

Appreciative Inquiry

Background: Dr. David Cooperrider is the Fairmount Minerals Professor of Organizational Behavior and the Faculty Director at the Center for Business as an Agent of World Benefit at Case Western Reserve University in Illinois. He was the first to coin the term and developed the practice known as Appreciative Inquiry.

Cooperrider was invited, as an OD consultant, to evaluate the dynamics and effectiveness of a physician group at the Cleveland Clinic. What he found was that the group already was performing very effectively and was part of a great organization. They did not need "fixing," so instead Cooperrider focused on the "aliveness" and what made them great. He created a methodology around the art of asking unconditionally positive questions which he called "Appreciated Inquiry (AI)."

The problem with the standard approach to improvement is that we ask what is wrong and how can we fix what isn't working. It's a deficit-based point of view. This deficit-based point of view has us always looking to solve the problem while we ignore what we do well. Expanding on what we do well generates positive energy in the people involved AI is the application of a positive psychology as a way of being, not simply a technique.

According to Dr. Cooperrider, Peter Drucker defines the essence of leadership and management as building on strengths to create an alignment of strengths that makes a systems weaknesses irrelevant.

Leading change is all about strengths and has nothing to do with weaknesses.

Definition: AI is a philosophy and methodology focused on the art of asking unconditionally positive questions to tap into the creative "life force" of an organization and then linking this positive energy to a change effort resulting in widespread mobilization.

Cooperrider describes the philosophy of AI as stemming from social constructionist theory (we construct our own reality) and action science. The methodology of AI is a four-phase OD



intervention:

1. **Discovery: The Appreciating Phase** ("What gives life?" Inquiry)

Discovery is pivotal to AI based on the premise that what you look for you find. There are two focuses:

- * The AI is itself an intervention: the process of doing the interviews is as important as the data collected.
- * The questions asked will frame the way people look at the topic, so they must be phrased in an affirmative way.

The inquirer explores themes and stories, usually through widespread individual interviews or through an open meeting format with individuals in groups interviewing each other. The inquiry may be general (e.g., "What is the best experience you have had at your company?") or focused on a particular theme (e.g., "When was a best experience in which you felt most empowered?").

2. **Dream: The Envisioning Phase** ("What might be?" Inquiry)

The organization uses the discovered stories and insights to envision possible futures for

the organization. Participants may be asked: "If you woke up five years from now, what would you want your company to look like?" The results reveal well-articulated strategic intents or in AI lingo "provocative propositions."

3. **Design: The Co-Constructing Phase** (“What should be the ideal?” Inquiry)

The organization then speculates on what the guiding principles and organizational structure should look like in order to fulfill the provocative propositions: "What would our organization look like if it were designed in every way possible to maximize the qualities of the positive core and enable the accelerated realization of our dream?"

4. **Destiny: The Sustaining Phase** (“How to empower, learn, and adjust?” Inquiry)

Cooperrider prefers to step back at this point in the intervention and let the momentum for change build from the positive energy generated. He used to call this phase "Delivery" and emphasized strategies for action planning, implementation, and progress monitoring to foster continuous learning, but he found that the more he let go of those strategies, the more momentum for change and long-term sustainability increased.

Some basic guidance includes:

- A generic AI interview pattern starts with the basic question: "Tell me about one of the best times that you have had with your organization. Recall a time when you felt most alive, most involved, or most excited about your involvement. What made it an exciting experience? Who was involved? Describe the event in detail."
- Questions are stated in the affirmative.
- Present questions as an invitation to tell stories.
- Convey unconditional positive regard.
- Listen appreciatively: suspend your own judgments.
- Don't be content with superficial explanations: avoid cliché responses.

- Don't stop until the interviewee has at least one new insight into what made it a peak experience.
- Keep detailed write ups of the stories: you can't collapse them into bullets or they lose life.
- Amplify the organization's values by interviewing large numbers of people, using surveys to test the propositions and get widespread attention, using quotes with names to give people attention, or videotaping interviews and showing clips.
- Feel free to wordsmith to help a group frame their stories into pithy, provocative propositions.

Application: Cooperrider feels change requires positive energy and that classic problem solving is too slow and energy sapping. Critics of AI (notably Golembiewski) favor empirical research and raise some valid concerns. How would different stories that indicate conflicting organizational values be reconciled? What if an organization's discovered "unconscious" has ethical implications? What if you are in a crisis? Maybe AI isn't the appropriate OD approach in every case, but it certainly provides another tool in the toolbox.

Resources:

Cooperrider, Davis L. & Whitney, D. (2008) *The Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: For Leaders of Change*. 2nd Ed. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, CA ISBN-13: 978-1576754931

Cooperrider, David L. & Whitney, D. (2005) *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change*. San Francisco, CA. ISBN-13: 978-1576753569

Gotches, Greg and Ludema, Jim (1995) "An Interview with David Cooperrider on Appreciative Inquiry and the Future of OD." *Organization Development Journal*, 13:3, 5-12.

www.FacilitationCenter.com
202-498-2310
wwick@verizon.net