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APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

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"My personal consulting style has undergone a radical transformation in the past six years as I have struggled to adopt an appreciative stance in my work. Now I pay attention to what is working well, the qualities of leadership or group process that I want to see more of, and try to amplify them when I see them. This is in direct contrast to my training where I learned to see what was missing and point that out. In the past I focused on understanding the failures and pathologies of leadership and organization. I thought that awareness was the first step in development and so I felt it was my job as an organizational development consultant to make people aware of just how bad things really were. Now I am focusing on helping people become aware of how good things are, on the genius in themselves and others, on the knowledge and abilities they already have, on examples of the future in the present. From this stance I am finding that chance happens more easily, people don't get as bogged down in uncertainty or despair and energy runs more freely." (Bushe 1995).

I. WHAT IS APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY? [1]

1. Appreciative Inquiry sees 'Organisation' of and by Human Beings as 'Organic' rather than a 'Machine'.

Through 'Appreciative inquiry' Cooperrider, with others like Peter Senge ('the learning organisation') rejects what has been the dominant image (Morgan 1985) of organisations in Western societies since Frederick Taylor's 1912 "Principles of Scientific Management' i.e. the organization as 'machine'. The 'organisation-as-machine' sees workers as functional pieces in the whole controlled by management. Scientific management methods then, by solving problems through rational logic, can increase efficiency and hence productivity of the machine. People in the organizational machine are not supposed to think but only to implement what they are being told and to adapt to new functions that management may decide to give them in a process of 're-engineering' the organization.

Appreciative inquiry on the other hand sees organisations more as 'organisms' and focuses on its life-giving forces. It believes in the power of imagination to produce change, and the role of positive emotional energy and not just rational 'logic'. AI practitioners see organisations as 'social constructs' that are produced and reproduced not so much through rules and procedures but through conversations.

As one AI practitioner puts it: "*I want to suggest three things that can form the basis of using AI as a change strategy:*

- *Organizations have an inner dialogue made up of the things people say to each other in small confidential groups that are undiscussible in official forums of organizational business.*
- *This inner dialogue is a powerful stabilizing force in social systems that accounts for the failure to follow through on rationally arrived at decisions. It is here where people's real thoughts and feelings about what is discussed in official forums are revealed and communicated.*
- *This inner dialogue is mainly carried through the stories people tell themselves and each other to justify their interpretation of events and decisions.*

The change theory is: If you change the stories you change the inner dialogue. Nothing the "rational mind" decides it wants will actually happen if the "inner dialogue" is resistant to it.

When people talk in the hallways and over coffee it is often stories of past events that they use to justify the interpretations and judgements of current events. These stories get passed on and embellished with time and their historical veracity is irrelevant to the impact they have on how people make sense of organizational events. From this point of view AI can change an organization if it changes the stories that circulate in the organization's inner dialogue." (Bushe 2005)

[1] The first formal articulation of 'appreciative inquiry' (AI) can be found in the 1985 Ph.D. dissertation of David Cooperrider: "Appreciative Inquiry: Towards a methodology for understanding and enhancing organizational innovation." Cooperrider subsequently published a seminal article with Srivastva in 1987.As a social approach, 'appreciative inquiry' connects to what Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann called "The Social Construction of Reality" (1966). This basically holds that human realities –such as organisations- are social constructs that are generated, reproduced and changed by the interactions between people. It also has roots in the work of Kurt Lewin, the father of social psychology and early developer, in the 1940s, of 'action-research'. Action research challenges the notion that it is desirable and even possible to analyse human phenomena in an abstract, analytical, disconnected manner, to produce allegedly 'objective' 'findings'. Action research deliberately presents itself as a form of interactive inquiry that induces change in what is being inquired into. Participatory action research (PAR) takes this a step further and encourages and enables those whose experience is under consideration, actively inquire into it themselves in a voyage of discovery. Appreciative Inquiry also connects directly with 'positive psychology', a term first coined by Martin Seligman in 1998 to stress that psychology should be concerned also with what is working well, what is right with people, and not just with what is not working well.

2. Appreciative Inquiry is an Approach for Positive Change. [2]

Appreciative inquiry is an approach for longer term change, particularly in situations where the future state is unclear.

It is used to tap into the sources for positive change and development that are present in people, teams and collectives such as 'organisations'. It is therefore not the AI practitioner or inquirer who determines where the change should lead – change will come from within through a process of collective conversation and mobilization. This at the same time 'develops' a capacity for self-renewal.

"*Appreciative process theorises that you can create change by paying attention to what you want more of rather than paying attention to problems*." (Bushe 2005)

Its essence is one of interactive inquiry, hence the need to develop the skill of asking powerful questions that resonate deeply, mobilise energy and catalyse fresh thinking of those engaged in the conversation.

"Appreciative inquiry recognizes that inquiry and change are not truly separate moments, but are simultaneous." (Ludema et alii: 15)

Appreciative inquiry meets a need for connection among people in organisations, communities, groups, teams etc.

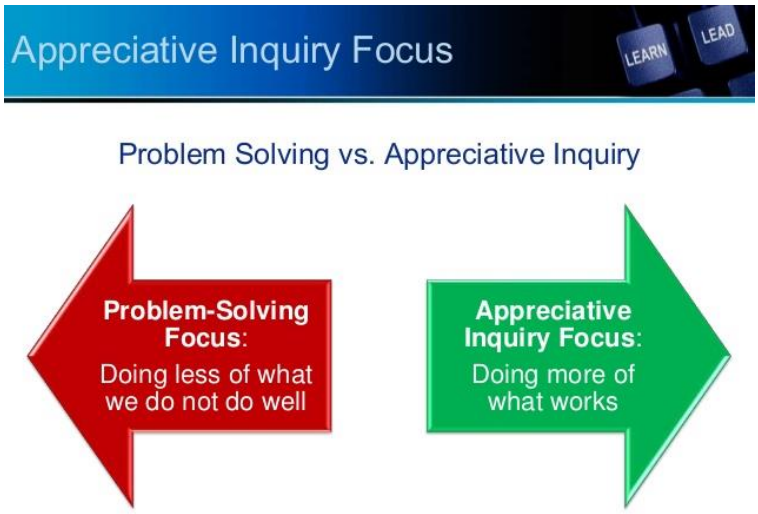
"…the most critical part of appreciative process required for it to work is a change in the consciousness of the change agent." (Bushe 2005)

3. Appreciative Inquiry is an Alternative to Deficit Thinking.

The predominant modes of viewing, thinking and acting when it comes to capacity-development and change, is to focus on 'deficits': needs, weaknesses, mistakes, errors, dysfunctionalities, poor performance, gaps etc.

AI deliberately positions itself as a radical alternative to this.

Appreciate Inquiry holds that:



By constantly paying attention to the 'problems', we may amplify them. If reliance on 'needs' or 'problems' is an entry to get resources, then this creates an incentive to make the problems bigger than they are and worse than in the past. It tends to ignore or even weaken the connections and relationships among those concerned, and looks to 'outsiders' to find solutions.

AI by contrast deliberately pays much attention to 'strengths', in order to amplify those. It encourages people to commit themselves and the resources to have available to bring about significant positive change. It is relationship driven, and focuses on the 'insiders' to find solutions.

Does this mean that Appreciative Inquiry conflicts with a 'change approach' referred to as 'problem-driven iterative adaptation' (PDIA) (see Resource document – Thinking and Working Politically)? Not necessarily.

Like 'problem-driven iterative adaptation', appreciative inquiry starts out with the identification on an area that is seen as very relevant by the key stakeholders and that can benefit from positive change. Like PDIA, Appreciative Inquiry

[2] Appreciative inquiry is being used in a wide variety of contexts, ranging from major private sector corporations like Nokia or BP Castrol Marine, to marginalized communities, NGO partnerships, District East in Amsterdam. A few other examples of the diversity and complexity of institutions that have successfully engaged in Appreciative Inquiry include: the United Nations Global Compact Summit (2004), chaired by the UN Secretary-General Kofi Anan, which brought together almost 500 leaders of corporate and government sectors to draft a Global Compact to address development challenges to assist the developing countries and the poor in them; GTE (now Verison), which brought all levels of the organisation together to plot a major culture change as the way forward for the company, and adopted a storytelling narrative model of cultural change; the Women's Empowerment Project in Nepal, which confirmed a remarkable 4-fold increase in the number of women with micro enterprises and an 8-fold increase in their gross sales following an AI-based empowerment, literacy, savings, and village banking curriculum among 125,000 women in 6,500 economic groups.

stays away from the 'grand design' master plans, and consciously allows a more organic evolution. While not so explicitly acknowledged in the AI handbooks and case studies, AI can also handle situations of setback and trial-and-error, if it sustains the positive energy and commitment of the key stakeholders and their believe in their own competencies. Appreciative Inquiry can actually add a very positive tone and flavour to a PDIA change process.

Its choice for a fundamental reorientation to the 'strengths' rather than the 'weaknesses' is also illustrated by the recent work on 'resilience' after a decade of emphasis on 'fragility'.[3]

Audit Approach	AI Approach
Problem Paradigm: fix flaws.	Strength Paradigm: amplify strengths.
Internal insights are discounted as "outside experts" fix the problems.	Tap into the accumulated wisdom of employees who are closest to the issues.
Input is contained to only top management. Majority support for change peters out.	All stakeholders co-create outcomes resulting in an engaged, purposeful work force.
Patch-work solutions based on the past lose sight of the larger system, missing potential future problems.	A systemic approach allows organizations to converge on optimal operating models.

[3] In 2014-2015 Interpeace is pursuing an action-research project in Guatemala, Liberia and Timor Leste, to deepen the understanding of what and how local people see as their strengths and 'sources of resilience'.

BEYOND DEFICIT THINKING:
AI WITH A NETWORK OF INTERNATIONAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS.

"The Global Relief and Development Organization (GRDO) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in the United States and Canada that works with about 120 partner organizations around the world. When we first began to work with GRDO, they came to us with the following story. "We have," they said, "a system of building and measuring organizational capacity that is the envy of virtually every Northern NGO that has seen it. The system allows us to evaluate the organizational capacity of our partner organizations every six months according to five key criteria: their governance, managerial, technical, financial, and networking capabilities. We then use this information to design interventions – like training, consulting, systems improvements, finding new sources of funding, etc. – to strengthen their capacity. We also use the data to rate them and make informed decisions about how much we want to invest in them, both in terms of human and financial capital. In many ways, it's a perfect system….And yet, many of our partner organizations and even our own staff do not like it. They consider it to be an imposition, and they find it tedious, irrelevant, and in some cases, demeaning. We want to do a worldwide appreciative inquiry to find out what's wrong with the system and fix it!"

It is important to point out that GRDO and its partners were entrapped in many embedded layers of deficit vocabularies (two of which we will mention here) that restricted their ability to accomplish their dreams. At the level of organizational architecture, GRDO's system for measuring organizational capacity was designed from a deficit perspective. It established a uniform global standard for a "healthy" organization and then evaluated partner organizations to discover the areas in which they were weak. Thus, the system itself created a context in which deficit vocabularies and negative blaming attributions dominated.

GRDO and its partners were also entwined in a more complex and pervasive discourse of deficit that had to do with paternalism and dependency between the Northern and Southern worlds. GRDO harbored the implicit belief that its organizational knowledge was superior to that of its Southern partners because it was from the more advanced North. GRDO was also a source of funding for its partner organizations and therefore felt it had to be in a policing or monitoring role when it came to money. Thus, it was virtually impossible for GRDO to see itself in the role of an equal partner and learner in the capacity building process. It simply did not have the vocabulary to describe itself *in that way." (Ludema et alii no date:4)*

Through the appreciative inquiry process we have begun to realize that of all the crucial characteristics of organizational capacity building, none is more important than the need for mutual partnership between organizations. Organizational capacity is essentially an interorganizational activity, a condition that occurs when organizations enter into mutually edifying relationships with one another to carry out their respective missions in the world more effectively. This kind of transformative growth and development flourishes most fully in relationships between equals. (Ludema et alii no date:9)

II. APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AS AN ATTITUDE.

Appreciative inquiry can be practiced already without mastery of its 'methodology'. Its basic principle is simply to inquiry into and value the positive in the past and the present, and to encourage the key stakeholders that one is interacting with, to discover the energy and commitments in themselves to drive positive change. AI as an attitude starts with asking different questions.

Here two examples of basic appreciative question sets, one that has been used in interactions with 'communities', the other in interactions with members of an 'organisation'.

Appreciate Questions: Example 1 – community conversations.

- As people of this region, what are we most proud of?
- What are our most valued traditions?
- What do I value most about my community?
- When in our community's history did we experience a high point?
- What image of our community do we want to promote?
- What do I want my community to pass on to future generations?
- What practices serve me best in my farming?
- Why have we been so successful in formal education and schooling?
- Etc.

Appreciative Questions: Example 2 – conversations with members of an organization.[4]

- Identify a time in your experience with your organization when you felt most effective and engaged. Describe this. How did you feel? What made this situation possible?
- What is your value to the organization? In what ways do you contribute yourbest? What are your strengths?
- What do you appreciate most about your unit as an organization? In what ways does it excel?
- What are the three or four most important aspirations for the future of this department? What are the key components for its vision?
- What are some sources of pride for you in your work?
- Describe a leader who has influenced you. What did that person do? How did that person interact with you? Describe some specific instances in which you experienced this influence.
- Think of a time when you felt especially creative. Describe what you were doing, what you were thinking, and what you were feeling.
- Tell me about a peak experience in your professional work. What was it about your situation, organization, colleagues, or yourself that enabled this to occur?
- Now, compose a few of your own questions!

III. APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AS A METHOD.

Methodologically, appreciative inquiry starts with 'Defining'. Then it proceeds as a 4 step approach: Discovery, Dreaming, Designing and Destiny. These are referred to as the '4Ds' though of course if you include 'defining', you have '5Ds'.

a. *Defining*: The focus of the inquiry is specified, but not too narrowly. A future outcome statement is formulated, but with sufficient broadness to allow many issues to emerge on the pathway to it. In other words, Appreciative Inquiry – contrary to so-called 'rational management' – deliberately does not seek to set SMART objectives. The outcome is positively phrased in a way that suggests positive benefits for all stakeholders. The outcome is also phrased in a way that gets people excited and talking.

b. *Discovery*: Now we set about discovering 'the strengths', the 'best of what is' in the organization/team/community/sector etc. This will largely be done through quality interviews which are conducted individually. Key themes from the interviews can then be mapped, in a collective exercise, and from those can emerge key factors that have sustained the organization in the past. But AI 'interviewing' does not operate according to a (semi-structured) interview protocol. In essence it seeks to get people to tell stories – their stories. People often are at their best when they can tell stories. This then comes together as a 'rationalising' and 'anonymising' analytical report, but as a collection of richly woven short stories, written in the first person. (Bushe 2005) Interviewing to get the positives –AI style- is a skill to be developed and requires preparation.

c. *Visioning/Dreaming*: Here the inquiry explores the positive future members wish for their team/community/organization etc., and the positive future for themselves therein. This is not dissimilar from 'visioning' exercises, but with the difference that the vision is closely connected to and grounded in the positive elements from the past. It creates optimism and energy. The dreaming or visioning can be done with different groups, after which the respective visions/dreams have to be brought together. It can be helpful to 'visualise' the vision or dream map(s). The vision or dream becomes the object of conversation, that turn towards specific details.

[4] No author, 2008: Exercise #1. Presented at the ALA Annual Conference. Draws on: The Promise of Appreciative Inquiry in Library Organizations by Maureen Sullivan in Library Trends (53(1) Summer 2004), page 224.

d. *Designing*: Now stakeholders focus on what it will take to bring the vision/dream alive. The focus remains at the fairly high level, to produce a high level 'plan' or 'pathway'. But this is not for the 'top leadership': the diversity of stakeholders remains engaged and contributes to the broad design thinking. The various design steps can be clustered and mapped, and put next to the vision/dream map. The design phase concludes with the articulation of statements about what is going to happen. These are phrased as 'Provocative Propositions' i.e. in terms as if the situation is already obtained e.g. "we are registering (and thereby providing a legal identity) all newborns within a week of birth", and not "we aim to register all newborns with a week of birth".

e. *Destiny*: This is the start of the actual progress forward. More detailed actions are planned: "What specific actions or changes to processes will bring the ideas to life?", and they are planned to create an organizational stretch though not an organizational stress or strain. Action groups are formed to take more detailed plans forward.

There is no fixed duration for the whole process, the context will determine the time it will take. (Chapter 4 in Lewis et alii 2008).

As always, moments of periodic – collective- review are to be planned in, to take stock of how things are progressing. Again an appreciative inquiry tone will pay particular attention in the review to what is going well, and what strengths there are to overcome the inevitable challenges that will arise or to make the necessary adaptations.Once again, the art of asking powerful questions is being called upon in each of the steps or phases of AI. The two text boxes below

AI Questions for Community Engagement and Leadership.

Discovery:

A. What do you love most about this community? What first drew you here and what has most encouraged you to stay?
B. What do you consider some of the most significant trends, events, and developments shaping the future of this community?
C. What has inspired you to get engaged as a civic leader? What do you most hope you can contribute?
D. As an engaged citizen, there are inevitably high points and low points, successes and frustrations. What stands out for you as a high point when you were part of an outstanding community effort here?

+ Please describe what happened and who was involved.
+ What difference were you able to make working together?
+ Which of your strengths and talents were called upon?
+ What contributed most to the success of the effort?
+ What did you learn about community change?

Dream:

Imagine a time in the future when people look to our community as an exceptional example of a thriving, attractive community where citizens of all ages engage as leaders and see themselves as owners of the community's future.

- In this exciting future, how are citizens engaged in community life?
- What is true of community leaders? What is sustaining their dedication?
- What kinds of systems and structures are most encouraging citizen engagement?
- What are you most proud of having helped the community accomplish?

Design:

A. What are the areas where you feel more citizen engagement could have the most impact on improving the quality of public life in our community?
B. As you reflect on successful ways citizens are currently engaged in improving the community, what initiatives stand out as being exceptionally promising in expanding local citizen leadership and why?

Destiny:

A. What small changes could we make right now that would really encourage more families to get engaged with improving our community?
B. How would you personally like to be involved in expanding citizen leadership here?
(designed by Bliss Browne, Imagine Chicago)

show examples of what sort of questions you might ask at each of the different steps. The first one again looks at a 'community' context, the second one at a public institution within a broader environment. The latter example concerns a university, but can you can replace this with the local 'population register', the local 'tax office', the local police or health or educational service, the local branch of the 'Ministry of Natural Resources'.

AI QUESTIONS FOR BUILDING UNIVERSITY CAPACITY.

Discovery:

- What has been a high point of your involvement with North Park university?
- Why was it a high point?
- What do you especially value
  a. About this university as a learning community?
  b. About this university as a community capacity building institution?
  c. About yourself as a contributor to this community?
  d. About Chicago as a context for learning?
- What do you consider the core factor that makes for excellence in education here?

Dream:

Imagine that by 2020 North Park has established its reputation as a premier community development program in this region.

- What has contributed most to making that distinction possible?
- How is it making a difference to the future of this city to have a premier community development program at the university?
- What bold decisions were made and by whom that set this leadership direction?

Design:

- What do you feel are the most promising areas in which to expand the collaboration between the university and the community?
- Who might be interested partners in enhancing the university's community development excellence and why do you think they would be interested?
- What do you consider the best reason the university should invest in building community development capacity? To whom is this case most productively made?
- What communication structures would need to be put in place to draw attention to this investment?

Destiny:

- Who will provide leadership to this effort?
- What specific ways would you like to contribute to realizing this dream?
- What's the first thing that's needed to make it happen?

(designed by Bliss Browne, Imagine Chicago – Bliss Browne in 1991 was a corporate banker, Episcopal priest in an African-American parish, mother of three and active on many civic boards, when she started a more systematic approach to revitalising Chicago, drawing on AI)

IV. RESISTANCE TO APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AND RESPONSIBLE USE.

AI practitioners have of course encountered resistance to AI at least when used as a 'methodology' for change. Sources of resistance can be the requirement for members of the organization to be involved as whole persons, or the fear of managers of a process that they can't control.

"*My own experience as an OD consultant is that it is very difficult to get a group of people who work together to talk about things they might hope for but have never seen. This is especially true in business organizations which tend to have a culture that values "hard headedness" and devalues "fanciful thinking". It is scary to verbalize those basic human desires for community, love, fealty, making a contribution in an organization where that is not the norm. To talk about "how things could be" when no one has ever actually seen them that way is to open oneself up to ridicule and embarrassment. Indeed, if there is a lot of repressed yearning in the system, anyone who names what is yearned for is sure to be ridiculed and shamed as a defense against experiencing that yearning. About the best one can expect is that people will talk about things they have experienced elsewhere, or read about, since they can defend themselves against ridicule by pointing to places where those noble aspirations and intentions are being lived. "(*Bushe 2005)

"Appreciative Inquiry is essentially a conversation-based change-strategy that involves all key stakeholders in an inclusive manner. As a method for organizational development, not all top managers are going to be open to it – nor for that matter all stakeholders. Opening up conversations without clear set controls over their boundaries can feel as a threat. AI conversations also engage the whole person – not always welcomed in environments with a culture that emphasis 'professional distance' and 'emotional detachment'. AI as a 'style' of change management also requires an 'appreciative leadership' style – again not something that all holders of senior positions feel comfortable with." (Lewis et alli 2008:75-78)

There is also a question of 'timing': The midst of a crisis might not be the best time to pursue an appreciative inquiry approach, at least not without recognizing the need of people to also express their grief, frustration, anger etc. at the crisis situation:

"*Having people think on what they are already doing, what they already have, and can build on to address the problem is a new domain, and the pre-formulated answers are rare to come. It therefore takes a little more time to focus the discussion, and steer it away from the default tendency to make this about a description of the problems. In Liberia in particular, conducting these discussions against the backdrop of Ebola, the team found it difficult to steer the discussion towards assets and strengths, because people just wanted to talk out the pain, the anger, the confusion, and in fact, in many instances, more people attended the FGDs than was planned because upon hearing that there was a discussion, they showed up, some for the refreshments, but others just because they felt they had something to say.*

Therefore, whilst on the one hand, going in with the "strengths" approach can be strategic as a means of overcoming some of the traps in a country plagued by FGDs, it may also deter and even anger people by being insensitive to their need to air grievances, especially when the discussions are held in proximity to a crisis." (Anupah Makoond, manager of the Interpeace action-research project on 'resilience'.

Appreciative inquiry like so many other approaches, can and has been misused, leading to deep disappointments. It is inappropriate and misleading to call anything that looks at 'the positives' a form of 'appreciative inquiry'. There have been consultants and advisers who misrepresented as appreciative inquiry, for example, their request for members of an organization to rate on a on a given scale how good they think the organization is. Others have promoted enthusiasm and energy where there was no ground for it, and which turned into frustration at the next challenge. (Bushe 2005). 'Do no Harm' is a key responsibility of advisers.

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