**APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

Appreciative inquiry is a methodology and perspective in which members of a team consider how they could improve their workplace or organization. The key feature is that members are encouraged to contemplate previous achievements, strengths, and advantages to generate a shared or inspiring vision of the future (Cooperrider, 1990; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001; for examples, see Scerri, Innes, & Scerri, 2016). For more information, you could also visit <http://www.new-paradigm.co.uk/Appreciative.htm>

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| **The 5D model** |

To implement appreciative inquiry, researchers tend to implement five phases. Usually, teams of individuals, often comprising between 5 to 15 people, assemble to complete these phases. The following table outlines these five phases.

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| Phase | Description |
| **Define**: define the topic to discuss. | * Define the topic you want to explore, sometimes called the affirmative topic * This affirmative topic should be phrased positively, such as “How can we use our time most effectively” rather than “Why is time management here so bad” * Typically, the topic begins with the phrase “How can we…”   Note that some depictions of appreciative inquiry overlook this phase and thus refer to these phases as the 4D model instead of the 5D model |
| **Discover:** consider which practices are effective | * Consider past achievements of the team or workplace * Identify the distinct strengths, talents, and capabilities of the team or workplace * Contemplate the features of the team or workplace of which you are most proud * A discussion of these effective practices does not only uncover vital information but is uplifting as well   To uncover this information, participants answer a range of common questions, designed to uncover stories and motives, rather than facts or opinions, about uplifting events. Usually, participants ask each other these questions in pairs. These questions include   * what has been your best experience that is related to this topic—such as using time effectively? * why is this experience important to you? What do you value about this experience? * what conditions or circumstances enabled this experience to unfold? What instigated this experience, such as leadership directives or some campaign? * what one wish would you like to express about this topic? |
| **Dream:** collectively imagine how the team or workplace could operate | * To set a direction that depicts the future, first prompt individuals to consider their personal ideal about the workplace themselves * Then, ask individuals to share these ideals * Finally, as a team, depict the best outcome for this team or workplace—an outcome that integrates the ideals of individuals—perhaps as a creative presentation. You might include a slogan as well.   Do not be concerned about practicalities or obstacles at this time. |
| **Design:** identify avenues to pursue the dream or vision | * Consider possible actions—or changes to the existing processes and systems—that could be initiated * Uncover as many possibilities as possible rather than feel compelled to evaluate or delete these suggestions. * The priority is quantity, rather than quality, of suggestions during this phase |
| **Deliver, destiny, or deploy**: construct an action plan | * Choose which of the actions or changes, identified in the previous phase, are most feasible * Decide how these actions or changes could be implemented. What are the key features or facets of these actions or changes? * Clarify the relationships between these actions and changes—such as whether one action is dependent on another action * Decide who will be responsible to achieve these actions and changes * Consider how you will measure success |

After delivery, sometimes called destiny or deploy, teams or workplaces will often return to the discovery phase. The cycle from discovery to dream, design, and deliver may continue many times.

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| **Underlying assumptions** |

At least five key assumptions and principles underpin appreciative inquiry. The following table outlines these assumptions and principles.

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| Assumption | Clarification |
| **The social constructivist principle** (Hung et al., 2018): our social interactions shape our knowledge of the world | * Proponents of positivism assume the world can be described by objective and universal laws * In contrast, proponents of social constructivism assume our description of the world, during social interactions, shapes our knowledge and perceptions of the world * The world cannot be reduced to objective and universal laws—laws and principles that do not depend on the language, time, or location of a place * Because of this principle, discussions about the positive features of workplaces can shape the reality of teams |
| **The positive principle**: Positive language tends to elicit positive behaviour. | * When people discuss positive events—such as achievements in the past or hopes in the future—they are more inspired and able to embrace change and innovation (Hung et al., 2016) |
| **The simultaneity principle**: Assessment does not precede change but is part of the change | * Inquiry, such as questions about the past and future, actually elicit change and, therefore, is part of the intervention * Change is thus perceived to start immediately—as the inquiry begins. * In contrast, proponents of other approaches often assume that comprehensive diagnosis of problems should precede any intervention |
| **The poetic principle**: Organizations are conceptualised more as stories than states—to reinforce the observation they are invariably changing, but in a meaningful direction. | * Stories are also an engaging way of depicting the past, present, and future of an organization * Stories can shape the behavior of listeners as well. * For example, positive stories about the past and future can prime more productive choices and behaviors. |
| **The anticipatory principle**: Images of the future can shape the way we behave now | * After we imagine an inspiring future as vividly as possible, this future seems more feasible * When an inspiring future seems more feasible, we naturally devote more of our efforts to activities that could help shape this future * Thus, after individuals can imagine the benefits of change, they become more inspire to challenge the status quo (Bushe, 2013) |

Appreciative inquiry also tends to be predicated on other assumptions. For example, many proponents of appreciative inquiry embrace critical social theory (Hung et al., 2018); in particular, this theory strives to challenge the hierarchies that sustain injustices

**The positive principle**

The positive principle is perhaps the key distinguishing feature of appreciative inquiry. Cooperrider and Whitney (2001) identified the main differences between traditional perspectives—perspectives that are oriented towards solving problems—and appreciative inquiry.

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| Problem solving | Appreciative inquiry |
| Organisations often strive to identify the main problem or concern of people | Proponents of appreciative inquiry strive to appreciate and value the best facets or possibilities |
| Organisations strive to identify the causes of problems | Proponents of appreciative inquiry encourage people to envision the exciting possibilities that could unfold in the future |
| Organisations strive to derive possible solutions from careful analysis | Proponents of appreciative inquiry encourage dialogue about possibilities they believe should unfold |
| The organisation is conceptualised as a problem to be solved | The organisation is conceptualised as a mystery to be embraced |

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| **Pragmatics of appreciative inquiry** |

When researchers conduct appreciative inquiry, they need to consider several questions, such as how long should you dedicate to appreciative inquiry and how to manage negative comments. The following table offers some insights into these questions.

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| Question | Considerations |
| How long should you dedicate to appreciative inquiry? | In many organisations   * the entire appreciative inquiry is conducted in a large event, lasting 4 to 5 days, called an appreciative inquiry summit (Ludema et al., 2003) * each day is dedicated to a distinct phase, such as discover, dream, design, and deliver respectively * if you want to interview hundreds of people, you might need to train other employers to conduct interviews too; this training might last about one to two days |
| How should interviewers manage negative comments | Appreciative inquiry should primarily revolve around positive comments. If participants start to gravitate to negative comments   * listen and empathize if you feel these negative comments need to be expressed—then summarize the comments before prompting an orientation to positive facets, such as “These events seem very frustrating to you. Did you experience any moments in which you felt better?” * prompt individuals to transcribe the negative comments now—with the intention to discuss these matters later—perhaps while discussing the wishes * after participants describe a negative event, ask these individuals to consider how the circumstances should have been—to underscore positive alternatives. |

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| **Limitations of appreciative inquiry** |

Some researchers maintain that appreciative inquiry may not be able to address or resolve problems (see Reason & Bradbury, 2008). That is, appreciative inquiry motivates individuals to orient their attention towards positive events, features, and opportunities of workplaces. Consequently, appreciative inquiry might divert attention from existing problems and constraints. However, in stark contrast to this concern, according to Bushe (2011, 2013)

* this orientation towards positive events, features, and opportunities does not divert attention from problems and complications
* instead, proponents of appreciative inquiry strive to reframe problems as opportunities; they conceptualize obstacles as avenues to improve the team or organization

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