

Appreciative Inquiry: What it is and how to use it for organizational planning

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Rehabilitation Review

I imagine being asked to remember one of the high points in your career, when you felt most engaged, inspired and energized by your work. Now imagine being able to use how you felt and what you learned at that time to create a *future* reality for your career.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a change-management process that helps organizations describe a vision for the future based on their successes in the past. Because this vision is based on their own experiences, organizations know what they need to do to repeat their successes. Unlike traditional approaches, AI's strength lies in systematically analyzing "how to do more of what works."

A past *Review* (June 2003) talked about how becoming a "learning organization" is one way of successfully adapting to the many changes witnessed in the rehabilitation field. This *Review* describes how AI's asset-based approach is a powerful tool for change processes, and how the VRRRI—an organization that values lifelong learning—used it for planning purposes.

What is Appreciative Inquiry?

Traditional change-management processes begin by asking the question "What problems do we need to fix?" The underlying assumption is that if we can pinpoint the problems, analyze their causes and work on possible solutions, we will "fix what is broken" (Hammond, 1998). Undoubtedly we've all experienced these kinds of planning sessions. More often than not, such meetings unearth negativity and disgruntlements (on which a lot of time gets spent), and result in exhausted participants and a "problem-solving action plan" which most of us are skeptical of or, at best, have half-hearted confidence in.

Enter AI, a complex (yet common-sense) theory of organizational development that has been successfully applied to improve organizations, communities and even personal lifestyles (Hall & Hammond, 2004).

How AI works

Developed in the mid-1970s, AI is founded on the philosophy that there are already a lot of things we do very well. Thus, instead of asking participants engaged in planning processes to think about "What problems do we need to fix?", AI practitioners ask "What is working well that we should do more of?" Participants are then led through the task of identifying the conditions that made these past successes possible, and determining how those conditions can be encouraged within the current organizational culture. The inquiry process of "what *can* be" is then turned into a series of concrete statements of "what *will* be."

Differences in approaches

Proponents of AI argue that by focusing on problems, traditional approaches end up magnifying them, leaving people feeling anxious or defensive. As well, they suggest that, in their effort to analyze problems and find solutions, traditional approaches dissect systems and processes, making it more difficult to see the many positive aspects of the system as a whole.

In contrast, AI enables people to think about the organizational system and processes as a whole. More importantly, by focusing on the "life giving forces" (Hall & Hammond, 2004) of past positive experiences, the process recreates energizing memories in participants. People are confident they can achieve the vision because they have done so before; they also know what steps to take to reach their goal. This energy is the hallmark of the generative process that results from Appreciative Inquiry (Hammond, 1998).

Fundamental assumptions of AI

To successfully implement AI, Hammond (1998) argues that all of the

Key Points

- Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a change-management process that helps organizations describe a vision for the future based on their past successes.
- Unlike traditional approaches that focus on "fixing what's broken," AI looks at "how to do more of what works."
- AI generates confidence in participants that they can achieve their vision because they have done so before, and because they know what steps to take to get there.

Putting it into Practice

- AI has been successfully used in diverse settings for improving organizations, communities and even personal lifestyles.
- This review describes how AI was used to frame a planning session on the organization's value of lifelong learning.



following assumptions underlying AI must be understood and internalized:

- in every society, organization or group, something works
- what we focus on becomes our reality
- reality is created in the moment, and there are multiple realities
- the act of asking questions of an organization or group influences the group in some way
- people have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known)
- if we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what is best about the past
- it is important to value differences
- the language we use creates our reality

From theory to practice

In thinking about how to frame a planning session on the value of lifelong learning, it seemed appropriate to try a new method of planning, i.e., to learn in our session about learning. AI seemed a natural fit, since we felt that internal staff training was already a strength in our organization and we had real lifelong learning

examples to draw from in our experience.

Our lack of prior experience with AI was less of an impediment than we had expected. While there are many good resources available, Hammond (1998) presents a very simple summary of the concepts. In less than two hours of reading, it is possible to gain enough understanding of the underlying concepts to dive in and experiment.

We opened our planning session with small groups answering the question “What does lifelong learning mean to me?” By sharing the summarized discussion with the larger group, we were able to identify common themes and understandings of the underlying concepts of lifelong learning.

Next we moved into the AI process by asking “Describe a time when you experienced lifelong learning within our organization, and what were the circumstances which enabled this to occur?” Examples generated by the groups ranged from dealing with difficult supervisory issues, to undergoing significant organizational change, to attending a course in an area of professional interest. Common underlying themes in the descriptions of the circumstances included an environment of trust, mentorship, support from supervisors and peers (emotional and financial), allowing risk-taking, and hands-on learning opportunities.

This discussion then led into

- (i) briefly explaining the key principles of AI,
- (ii) acknowledging that we have supported lifelong learning in the past, and
- (iii) affirming that we can continue to do this in the future because we now have a better understanding of some of the circumstances that promote it.

The final component of our session focused on addressing the assertion “As the leaders of this organization, we will support lifelong learning by” The group was encouraged to generate realistic ideas that they would commit to; that fit for them as employees, for them as leaders, and for the organization as a whole; and to identify what was needed to implement these ideas. With one of the original outcomes of the day identified as a commitment to action, each person was asked to take the concept of lifelong learning back to their work teams for discussion, and commit to implementing at least one new idea that would promote lifelong learning within their team. We concluded the planning session with one final AI exercise: as a group we identified what we did well during the planning session!

A welcome change

How many of us have sat through hours of planning sessions only to come away feeling defeated and overwhelmed? Our typical focus on needs and problems arguably has its place, but how refreshing it was to end a planning session feeling enthusiastic, empowered and capable of achieving our vision! One participant described the experience as “creating crazy enthusiasm,” and everyone acknowledged that our planned change felt attainable given that we already had a head start with some experience behind us. It is too early to say if our AI planning experience was completely effective; we still need to revisit our commitments and see if we have moved forward. But it definitely felt different, and the process itself garnered rave reviews from participants.

Conclusion

While we are by no means experts in AI, our initial exploration of the process proved it to be a simple, positive alternative to more traditional organizational planning methods. It may not work in all situations, or it may need to be used in combination with other processes to create a comprehensive plan. But we feel that it definitely has its place as a means to reflect on past positive experiences and provide confidence in our ability to achieve our vision for the future.

In thinking more about the AI concepts, perhaps it would be a valuable tool for planning with people with disabilities, e.g., adapting it as a means for lifestyle planning, with people creating their future vision based on their positive life experiences.

References

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