

# Appreciative Inquiry

by Olivier Serrat

Appreciative inquiry is the process of facilitating positive change in organizations. Its basic assumption is uncomplicated: every organization has something that works well. Appreciative inquiry is therefore an exciting generative approach to organizational development. At a higher level, it is also a way of being and seeing.

## Rationale

Most organizational change processes are based on problem-solving. We ask “what is the problem?” but in so doing focus energy on what we want less of. We then work to fix things (and keep finding problems). However, organizations change in the direction in which they inquire. Appreciative inquiry is based on the following propositions

- Organizations are not machines.
- Organizations are a social reality—that reality is co-constructed.
- Important organizational processes, e.g., communicating, decision making, and managing conflict, hinge on how the people involved make meaning out of their interactions, not so much on the skillful application of techniques.
- Endeavors to identify or develop the right formula for successful change are often misguided—one cannot treat social reality as if it were objective.

Every organization has something that works right, even if only in small quantities. Hence, it might be easier to foster organizational effectiveness by focusing on what one wants more (not what one wants less of). Getting people to inquire into the best examples of what they want more of creates a momentum toward the creation of more positive organizations. Of necessity, such inquiries should be appreciative, applicable, provocative, and collaborative.<sup>1</sup> To sum up, an organization that tries to discover what is best in itself will find more and more that is good: its discoveries will help build a future where the best becomes more common.

## Definition

Appreciative inquiry is a relatively new form of action research that originated in the United States in the mid-1980s and is now being used around the world. It studies the positive attributes of organizations to create new conversations among people as they work together for organizational renewal. It involves in its broadest focus the systematic discovery of what gives life to a human system when it is most alive, most effective, and most capable in environmental, economic, societal, political, and technological terms. It involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. It is based on two assumptions: first, organizations always move in the direction of the questions their members ask and the things they talk about; second, energy for positive change is created when organiza-



<sup>1</sup> Appreciation means looking for the positive core of an organization and seeking to use that as a foundation for future growth. Applicability means that inquiry is grounded in stories of what has actually taken place in the past and is therefore essentially practical. Provocation means inviting people to take some risks in the way they imagine the future and to redesign their organization to bring that about. Collaboration means involving the whole organization, or a representative cross-section of it, so that all voices can be heard and everyone’s contribution valued.

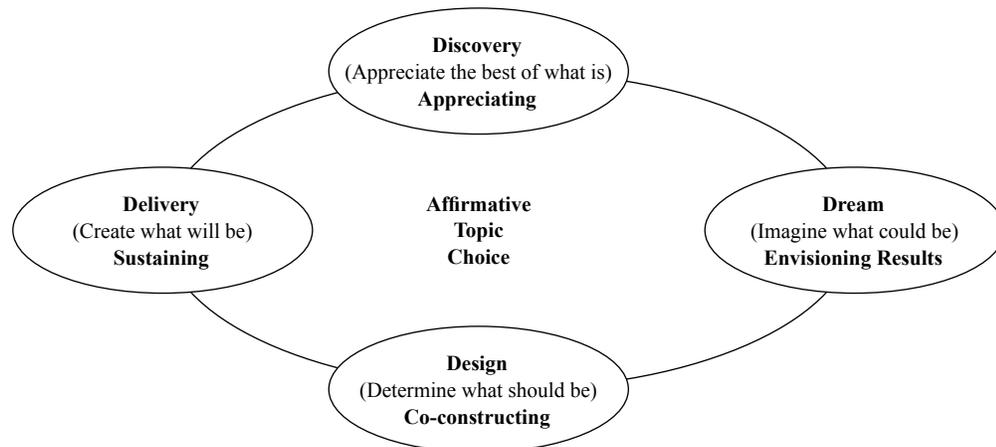
tions engage continually in remembering and analyzing circumstances when they were at their best rather than focusing on problems and how they can be solved. The approach invites organizations to spend time creating a common vision for their desired future and developing the images and language to bring that vision to life.

### Process

Appreciative inquiry is usually worked out by using a 4-D Cycle<sup>2</sup>

- **Discovery:** People talk to one another, often via structured interviews, to discover the times when their organization is at its best. These stories are told as richly as possible.
- **Dream:** The dream phase is commonly run as a large group conference with the help of facilitators. People are encouraged to envision the organization as though the peak moments identified in the discovery phase were the norm rather than the exception.
- **Design:** A team is empowered to go away and design ways to create the organization dreamed in the large group conference.
- **Delivery:** The final phase delivers the dream and the new design. It is one of experimentation and improvisation. Teams are formed to follow up on the design elements and to continue the appreciative process. This phase may itself contain more small-scale appreciative inquiries into specific aspects of organizational life.

**Figure: The 4D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry**



Source: Author.

### Table: A Generic Appreciative Interview Questionnaire

Think of a peak experience or high point in your work or experience in your organization.
In that experience, think about the things you valued most about yourself, the nature of your work, and your organization itself.
Think about the core factors that give life to your organization, viz., the really positive values it can build upon.
What three wishes would you like to have that would heighten the vitality and health of your organization?

Source: Author.

<sup>2</sup> The 4-D Cycle is not the only way of thinking about the process of appreciative inquiry. Some favor the 4-I Model of initiation, inquiry, imagination, and innovation.

## Applications

Appreciative inquiry can help

- Build a common vision where one is lacking.
- Challenge preconceived notions of what might be by locating the best of what already exists.
- Discover, understand, and amplify the positive forces that exist in organizations.
- Create openness and rapport between people and groups where a negative work climate has prevailed.
- Forge new approaches to human resource issues that will be accepted by staff and lead to positive change.
- Provide an alternative to conventional team building processes.
- Demonstrate the power and value of teamwork by highlighting ways in which teams give life to organizations.
- Open up opportunities for continuous organizational improvement by illuminating the principles, core values, and exemplary practices that support successful teams.
- Develop communities in various ways.

## Further Reading

David Cooperrider, Diana Whitney, and Jacqueline Stavros. 2007. *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

*Appreciative Inquiry Commons*. 2008. Available: <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/>

## For further information

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