APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

The Art of Constructing a Positive Future
(adapted from the writings of David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney)

by Ravi Pradhan

If you were to ask organizations that wanted to create and develop a positive future for themselves, which approach would be more effective -- an inquiry into failures, weaknesses, problems and obstacles in the organization or an inquiry into its strengths, successes, innovations, enthusiasm, high commitment—what would people choose? In my experience, people instinctively want the second approach.

What is becoming increasingly clear to me is that the last thing organizations need, especially where there is a predominant mood of resignation, cynicism, and persistent negative interpretations is more analysis of these same negative patterns. I agree with David Cooperrider who believes that one of the most under-recognized resource in organizations is “positive, life-giving core”. Organizations have a tremendous capacity to shape and construct their realities and their future. What would be possible if we began to work with organizations and communities with a positive presumption -- that these organizations, as centers of human relatedness, are "alive" with infinite constructive capacity? He admits “in many ways, we are in our infancy when it comes to tools for working with it, talking about it, and designing our systems in synergistic relationship with it.”

How can we inquire into organizations that would help people discover, dream, design and transform toward the greatest good? This is the fundamental question underpinning an innovative approach called Appreciative Inquiry. Pioneered in the 80’s by David Cooperrider at Case Western University in Cleveland, USA, Appreciative Inquiry is being recognized as a major innovation in management and organizational development.

What is Appreciative Inquiry?

APPRECIATE

• The act of recognizing the best in people and the world around us; affirming past and present successes, strengths and potentials; to perceive those factors or conditions that give life and vitality to any living system.
• To increase in value (as in assets).

INQUIRY

• The act of exploration and discovery
• To ask questions, be open to seeing new possibilities and perspectives

THE FOCUS ON APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY IS TO CO-CONSTRUCT A BETTER FUTURE OR A DIFFERENT SOCIAL REALITY.
In the words of Cooperrider, "Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is about the cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives "life" to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms.

AI seeks, fundamentally, to build a constructive union between people and their past and present capacities: achievements, assets, unexplored potentials, innovations, strengths, elevated thoughts, opportunities, high point moments, lived values, traditions, strategic competencies, expressions of wisdom and insights into the deeper corporate spirit or soul-- and visions of valued and possible futures. Link the energy of this core directly to any change agenda and changes never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilized."

Appreciative Inquiry represents a radical departure from the established social science approaches of the past which are focused on identifying the problems or what is not working. The traditional approach is embedded in a language of deficiency, such as "diagnose problems", co-dependency", "dysfunctional patterns", "low morale", "role conflicts" and so on. Appreciative Inquiry is based on the principle that this vocabulary of human deficit is actually counterproductive to the development potential of organizations and to the generation of new knowledge. A key assumption is that organizations are social living systems and not machines.

THE 4-D CYCLE

An underlying theme in Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is that “human systems grow in the direction of what they persistently ask questions about and this propensity is strongest and most sustainable when the means and ends of inquiry are positively correlated. The single most prolific thing a group can do if its aim is to (1) liberate the human spirit, (2) discover not just common ground but higher ground, and (3) consciously construct a better future, is to make the positive change core the common and explicit property of all. This is where the revolutionary part begins…” (Cooperrider)

In the AI approach, a maximum number of people are involved in a process that goes through what is called the 4-D cycle: Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny. Appreciative Inquiry has been successfully applied in a variety of settings and organizations – from small community groups in Nepal and other developing societies, to large complex corporations in the US. Its applications have ranged from Strategy formulation, Vision creation to customer surveys, new employee orientation, evaluations of projects and community mobilization.

First, you **discover** and value those factors that give life and vitality to the organisation (or any other affirmative topic, such as, empowerment, teamwork, customer service, etc). In each case the task is to discover the most positive, effective, best exceptions, successes or peak moments. Discovery involves identifying and illuminating those factors, forces, values, and practices that led to these superior performances.

Second, you **envision** what might be. When the best of what is has been identified, the mind naturally begins to search beyond this; it begins to envision new possibilities. Envisioning involves...
"passionate thinking" -- it means creating a positive image of a desired and preferred future. Through dialogue, a consensus begins to emerge whereby individuals in the organization say, "Yes this is an ideal or vision that we value and should aspire to." It is through dialogue that individual appreciation becomes collective appreciation; individual will evolves into group will; and individual vision becomes a cooperative or shared vision for the organization. Appreciative Inquiry helps create a deliberately supportive context for dialogue. It is through the sharing of ideals that social bonding occurs.

Third and fourth, you construct the future through design, innovation and action. Appreciative Inquiry establishes momentum of its own. Members of the organization find innovative ways to help move the organization closer to the ideal. Because the ideals are grounded in realities, there is the confidence to try to make things happen. This is important to underscore because it is precisely because of the visionary content, placed in juxtaposition to grounded examples of the extraordinary, that Appreciative Inquiry opens the status quo to transformations in collective action.

Appreciative inquiry transforms negative and deficit dialogue to optimistic and affirmative capacity. It elevates positive emotions of hope, inspiration, confidence and trust in one-self. It taps into and enhances the wisdom, intelligence and commitment of large groups of people to shape their destinies. It strengthens resilience, vitality and relationships.

Appreciative Inquiry as a philosophy of change

- emphasizes collaboration and participation of all voices in the system
- approaches change as a journey (rather than an event)
- has a system orientation (focus is on changing the organization rather than the people)
- values continuity along with innovation and transition management, and
- MOST UNIQUELY, builds on the “life-giving forces” present when a system is performing optimally in human, economic and organizational terms.

References:

Appreciative Inquiry, change at the speed of Imagination – Watkins and Mohr
The Appreciative Inquiry Summit – Ludema, Whitney, Mohr and Griffin
Appreciative Inquiry and Organizational transformation – Fry, Barrett, Seiling, Whitney

http://connection.cwru.edu/ai/

This site is the largest repository of AI material. Set up by Case Western University, it is free.
Appreciative Inquiry "4-D" Cycle

NOTE: Some consultants have added another D for Definition before getting to Discovery. The intention is to align on defining the primary topic for inquiry. In other words, what is it that you want to study and have more of?