

Appreciative Inquiry and Powerful Questions¹

Appreciative Inquiry²

“What might be possible if community and organization members were fully engaged and using their strengths to collectively achieve shared visions?”

“The traditional approach to change is to look for the problem, do a diagnosis, and find a solution. The primary focus is on what is wrong or broken; since we look for problems, we find them. By paying attention to problems, we emphasize and amplify them. ... **Appreciative inquiry suggests that we look for what works in an organization.** The tangible result of the inquiry process is a series of statements that describe where the organization wants to be, based on the high moments of where they have been. Because the statements are grounded in real experience and history, people know how to repeat their success.”

Hammond, Sue, The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry. Thin Book Publishing Company, 1998, pages 6-7.

“[Appreciative inquiry] deliberately seeks to discover people’s exceptionality – their unique gifts, strengths, and qualities. It actively searches and recognizes people for their specialties – their essential contributions and achievements. And it is based on principles of equality of voice – everyone is asked to speak about their vision of the true, the good, and the possible. Appreciative inquiry builds momentum and success because it believes in people. It really is an invitation to a positive revolution. Its goal is to discover in all human beings the exceptional and the essential.”

Cooperrider, D.L. et. al. (Eds) , Lessons from the Field: Applying Appreciative Inquiry, Thin Book Publishing, 2001, p. 12.

“Appreciative inquiry is an exciting way to embrace organizational change. Its assumption is simple: Every organization has something that works right – things that give it life when it is most alive, effective, successful, and connected in healthy ways to its stakeholders and communities. AI begins by identifying what is positive and connecting to it in ways that heighten energy and vision for change.” “...AI recognizes that every organization is an open system that depends on its human capital to bring its vision and purpose to life.” “... The outcome of an AI initiative is a long-term positive change in the organization.” “... AI is important because it works to bring the whole organization together to build upon its positive core. AI encourages people to work together to promote a better understanding of the human system, the heartbeat of the organization.”

Cooperrider, David L; Whitney, Diana; and Stavros, Jacqueline M., Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: The First in a Series of AI Workbooks for Leaders of Change, Lakeshore Communications, 2003, Pages XVII – XIX

“[Appreciative inquiry] is intentional inquiry, directed conversation and story-telling that leads to a place of possibility... Societies are stories, as are companies, schools, cities, families and individuals. There are bricks and mortar and flesh and bones, but all of it comes from a story..... I can think of many moments where groups reached a profound spot with Ai and touched a sense of freedom. Usually one person would say something like, ‘From what we heard in these stories, we could...’ and there follows a collective deep breath and then silence as people consider the new ‘we could.’ Possibility sits in the room as a space of silence and then thought fills the space... The thought comes out of relationship, conversation, and newly created images... There are times when the possibility is so stunning the group has to sit in silence if just for a couple ticks before saying, ‘well, yes, maybe, why not, let’s do it!’ ... The openness to new ideas is not coerced. People don’t have to force each other to listen to others’ ideas and possibilities: minds are opened because the nature of the stories is so compelling and energetic.”

John Steinbach, Contribution to the AI Listserv, July 2005

¹ Handout for: *Tensions and Tools: Navigating the Tricky Terrain of Health Equity*, Minnesota Community Health Conference, 9-19-14

² Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a model for analysis, decision-making and the creation of strategic change, particularly within companies and other organizations. It was developed at Case Western Reserve University's department of organizational behavior. Definitions retrieved 9-5-14 from the [Appreciate Inquiry Commons Website](#) at Case Western Reserve University.

Powerful Questions

Excerpts from: The Art of Powerful Questions³

“Consider the possibility that everything we know today about our world emerged because people were curious. They formulated a question or series of questions about something that sparked their interest or deeply concerned them, which lead them to learn something new...

“If asking good questions is so critical, why don’t most of us spend more of our time and energy on discovering and framing them? One reason may be that much of Western culture, and North American society in particular, focuses on having the ‘right answer’ rather than discovering the ‘right question.’ Our educational system focuses more on memorization and rote answers than on the art of seeking new possibilities. We are rarely asked to discover compelling questions... Quizzes, examinations, and aptitude tests all reinforce the value of correct answers... As we enter an era in which systemic issues often lie at the root of critical challenges, in which diverse perspectives are required for sustainable solutions, and in which cause-and-effect relationships are not immediately apparent, the capacity to raise penetrating questions that challenge current operating assumptions will be key to creating positive futures.”

A powerful question:

- Generates curiosity in the listener
- Stimulates reflective conversation
- Is thought-provoking
- Surfaces underlying assumptions
- Invites creativity and new possibilities
- Generates energy and forward movement
- Channels attention and focuses inquiry
- Stays with participants
- Touches a deep meaning
- Evokes more questions

A powerful question also has the capacity to ‘travel well’ – to spread beyond the place where it began into larger networks of conversation... Questions that travel well are often the key to large-scale change.

When framing questions, consider the following:

- Is this question relevant to the real life and real work of the people who will be exploring it?
- Is this a genuine question – a question to which I/we really do not know the answer?
- What assumptions or beliefs are embedded in the way this question is constructed?
- Is this question likely to generate hope, imagination, engagement, creative action, and new possibilities, or is it likely to increase a focus on past problems and obstacles?

Some “generative questions:”

- What question, if answered, could make the most difference to the future (of your specific situation)?
- What is important to you about (the specific situation) and why do you care?
- What is emerging here for you? What new connections are you making?
- What is missing from this picture so far? What is it we’re not seeing? What do we need more clarity about?
- If there was one thing that hasn’t yet been said in order to reach a deeper level of understanding, what would that be?
- What would it take to create change on this issue?
- How can we support each other in taking the next steps? What unique contribution can we each make?
- What conversation, if begun today, could ripple out in a way that would create new possibilities for the future?

³ Vogt, Eric E., Brown, Juanita, and Isaacs, David. *The Art of Powerful Questions: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation, and Action*. 2003. Retrieved 9-5-14 from: http://www.principals.ca/documents/powerful_questions_article_%28World_Cafe_Website%29.pdf