

Everyday Appreciative Inquiry

Louis J. Alloro, M. Ed., MAPP

louis@louisalloro.com | www.louisalloro.com

How do we really create positive change in our lives and in our firms? This topic has been taken up in many disciplines from sociology and psychology to management science and organizational behavior. Six Sigma, Gap analysis, and Threat Analysis all propose that the most effective way to change is to lock into what's wrong and find solutions (or consultants with solutions) to fix our problems. Such processes are reactive, evoke negative emotions at the start, and are limited in terms of ultimate innovation and change (Fredrickson, 2009). Humans, like all animals, have evolved with a strong negativity bias (Baumeister et al., 2001). The result is that our default is to focus on scarcity.

But this deficit-focused perspective is not inevitable or the only way to approach change. We can change our beliefs and our behavior. Beliefs are thoughts we think a lot (Dweck, 2006). When our thoughts habitually focus on scarcity and problems, we tend to stay stuck. When we instead focus on what's right, new opportunities can emerge. For example, studies on the placebo and Pygmalion effects show just how much our positive expectations and mindsets (or habits of thinking) can impact our experience (Blease & Kirsch, 2016; Rosenthal & Rubin, 1978). With increased mindfulness, we can work to rewire our brains and begin to see our lives and our organizations through a strengths-based lens that evokes imagination, opportunities, and possibilities for new ways forward.

WHAT IS APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY?

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a process that guides groups' creation of a vision of a preferred future by starting with what's already working well (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008). Starting with what's good doesn't ignore problems,

"We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them."

-- Albert Einstein

but instead puts us in a different mindset for generating solutions. The tool helps groups of people share leadership as they design their new reality. Organizations like British Airways, Hunter Douglas, McDonalds, and NASA have successfully used the process.

AI can take many forms and be incorporated into a variety of initiatives. It is:

- A strengths-based approach to unleash the best in people, their organizations, and the world
- A process for organizational development that leverages all stakeholder voices
- An art and practice of asking unconditional positive questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential
- A philosophy, methodology and technique that can be used in large or small groups
- A way of being in the world for change leaders and activators

We humans are inherently prospective and are constantly running scenarios of the future in our minds, thereby creating images of what's about to happen before it actually happens (Seligman, 2017). The advent of positive psychology over the past

"Human systems move in the direction of the questions they ask."

— Dr. David Cooperrider

two decades has offered a science of human wellbeing that is fundamentally concerned with the power we have to be hopeful and optimistic of our preferred futures. The alternative path of worry and doubt keeps us fixated on what needs fixing (the problems) and therefore stuck in a hamster wheel of same old, same old. Why not try something new?

There are many ways to apply the AI process in our everyday work life, like:

1. FIRM-WIDE CHANGE INITIATIVES

The full, 5-D AI process (set out on the next page) can be used for large-scale, firm-wide change initiatives. The AI process assumes that there is collective intelligence to harvest from a multi-stakeholder group and a process to design and execute a preferred future.

2. TEAM MEETINGS

Start meetings with everyone sharing what's working (the wins) on a particular case, project, or more generally before jumping into to what's wrong or what the problems might be. "What's been good since we last met?" "What's been a highlight on this project?" "What are our wins—big and small?" Notice how the team may come up with more creative solutions after being primed with positivity charged questions to start.

3. PERFORMANCE REVIEWS & COACHING

An AI process also can be used for one-on-one coaching. Inquire before you advocate. Learn to ask good, more positively primed questions, like "Tell me about a time you felt engaged this year? What were you working on? What was it like?" Then, move to more future oriented questions, like "What do you see yourself doing differently in the next year?" "What would you like more of?" "What roadblocks do you foresee and how can we plan for them?" "How can I support your vision in coming to life?"

4. CLIENT MEETINGS

Help your clients put their matters in perspective by asking questions in this particular order (best, worst, most likely): "What do you hope will happen in the case/situation/meeting?" "What's the worst possible outcome here? What's the best possible outcome? What's the most likely outcome?"

5. APPRECIATIVE WALK-AROUNDS

Walk around the office catching people doing things right. Point out what you see and offer appreciation or acknowledgment. Be specific and generous in your feedback/feedforward. Or, offer "possip" (positive gossip) when appropriate.

6. START YOUR DAY OFF RIGHT

Ask yourself, "What is my intention for today? "What's my vibe going to be today?" "How can I maximize my energy level throughout the day?" "What is one thing I can do/read/listen to that will help me grow today?"

Remember how important your mindset and beliefs are in creating any lasting change. Professor David Cooperrider, the main researcher of the Appreciative Inquiry approach says, "Human systems move in the direction of the questions they ask." Becoming more aware of what you are thinking and asking impacts the energy and thus direction of your movement and growth. Your movement and growth influences others.

With the AI process, change begins as soon as the first questions are asked. It's a very simple shift--from what's wrong to what's right.



LEARN THE 5-D APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY PROCESS

Whether you're undergoing a full organizational change or working 1:1 to coach a team mate or even yourself, the Appreciative Inquiry methodology is the same:

AI STEP	WHAT IT MEANS	HOW IT WORKS
<p>Define: What are you curious about? What is the topic of the inquiry? This is what you want more of.</p>	<p>Be affirmative and aspirational as you define your topic.</p>	<p>For example, if your employees are experiencing burnout, the topic of your firm's inquiry is not "Ending Burnout" but instead might be "Igniting Employee Wellbeing."</p>
<p>Discover: What are stories of past, positive moments? This is appreciating what is or was.</p>	<p>Discovery questions and storytelling relating to the inquiry. As you collect these stories, listen for the conditions that made these moments great. This is the "data" from which a dream and design can be created.</p>	<p>Tell us about a time when you were in tip-top alignment: when your "life-work balance" was high and you felt like life was in great flow with high quality wellbeing? What did that look and feel like? Tell a story or two about specific moments from the past.</p>
<p>Dream: What imagined future can we co-create? This is envisioning what could be—the best possible future.</p>	<p>Visualization is a powerful process for individuals and for groups as is shown in many sports' psychology studies. Powered up from the positive emotion in the discovery phase, our vision ought to be bold. Be as general as you need to be or as specific as you can be in crafting a vision statement. Novices often skip giving full attention to this part but it's key we continually clarify our visions of the best possible future. Divergent thinking in the dream phase will help us move to more convergent thinking in the design and destiny phases. In other words, think of the "what" not the "how."</p>	<p>A dream prompt might be: Imagine it's 2025 and you wake up to the organization of your dreams. Employee wellbeing is ignited; you and your colleagues are functioning at quantum levels of wellbeing. What does that look like? What does that feel like? Spend time journaling what you see.</p>
<p>Design: What prototypes will help this vision become reality? This is deciding what should be.</p>	<p>Aggregate the vision statements into a shared vision and then wonder what "design elements" would we need to consider to move from vision to reality? This is where we start thinking about "how" our dream becomes real.</p>	<p>In the example of greater employee wellbeing, we might have to consider Technology? Incentives? Feedback? Benefits? Space Design? Remember that good design is iterative and starting with prototypes can help us make incremental changes towards making our vision a reality.</p>
<p>Destiny: What processes will ensure that our prototypes get tested, iterated, and implemented? This is planning and executing what will be.</p>	<p>It's important to remain flexible and agile, trusting the process. Be open to new directions if it becomes evident that something may not be working.</p>	<p>In the case of firm-wide initiatives, shared leadership can emerge from across departments. We can hold each other accountable for small, incremental changes that we implement, test, and then iterate.</p>

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RESOURCE

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Good Questions resources [here](#) and [here](#).