to duplication and/or gaps in service provision.
- Desired state: effective coordination leverages each partner's capabilities while enabling synergies across all partners to achieve shared goals.
- Core ideas/inquiry topics to pursue: leveraging the best features of a networked system.
- Problem statement: considerable conflict occurs among team members, and no one feels valued for his/her contribution.
- Desired state: there is a strong sense of shared purpose among team members and members actively support each other's work and celebrate one another's successes.
- Core ideas/inquiry topics to pursue: a compelling and unifying purpose, team performance, mutual support.

Selecting the focus or topic of the inquiry is important because it will determine the kind of data elicited, which in turn will affect the ways in which participants see themselves and the system. AI holds that, whatever the focus of inquiry, asking questions heightens awareness of a particular aspect of the system. Asking questions begins a process of change, so it is important to get the questions right.

2. Discovery: eliciting stories of the system at its best

The second phase consists of interviewing the people selected in Phase 1. The standard AI interview protocol consists of four open-ended questions to elicit stories of highpoint experiences related to the inquiry topic. Interviewers are often asked to capture 'gems' or key quotes from their conversations. Participants generally find sharing highpoint stories very motivating. (See box for some examples of AI interview questions; Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2003 have more).

AI interviews have two important features. Firstly, they focus on the interviewee's views, with the interviewer using basic skills of active listening and probing to elicit further details. Secondly, AI interviews seek stories rather than opinions. Stories provide the raw material from which opinions can be derived. By going back to the original data, people can connect with the richness of their experience, rather than with the conclusions that have been drawn. Stories remind us of the context, who was involved, the enabling circumstances, the prior history and the subsequent outcomes.

Both the interviewer and interviewee generally find that the interview allows for deep connections, unexpected learning, and, above all, a sense of empowerment. In retelling their success stories, interviewees often see themselves as being able to make a difference. This can be very empowering, especially in situations where the individual has felt marginalized.

The next step is to look for common themes and outstanding insights, often by involving small groups of interviewees who share summaries of their interviews and any gems they have captured. Each group then identifies common themes and insights to share in plenary. Participants are often surprised and excited to see the same themes coming up repeatedly. These themes are then shared with the interviewees and with others in the system.

3. Dream: collecting the wisdom and imagining the future

In the dream phase, participants create a vision of their ideal future, based on what they learned in the discovery phase. They can be guided by asking: Imagine waking up 5 or 10 years in the future and discovering that your organization has made its highpoint experiences the norm. Your organization has become so successful that a journalist is about to interview you on how your organization is working. What do you say?

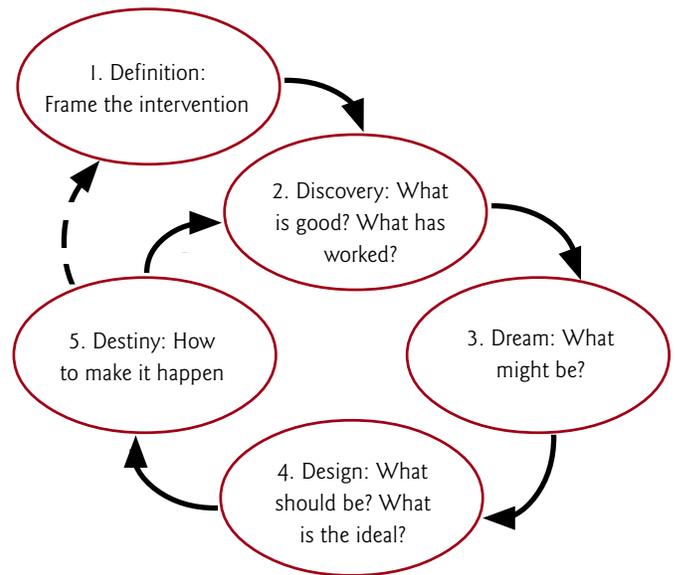


Figure 1. The appreciative inquiry '5-D' model (see Cooperrider et al., 2003; Watkins and Mohr, 2001; Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2003 and the AI Commons website)

In this way, participants begin to see their preferred future in concrete terms, based on what they have discovered in the previous phase. They then share their dreams, first in small groups and then in plenary, to derive common themes.

4. Design: bridges to the future based on the best of the past and present

The design phase maps the steps that will turn the dream into reality. Participants are asked to formulate 'provocative propositions', i.e. what needs to happen to support their vision of the future. The CIAT case described in the box includes some criteria for provocative propositions. The process of generating provocative propositions may be helped by identifying different domains of a system that need to be aligned in a new way to bring the dream into being, and then generating provocative propositions for each. For example, Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) propose the following organizational dimensions that might be considered when developing provocative propositions:

- vision and purpose
- strategy
- structure
- leadership
- decision-making processes
- communication
- systems
- roles and relationships
- knowledge management
- policies and procedures
- products and services.

5. Destiny: making it happen

Experience with AI suggests that implementation is accomplished most effectively by implementation teams, comprising committed individuals and groups. They continue to use the AI cycle to enact change; in particular, by continually seeking and sharing success stories that illustrate

Using appreciative inquiry to strengthen a community of practice at CIAT

Early in 2004, researchers at the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) working in Latin America, Africa and Asia who were interested in fostering rural innovation set out to form a community of practice based on a website and listserv. This resulted in formation of the Learning to Innovate (LTI) Group, which now has more than 50 members. Sponsored by the ILAC Initiative, the Group took advantage of CIAT's annual work-planning week to hold a one-day appreciative inquiry (AI) workshop. The objectives were to create a compelling vision for the LTI Group, to agree on a process for putting the vision into place and to learn about AI and its applications.

An AI workshop would normally take three days, so this was an ambitious undertaking. To save time, the inquiry focus was defined before the workshop started, and, after an introduction to AI, participants launched straight into the discovery phase, interviewing each other one-on-one (see questions below). They then formed groups of six to eight and shared interview highlights before identifying between three and five themes to be shared in plenary. The interview questions were as follows:

1. Fostering innovation

Reflect on your time at CIAT or other experiences. What were the highpoints for you working to foster innovation? Select one highpoint, at a time when you felt happiest and most alive, when you felt you were doing creative, useful, meaningful work that really made a difference. What were you doing, what felt good, who else was involved and what did you feel you achieved?

2. Cooperative relations

Identify and describe a scenario that demonstrates the positive aspects of working together, cooperating to get something done. Who and what was involved, why did it work, what were you doing and what were other people doing?

3. Effective communication and knowledge sharing

What different types of communication occur between CIAT's different geographic locations? What do you value most about effective communication? When does this happen for you? Who and what is involved in the best types of communication? Why is effective communication good for you and for work on fostering innovation?

The groups then went back to 'dream'. Participants were asked to imagine they had woken up 5 years into the future, when the LTI Group had become famous. They were asked to describe this success under the three question headings above. These descriptions were in the form of 'provocative propositions', which the facilitator suggested should:

- stretch, challenge and interrupt the status quo;
- be grounded in the group's collective history;
- describe something we want – our preferred future; and
- be stated in bold affirmative terms in the present tense.

Three small groups worked to develop provocative propositions, which were later combined through discussion on our listserv. Everyone who attended the workshop enjoyed the experience. Participants found, as the AI rhetoric claims, that the one-on-one interview was very motivating. Spending a day together helped cement the incipient community of practice. Since the end of the workshop, at least three of the participants have included aspects of AI in their work (see http://www.ciat.cgiar.org/ks_week/appreciative_inquiry.htm).

progress towards the dream. It is also important to foster a supportive environment for the AI change process. Ultimately, one will know if AI has really taken hold when the 'appreciative eye' is used with increasing frequency, beyond the initial pilot phase.

Situations in which AI has been applied

Numerous case studies describing the applications of AI can be found on the website of the Appreciative Inquiry Commons (<http://appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu/intro/bestcases.cfm>) and in Watkins and Mohr (2001) and Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003). AI has also been applied in:

- community development and community assets mapping
- strategic planning
- collaborative (project) planning
- strengthening partnerships
- organizational change management
- promoting organizational learning across disciplines, functions and generations (i.e. 'newcomers' and 'old-timers' in the organization)
- improving staff morale
- conflict resolution
- program assessment, monitoring and evaluation.

Prerequisites for a successful AI intervention

AI can work in a diversity of settings and is especially appropriate for situations where there is conflict or a lack of progress. However, it needs support and commitment from the leaders of the community, organization or team. Most importantly, leaders need to trust the process and support the ideas that emerge from it. They need to let go a certain amount of control. If they do not, the participants may feel that AI is being used to manipulate them towards the ulterior motives of the management. AI also needs support from the participants. If cynicism seems to prevail, it is better to start small and let the results convince people, before scaling up the initiative.

Conclusion

Several characteristics of AI differentiate it from other change management processes:

- The change process begins with interviews in which participants reflect on their positive experiences and discover their own capacity to make a difference. For some, the AI interview may be the first time anyone has asked about their unique contributions, and being allowed to voice these can have a notable empowering effect. Sharing the stories that emerge from the interviews builds appreciation

ILAC Brief 6

for the value and potential to contribute that is inherent in all human resources.

- Accumulating positive stories has the effect of changing the grand narrative or self-image of a system.
- The dream phase raises the sights of the system by enabling it to see the significant contributions and achievements it is uniquely capable of making.
- The most powerful seeds of change are contained in stakeholders' ownership of the dream and provocative propositions. If stakeholders buy into the dream and design statements, they will organize themselves and build change into their own agendas, above and beyond other formally planned actions or large-scale interventions.

Perhaps most importantly, AI makes system change processes remarkably pain-free compared to traditional processes. Innovation emerges by fostering both continuity and transition from the best of the past and present into the future. The vision sells itself because it emerges from the collective aspirations of the system's members. The principle of self-organization allows individual members of the system to sign up for the things they care most about. The energy and excitement generated by the process makes it difficult for anyone to remain on the sidelines (Head et al., 2000).

Further reading

Ashford, G. and Patkar, S. 2001. *The Positive Path: Using Appreciative Inquiry in Rural Indian Communities*. Winnipeg, Canada: International Institute for Sustainable Development. <http://www.iisd.org/publications/publication.asp?pno=304>

Cooperrider, D.L., Whitney, D.L. and Stavros, J.M. 2003. *The Appreciative Inquiry Handbook*. San Francisco, USA: Berrett-Koehler.

Elliott, C.E. 1999. *Locating the Energy for Change: An Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry*. Winnipeg, Canada: International Institute for Sustainable Development.

Head, T.C., Sorensen, P.F., Preston, J. and Yaeger, T. 2000. Is Appreciative Inquiry OD's Philosopher's Stone? in Cooperrider, D.L. et al. (eds.), *Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking Human Organization Toward a Positive Theory of Change*. Champaign, IL, USA: Stipes Publishing, LLC.

Watkins, J.M. and Mohr, B.J. 2001. *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*. San Francisco, USA: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.

Whitney, D. and Trosten-Bloom, A. 2003. *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change*. San Francisco, USA: Berrett-Koehler.

Related websites:

Appreciative Inquiry Commons (AI Central): <http://appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu>

Appreciative Inquiry listserv: <http://mailman.business.utah.edu:8080/mailman/listinfo/ailist>

Appreciative Inquiry newsletter: www.aradford.co.uk

Global Excellence in Management (GEM) website: <http://connection.cwru.edu/ai/gem/index.html>

Online access to AI materials and tools: <http://www.ovationnet.com/>

World Vision Tanzania's use of AI for community capacity development: <http://connection.cwru.edu/ai/gem/tanzania.html>

Use of AI in The Mountain Forum: <http://connection.cwru.edu/ai/gem/mtnforum-v1i1.html>

AI in village development in Nepal: <http://connection.cwru.edu/ai/gem/macfinal.html>

About the authors

Anne Acosta (acostarks@prodigy.net.mx) is a management consultant and was Research Associate for the ILAC Initiative; Boru Douthwaite is Senior Scientist at the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT).

Available Briefs

1. The ILAC Initiative
2. Innovation systems
3. Learning-oriented evaluation
4. Collaborative agreements
5. Innovation histories
6. Appreciative inquiry
7. Outcome mapping
8. Learning alliances
9. The Sub-Saharan Africa Challenge Program
10. Making the most of meetings
11. Human resources management



The Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Initiative is hosted by IPGRI, a member of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research www.cgiar-ilac.org

The Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Initiative seeks to improve the relevance and effectiveness of agricultural research programs in contributing to sustainable poverty reduction. Hosted by the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI), the ILAC Initiative is supported by The Rockefeller Foundation, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands and The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany, and works with research centres and programs affiliated with the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). ILAC Briefs are issued to stimulate dialogue and disseminate ideas and experiences that researchers and managers can put to use in strengthening organizational learning and performance improvement in their own work. An ILAC Brief may introduce a concept, approach or tool; it may summarize results of a study; or it may highlight results of a recent event.