

## Appreciative Inquiry

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### Introduction and summary by Dr. Eberhard Belz

**In broad terms, appreciative inquiry is a way of looking at the world around us. Appreciative inquiry invites us to think about the things in the world that we appreciate, that we find valuable. It is an approach that allows us to consciously and actively seek, identify and strengthen energy-giving forces. These forces are present when a system is performing at its best in terms of human, economic and organizational aspects.**

Appreciative inquiry invites us to reflect on the things we appreciate, on the things that are of value to us, and on what is positive in the world. This approach also invites us to ask questions about what we appreciate and value, and about what we want – and what we want more of – in our lives.

Appreciative inquiry is a philosophy that enables us to see possibilities and opportunities in life, to see the glass as half full. Appreciative inquiry is a hopeful place, where changes are met with positivity and expectations of a better future.

Appreciation is the art of acknowledging the best in people and in the world around us, confirming past and present strengths, recognizing successes and potential, noticing the things that give life to living systems (health, vitality, excellence).

Inquiry is about exploring and discovering. Asking questions. Being open, seeing new potential and possibilities.

This attitude and the related approach can be applied "universally" in all areas, for individuals, groups, organizations, companies, and society in general. The different ways of applying appreciative inquiry are as numerous as the areas and people that use it. The fundamental openness of the approach allows a holistic perspective, without divisions. This leads to solidarity, connectedness, perspective – with the world around us and with ourselves. This in turn generates openness, trust, and courage, and with it the energy needed for a successful process, company, community, coexistence, life.

There are people who see appreciative inquiry as an American-style management technique, one of many strength-oriented methods. ("I'm familiar with that, I do that too, I use that too, I always see everything in a positive light etc...").

This is not wrong, but it is only one (limited) perspective. Ultimately this kind of viewpoint only reflects the depth and quality of a given user's perception of appreciative inquiry. This is comparable to learning a language at a basic or more advanced level. I can get through everyday life, live my life, be successful, with just a few words, or I can develop with the language, write texts, develop content, write poems, create new things.

The crucial thing, besides the basic factor of "who I am", is the relationship and the affection that I develop towards the language, and the intention with which I use it. The prerequisite for this is practical implementation and experience, the courage to confront myself and to

set off on my journey. No one will ever use, express, experience a language in exactly the same way as another person. This also applies to the use of appreciative inquiry. The actual experience of appreciative inquiry reflects what the user is capable of experiencing. Since an encounter brings more pleasure and better prospects if it builds on a shared positive experience, an attitude of consistently appreciative inquiry invites and positively reinforces curiosity and courage. This then enables us to pay attention to those aspects that are seen as negative or difficult.

This can be illustrated with an example: before we set out to climb a mountain, we obviously try to build up our strength. It would never occur to anyone to deliberately weaken themselves, physically or mentally, for such an undertaking.

### **The structure of appreciative inquiry <sup>1</sup>**

#### The foundations of appreciative inquiry come from

- sociology (of knowledge, especially social constructivism)
- the "new" branches of academic inquiry (chaos theory, complexity theory, self-organizing systems, quantum physics, neurophysiology)
- studies on the power of positive images
- research in the area of positive psychology and positive emotions

#### The core of appreciative inquiry is

- the principles (constructionist, simultaneity, anticipatory, poetic, positive and wholeness)
- the general process:
  - \_ focusing on the positive side of the inquiry
  - \_ inquiry in stories that generate life-energy
  - \_ localizing topics that appear in the stories, and selecting these as topics for further inquiry
  - \_ jointly creating shared images of a "preferred future"
  - \_ finding innovative ways to create this future

### **Practising appreciative inquiry**

The many activities, steps and applications of appreciative inquiry are unique and different in every situation.

Academic research provides appreciative inquiry with a stable foundation. In particular, the latest research findings from the areas of neurobiology and neurophysiology underline and reinforce the effectiveness, meaningfulness and scope of appreciative inquiry.

For many experts, the "essence" of appreciative inquiry is the conscious application and implementation of these principles, which strongly reflect the scientific foundations. From my point of view, and based on my experience, the most important aspects are the process of "becoming aware" and the related focusing of the attention. The crucial thing is to ask the "right" questions, "the unconditional positive question" (David Cooperrider). In order to sense this, to recognize it, and to put it into practice, the questioner must be highly aware: aware of what is at stake, what is essential, where the energy is, what the context is etc. The core process is then set in motion by the use of the questions. The questions provide a "mirror", facilitate an encounter, a confrontation with a topic, with oneself and with the questioner.

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<sup>1</sup> from Appreciative Inquiry – Change at the speed of imagination (Watkins, Mohr, Kelly)

The most important thing here is the way a question focuses the attention. This focusing of attention leads to an inner focus on a primarily "positive core" (insofar as the question is really unconditionally perceived as open. D. Cooperrider<sup>2</sup> recounts that, at an important lecture with distinguished international figures he spent a week formulating the core questions, only to realize afterwards that one (!) question would have been enough to activate the whole process – since he had, with this question, addressed the whole system on all its levels, and captured its "positive core").

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What happens is an "energization", enabling us to face even those topics that are (considered to be) obstacles. It is not a matter of right or wrong, or of what fits or does not fit. It is about creating space that makes it possible to perceive and experience "unconditionally".

The main factor for the quality and intensity of the process is the awareness of the user, and thus the ability to ask the "right" question. Related to this is the clarity and consistency with which the questioner shapes and implements the process, and finally his or her ability to focus the attention. This opens up new "unconditional" perspectives and inner room to manoeuvre, which can then be experienced by the individual, the group, the organization or the company.

Appreciative inquiry is applied in many areas:

One particular focus, and also its historical starting point, is its use in management processes, especially change processes.

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<sup>2</sup> David Cooperrider and his associates at Case Western Reserve University challenged the problem solving approach used by many change agents. They wanted to focus on what people appreciated about a situation and discover how they could have more of what they appreciated. They took an approach of discovering, through an interview process, the possibilities that were in people's minds that could solve the issue at hand.

This transformation started in the late 1970's and early 1980's when Cooperrider wrote his dissertation on the AI approach to change. By 1985 Cooperrider and an associate, S. Srivastva, published the first professional publication on AI.

Throughout the next 10–15 years AI has been shared with numerous organizations. The results have been very positive as the AI process helped the organization "see" what it already knew it appreciated and wanted more of it in their organization.