

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) – Using the Power and Wisdom of Successes

AI is a philosophy as well as a methodological approach for team and organizational development. Without denying problems, it is not focused on them, but rather focused on the unfolding of resources and potentials.

AI is based mainly on the following basic assumptions:

- People and social systems always develop in the direction of their focus and awareness.
- Every human being, every relationship and every system has unsuspected and unused positive potential that comes to light now and then.
- People face the future with more trust and comfort, if they continue something from the past.
- If we continue something from the past, it should be the best out of the past.

The past and present are rich with positive experiences and insights and can be an infinite source for development, performance and success.

The Roots

Appreciative Inquiry is a value oriented process that allows teams and organizations to outgrow their problems and boundaries. Through the way it is designed it creates a safe space such that people feel seen and appreciated as whole human beings. On this basis they are able to contribute fully, listen to their shared purpose and create the desired future in a more and more self-managed way.

The method was created by Dr. David L. Cooperrider and Dr. Suresh Srivastva at the Case Western Reserve University in Ohio in the eighties.

David L. Cooperrider said:

“Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves a systematic discovery of what gives a system ‘life’ when it is most effective and capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to heighten positive potential. It mobilizes inquiry through crafting an “unconditional positive question often involving hundreds or sometimes thousands of people.”

The success and the potency of Appreciative Inquiry can now also be explained by neuroscience: People engage in development and change, if they are invited,

encouraged, and inspired. They need the possibility to be impactful. All this is fulfilled through Appreciative Inquiry!

Preconditions for Success

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a “true participatory process”. It postulates that the decision makers of the respective system understand the method and are open for the process.

A profile of the whole system should always be involved, including effected systems like suppliers, customers etc.

A successful AI process needs enough time to elaborate on results that are in alignment of all.

In situations that have escalated emotionally, or where injuries, resentments and other negative emotions have taken root in the system and daily encounters, it is crucial to give them an appreciative safe space where they can be expressed and acknowledged. AI can become very effective when people are able to express what bothers, annoys, and offends them.

The Four Phases of Appreciative Inquiry

The process in which the power and energy of AI unfolds, is the so called “4-D-Cycle”. It is the script for change:

- **Discovery:** Exploring and understanding what is working well and where the potentials can be found
- **Dream:** Inventing and designing how it could be at best, if all potentials are activated
- **Design:** Designing a bridge into the desired future
- **Destiny:** Realizing the desired future in a sustainable way

To carry out the four phases in an optimal way, it is necessary to define what the theme and focus is, i.e. what the “core themes” of the inquiry should be.

Discovery – Exploring and understanding what is working well

Main corresponding Teal pillar: Wholeness

It is a journey into looking at the resources, successes and highlights that have been experienced in the past in the field where a breakthrough, a new future is desired.

Wertschöpfen durch Wertschätzen – Entfalten von Potenzial und Exzellenz

This phase is about bringing into awareness the strengths and potentials of each individual and the whole system and to use them in a way to find solutions.

This happens through an “appreciative interview” conducted between two persons at the beginning of the AI process. This is the basis and core of every AI process.

The goal of these interviews is to express the positive qualities of the people and the organization and to recount stories about experiences and events in the defined fields of concern that are connected with the best feelings, results and memories.

The “power stories” are the fertile soil on which the future flourishes and thrives.

The interviews are usually an inspiring experience for both partners. The involved persons not only open up and get closer but also the sharings often touch deeply. The interviewee is empowered to show up as a whole and inspired by his/her own replies.

Being aware of these wonderful success and “power” stories in the organization enables all participants to draw from them. This way the already existing skills and potentials are seen and appreciated.

After the interviews the power factors that create vitality and power as well as the underlying values are identified. This way, they can be used by everyone and the whole system.

The power of the stories told and the “power factors” build the fundament and the driving energy for all further steps. The past becomes a source from which positive possibilities for the future can be drawn.

Dream: Inventing and designing how it could be at best, if all potentials are activated

Main corresponding Teal pillars: Wholeness & Evolutionary Purpose

Out of what was shared and seen from the interviews, some emphases are ascertained that will build the bases for further steps.

The focus lies on the question: **What does a preferably optimal future look like?**

Now wishes are deepened and pictures and visions drawn of what and how it could be. The earlier detected power stories and positive experiences are the resources, “the colours” with which the pictures of the future are painted. What treasures and strengths shall be carried into the future?

A positive, challenging, attractive and at the same time reachable picture of the future arises. The future emerging here is rooted in the soil and is realistic as well as visionary. It is grounded in examples of the past and at the same time opens up new avenues.

For this phase different creative elements and methods (i.e. vision journeying, painting, collaging, dancing) are used. Out of those a “collective verbal picture” is created. This is a text which describes the dream of the desired future that connects the group in a concrete and inspiring way. This way people show up with their whole being (including both hemispheres) and their longing for a desirable future, individually and collectively.

Design: Designing a bridge into the desired future

Main corresponding Teal pillars: Evolutionary Purpose

In the next step regarding the basis of the visions, what is to be built gets precisely formulated - like an architect who creates a blueprint for the house from the builder's dreams and ideas.

For every core theme, so called “future statements” get formulated which express the power of the visions - what shall be - in a clear way. The future statements are more and more specified and concretized till they build a viable bridge - from the existing potentials to the shared future - and have a real “suction force”.

The focus lies on the simple question **“What will be?”**

Good future statements are:

- **provocative** – challenging and go clearly beyond what has been achieved so far
- **“grounded”** – since traceable examples from the past show that it is possible
- **affirmatively formulated** – they describe what will be and not what should not be
- **expressive** – they have the power of attraction
- **motivating** – they represent an attractive future
- **formulated in present tense** – this supports our brain's realization power

Future statements describe the ideal, stimulate creativity and question the existing patterns and assumptions. They are, so to say, the “blue print” for the desired future. They are not graven in stone but evolve over time.

Here are some examples for impactful future statements:

- Everybody is taking 100% responsibility for the desired outcome.
- Fairness and respect is waking up our potentials.
- Everybody freely and gladly contributing to the whole and everything gets done.
- Free, inspired and focused - the future is happening
- Accept, appreciate, trust, act ... and celebrate.

These sentences need to inspire the creators but they often also inspire outsiders or other teams of the organization. Especially for those who have witnessed the process,

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they stay connected with the energy of the desired future and the designed plan for the shared “house”.

These powerful statements over and over again bring back to memory in a pithy way what it is about and what all are standing for.

Destiny – Realizing the desired future in a sustainable way

Main corresponding Teal pillars: Self-Management

Now, on the wings of inspiration from the first three phases, how the visions and future statements will be realized will be planned. Next steps and procedures get generated. But: Destiny in the realm of AI is a lot more than the what might be called normal “who does what, with whom, by when”.

In this phase a frame gets created in which the best becomes possible, in which the organization, the team and the individual person unfold their potential, while at the same time starting to fulfil on their destiny.

It is about the realization of the visions with persistence in the “appreciative spirit” of wholeness.

The implementation or realization in terms of AI means culture change. With the thrust of the future statements, concrete agreements, plans and operative (project) structures get designed that enable participants to act out of the inspiration of the “already fulfilled” in their everyday lives. This goes far beyond reaching and “checking off” of goals.

At best, Destiny is an ongoing adaptive – evolutionary - process that is continued with the motivation of the shared experience and that unfolds over time.

In a first step in the Destiny phase, what it means to live the future statements and what is needed for that is captured concretely.

Useful questions:

- Where is the dream already alive?
- By what can the vision come to life?
- What creates the essential energy for that?
- What brings joy and excitement?

Furthermore, together operative project structures get created out of the future statements.

Questions that lead there are:

- What does the process so far mean for my own behaviour?
- What are we exactly doing then?
- Where exactly can we move something and with what procedures?
- What structures do we need for that?
- What strategic course do we need to set for this?
- What feedback loops keep us on track?
- How do we support and strengthen one another?
- What new affirmatively formulated measures do we introduce to consequently focus on our successes and what we achieved?
- How do we appreciate and celebrate our successes while also shining an appreciative light on what didn't work as we would have liked it to?

Destiny also includes that procedures and achieved results get communicated transparently into the organization by the designed responsible people. Structures that support "staying tuned" get implemented.

If an organization has embraced all four phases and gone through them in the described way, it will have established appreciative structures, processes, sequences, meeting forms, feedback loops etc. that nourish a new culture in the organization. Therefore it is essential that in this phase no business plan "as usual" will be executed.

Conclusion

At best Appreciative Inquiry is an ongoing evolutionary process in the course of which reaching for the desired future the power of the existing resources will be drawn over and over again.

The result is a new sustainable, appreciative way of being and working together, aligned in a shared purpose and with more and more structures that support self-management.

Literature: Appreciative Inquiry Handbook, David L. Cooperrider, Diana Whitney, Jacqueline M. Stavros, Publisher: Crown Custom Publishing, Inc.