What Is Appreciative Inquiry?

A *positive engagement* briefing paper

Appreciative Inquiry (Ai) is a way of looking at organisational change which focuses on doing more of what is already working, rather than focusing on fixing problems. It mobilises strategic change by focusing on the core strengths of an organisation, then using those strengths to reshape the future.

Ai is both a high-participation learning process to identify and disseminate best practices, and a way of managing and working that fosters positive communication and can result in the formation of deep and meaningful relationships.

Ai was developed by David Cooperrider and his associates at Case Western Reserve University in the mid-eighties. His wife Nancy, an artist, told him about the "appreciative eye" – an idea that assumes that in every piece of art there is beauty. Ai applies this principle to business.

How It Works

Appreciative Inquiry begins with analysing the "**positive core**" of an organisation (or a person) and then links this knowledge to the heart of the strategic change agenda.
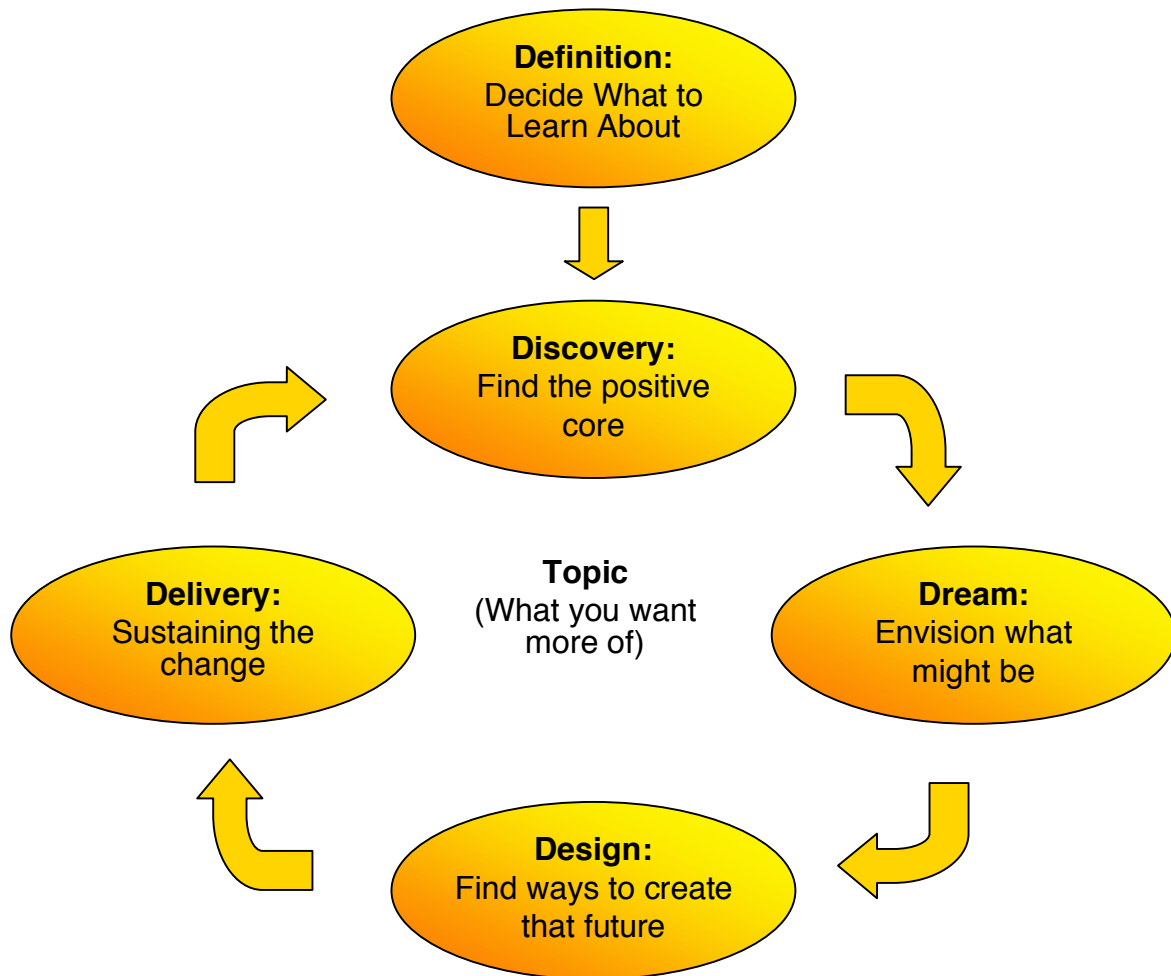
The very act of asking a question influences the worldview of the person who is asked. Because human systems move toward what they persistently ask questions about, Appreciative Inquiry involves the deliberate discovery of everything that gives a system "life" when it is most effective in performance and human terms.

When we link the positive core directly to a strategic agenda, changes never thought possible are rapidly mobilised while simultaneously building enthusiasm, corporate confidence, and human energy.

Comparison With Problem-Focused Approaches

Problem Solving	**Appreciative Inquiry**
❏ What to fix	❏ What to grow
❏ Thinks in terms of: problem, symptoms, causes, solutions, action plan, intervention	❏ Thinks in terms of: what's already working, what's better, what's possible
❏ Breaks things into pieces & specialties, guaranteeing fragmented responses	❏ "Problem focus" implies that there is an ideal. Ai starts by focusing on that ideal and its roots in what is already good.
❏ Slow! Takes a lot of positive emotion to make real change.	❏ Expands vision of preferred future. Creates new energy fast.
❏ Assumes organisations are made up of problems to be overcome	❏ Assumes organisations are sources of infinite capacity and imagination

The Ai Change Process

Definition:
Decide What to
Learn About

Discovery:
Find the positive
core

Dream:
Envision what
might be

Delivery:
Sustaining the
change

Topic
(What you want
more of)

Design:
Find ways to create
that future

Typical Ai Project Start-Up

❑ Choose the topic: combine themes from generic interviews with research questions

❑ Agree on desired outcomes and critical success factors

❑ Agree on how to get there

❑ Develop draft interview protocol

❑ Practice interviews; develop interview guidelines

❑ Plan for collecting & "analysing" the data

❑ Plan for how the process will drive change.

Six Generic Questions To Start

- What have been your best experiences at work? A time when…
- What do you value about… yourself, work, organisation.
- What do you think is the core life-giving factor or value of your organisation –which it wouldn't be the same without?
- If you had three wishes for your organisation, what would they be?
- What achievements are you (and/or your team) proud of?
- Apart from the money, what makes it worth coming into work?

Why It Works

- It doesn't focus on changing people, which leads to relief that the message isn't about what they've done wrong or have to stop doing.
- Instead, people get into a positive, energised state because you're focusing on what's good about their work.
- It invites people to engage in building the kinds of organisations and communities that they want to live in.
- It helps everyone see the need for change, explore new possibilities, and contribute to solutions.
- It's easier to see your vision of the future vividly when it has roots in your past experiences, rather than trying to start with a blank canvas
- It means you won't be throwing out the good stuff that's already there when you start to build your new organisation.
- Through alignment of formal and informal structures with purpose and principles, it translates shared vision into reality and belief into practice.-

Underlying Principles

- In every human system, something works.
- What we focus on, and the language we use, becomes our reality.
- Reality is created in the moment and there are multiple realities. It is important to value differences.
- The act of asking questions influences the group in some way.
- People have more confidence & comfort to move to an unknown future when they carry forward parts of the past.
- What we carry forward should be what is best about the past.

"Provocative Propositions"

As part of the "Dream" stage, we take the best of what currently happens and determine the circumstances that made that possible. We then write one or more "provocative propositions" which describe the idealised future in which the best happens all the time, and serve as a reminder to focus on it. Examples:

We anticipate the customer's needs and we are continually learning about what they want.

Our company is recognised as the best employer in our industry.

Checklist for determining a provocative proposition:

- ❑ Is it provocative? Does it stretch, challenge or innovate?
- ❑ Is it developed from real-life examples?
- ❑ Do people feel passionate enough about it to defend it?
- ❑ Is it stated in bold, positive terms and in the present tense?

Appreciative Inquiry Resources

This paper builds on information in:

- ❑ *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry* by Sue Annis Hammond
- ❑ *Appreciative Inquiry: A Revolution In Change* – PowerPoint presentation by Debbie Morris downloadable at http://tinyurl.com/ymavmq

The central resource for Ai is the *Appreciative Inquiry Commons* at http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/. *A Positive Revolution In Change: Appreciative Inquiry* is a great introduction: http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/uploads/whatisai.pdf

What Next?

Would you like to:

- ❑ I**ncrease** staff engagement?
- ❑ **Engage** the whole of your organisation, including customers, service users and other stakeholders, in visioning the future direction?
- ❑ Introduce an appreciative **coaching and mentoring** culture?
- ❑ Hold a highly effective and morale-raising **team building** event
- ❑ **Train** as an Appreciative Inquiry facilitator?

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positive engagement

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