

THE FACILITATOR

An introduction to Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry was developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva in the 1980s. The approach is based on the premise that ‘organisations change in the direction in which they inquire.’ So an organisation which inquires into problems will keep finding problems but an organisation which attempts to appreciate what is best in itself will discover more and more that is good. It can then use these discoveries to build a new future where the best becomes more common.

Cooperrider and Srivastva contrast 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, they say, should have four characteristics. It should be:

1. Appreciative
2. Applicable
3. Provocative
4. Collaborative

This approach is often worked out in practice by using the ‘4-D’ model:

- Discover - people talk to one another, often via structured interviews, to discover the times when the organisation is at its best. These stories are told as richly as possible.
- Dream - the dream phase is often run as a large group conference where people are encouraged to envision the organisation as if the peak moments discovered in the ‘discover’ phase were the norm rather than exceptional.

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- Design - a small team is empowered to go away and design ways of creating the organisation dreamed in the conference(s).
- Deliver - the final phase is to implement the changes.

Appreciative Inquiry is a curious mixture of old and new paradigm approaches to organisational change. Its underlying principles can be very empowering and energising. I use them quite a lot in my work - for instance, when a team I was working with suddenly had the plug pulled on their project, they were very angry and depressed. I encouraged them to undertake a brief appreciative inquiry into the times when they had worked really well as a team. The results were extremely positive. It didn’t change their disappointment at the cancellation but it added a positive and realistic dimension that could have easily gotten lost otherwise.

Although AI is often presented as an organizational intervention, it can be very useful for facilitators working with small groups or teams. Gervase Bushe has written a useful article on his experiences of using AI with teams, which gives some more information.

If you haven’t come across Appreciative Inquiry before, do give it a try. If you want to know more, there are some links on www.new-paradigm.co.uk and the articles below will give you a good grounding in the theory and practice.

- Bushe, Gervase 1998 “Appreciative Inquiry in Teams” *The Organization Development*



Journal, 16:3, pp.41-50. This article can also be found at: http://www.bus.sfu.ca/homes/gervase/AI_Teams.html

- Cooperrider, David L. & Srivastva, Suresh 1987. “Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life” *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, Vol.1, pp 129-169. ISBN 0-89232-4749-9. This article can also be found at: <http://www.appreciative-inquiry.org/AI-Life.htm>

An organization consultant working in the UK, Richard Seel works with all kinds of organizations from multi-nationals to small charities. He has a particular interest in organizational culture and likes to work in ways that engage the whole person. Richard is also influenced by his developing understanding of complexity theory. Much of his pre-consulting career was spent making films for the BBC.

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