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*Jo TÖPFER*

Appreciative inquiry –  
changing perspectives in our  
perception of organisations

*Secțiunea: Din experienta  
practicienilor*

Editura Lumen, 2008

# **Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială**

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# Appreciative inquiry – changing perspectives in our perception of organisations

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## Abstract

*In the workplace, we normally focus on solving problems and difficulties. In doing so, we often employ terminology which is also associated with dissent and conflict. We talk about struggles with something or against someone, of fronts and coalitions. What if, however, we focused our concentration completely on the positive experiences and moments of inspiration through which we live each day? Appreciative Inquiry (AI) offers us the opportunity to see our work and organisations in a positive light for once.*

**Key terms:** *Appreciative Inquiry, intervention, organizational change, positive change, appreciative approach, facilitator, case study.*

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## Historical overview

Two decisive observations in the history of organisational development have led to the development of Appreciative Inquiry. First, over the years it has been observed that concentrating on problems, difficulties and deficits when seeking to effect change leads to a closing down of perspectives in those involved. This leads to a focus on how to improve what exists, but not to discovering what could be possible. Focusing on problems leads to a feeling both of weakness and helplessness, neither of which promotes creativity, enthusiasm and passion.

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Secondly, when change in an organisation is planned by senior management behind closed doors, the willingness of those affected by the planned changes to accept and implement these changes sinks (regardless of the quality of the proposed action). People who have not been involved in the decision-making and planning process look for arguments why this imposed plan can not work. They lack a connection to the proposal and they will only with a great deal of effort or pressure be moved to comply with the new plan – if at all. A phenomenon that is often seen as resistance, as it leads to a breakdown.

Equipped with this knowledge, the researchers and consultants David L. Cooperrider, Suresh Srivastva and their colleagues at the Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, USA set off in search of new paths leading to organisational development. They knew that developmental processes which focused on problems or deficits did not lead to the desired innovation. Furthermore, it was clear to them that complex processes of change in organisations can only succeed when they are supported and driven forward by the large majority of the workers impacted by the change. Ready-made solutions out of the desk-drawer of their managers had little chance of success.

Thus they questioned the classic paradigm of problem-solving and “change management” and began instead to view organisations as the very definition of “beauty and spirit”. They looked for an approach that: a) was oriented towards the future; b) was oriented towards the positive values and experience of the organisation; c) turned those affected into those involved; and d) effectively networked internal and external players in the process. The result was Appreciative Inquiry (AI).

## **The approach**

AI is founded on several principles which together offer a framework for the perception and acknowledgement of the positive values and experience of individuals, teams, organisations and systems. The acceptance of these principles leads to a change of perspective in the perception of the organisation in question. The basic principles move us away from our familiar patterns of perception and lead the individual to a positive interpretation of experienced reality. The basic principles are:

1. Groups, organisations and systems develop in the direction in which they focus their attention. If development is seen as the elimination of disruption, deficits and problems, then the focus will be on improving what already exists. This position may lead slowly to improvements in current systems – but nothing new will emerge. Directing attention towards what is already working well, however, leads to positive visions and the motivation to approach challenges with creativity.

2. Every group, every organisation and every system contains unsuspected and unused positive potential which now and then comes to light. The back-catalogue of collective experience offers a virtually inexhaustible resource for learning and development. It is rich in positive experiences and knowledge which often goes unnoticed. This “gold” is contained within collective memory and is waiting to be discovered and used.
3. Change is a permanent state. Groups, organisations and systems adapt themselves permanently to an ever-shifting environment. Transformation or change is not an isolated event within an organisation or a part of it. Transformation is perpetual and is an essential characteristic of every living, organic system. There is no such thing as “best practice”. Organisations can only be successful when they continually adapt to the changes in their dynamic environment.
4. The words of Ghandi also ring true for Appreciative Organisational Development: *“Live the change that you wish to see in yourself!”* Appreciative Inquiry only works when individuals behave in a manner congruent with the desired change in the organisation. The approach is based on the integrity of individuals and organisations and works simultaneously on the personal level as well as the relationship and organisational realities.
5. Our current behaviour is stimulated by our view of the future. If we see the future in a positive light, then our personal commitment is higher and through this the performance of the entire organisation is improved. If we view the future negatively, then we are less inclined to perform and the productivity of the whole system declines.
6. Analysis and intervention are linked in AI. There is no objective observation as the observer is always a part of the system on which their attention is focused. The first question posed is the starting point for realisation and therefore key in the view of the future that we develop.

The concept of Appreciative Inquiry was developed on the basis of these principles. It is described today by its discoverer David L. Cooperrider as follows:

“Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves 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. [...]

In AI the arduous task of intervention gives way to the speed of imagination and innovation; instead of negation, criticism, and spiralling diagnosis, there is discovery, dream, and design. AI seeks, fundamentally, to build a constructive union between a whole person and the massive entirety of what people talk about

as past and present capacities: achievements, assets, unexplored potentials, innovations, strengths, elevated thoughts, opportunities, benchmarks, moments of high performance, lived values, traditions, rituals, strategic competencies, stories, expressions of wisdom, insights into the deeper corporate spirit or soul - and visions of valued and possible futures. Taking all of these together as a gestalt, AI deliberately, in everything it does, seeks to work from accounts of this “positive change core” and it assumes that every living system has many untapped and rich and inspiring accounts of the positive. Link the energy of this core directly to any agenda and changes never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilized.”

### **AI in practice**

A workshop based on the AI approach with a mixed group of participants is also called the AI Summit. This is a coherent process which consists of four phases. As the titles for these phases all begin with the letter “D”, it is also called the “4-D cycle”: Discovery – Dream – Design – Destiny. Ideally, one day would be devoted to each phase, which would mean that an AI Summit would proceed over four days. Development of visions about how a participant’s organisation should change is not where the process stops. Concrete projects are planned and agreements are made about who is responsible when for which step of the proposed action, so that the visions can become reality.

#### ***Phase 1: Discovery***

In the first phase of the Summit, participants focus on positive moments in the past which they have experienced in their organisation, department or team. Participants interview each other in duos with the help of basic discussion points. The starting point of the interview is the question about an exceptional experience (see the interview handout).

Each of the interviews takes approximately 20 minutes. The results of the interviews are preserved in keywords on metaplan cards and are then evaluated and consolidated by groups of eight participants (four duos form one small group). Through this process exchange of information and improved understanding is promoted. The key question for the consolidation of the initial notes is: *Which of the aspects listed are especially significant for us as a group?* The results of the small-group work are exchanged and discussed in plenary at the end, during which especially important stories for all participants are repeated. A positive atmosphere is established during this first phase through the exchange about memories of breakthrough moments in the history of the system, their root causes and the values underlying the whole, which also builds a strong support for the following phases.

### ***Phase 2: Dream***

On the basis of these stories and the values uncovered from within them, a model of the future is developed during the dream phase. The key question for this phase is: *How would it be if the root causes and conditions leading to these positive experiences were strengthened?* In this stage, the participants look to the future and imagine that their organisation, department or team had developed in the way that they had imagined. They describe how their private and professional world would look like in three to five years. The wishes from the interviews have in the meantime been successfully realised and the root causes of success have become ingrained in the blueprint of the everyday work experience. A “State of the Art” investigation of the organisation, department or team is then undertaken on the basis of these assumptions, and the participants describe what has happened in the meantime, what action has been taken and what changes have occurred. During this process they follow the following steps:

1. The similarities between the wishes/statements of the participants are captured and visualised
2. The most important issues/components for future development are selected
3. Future prospects are developed

This sequence is also completed in small groups. The participants have a wide range of media and material at their disposal to help them present their view of the future status quo. They can present their predictions as a song, a scene, a model, a sketch or talk, for example. The variety of choice in the mode of presentation sparks creativity and imagination. During this description of the future, differences between what is desired are not ignored; however, neither do they become issues of negotiation. The group talks about the differences for as long as necessary for these differences no longer to stand between the participants, rather for them to become accepted as enriching facets of reality.

### ***Phase 3: Design***

During the Design phase the following questions stand in the foreground: *Which basic principles and key ideas are essential for our future? Which development priorities must be set today in order to arrive in the envisioned future state? Where do all of our positive experiences fit in the future structure of our organisation, department or team?* The group focuses on construction and planning of their new system. The visions are broken down into manageable portions and designated to different corporate functions such as sales, production, human resources, finances, service and so on. This step creates a bridge between the predictions and the current position.

**Phase 3: Destiny**

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| <p><b>Care and treatment of older people –<br/>best practice in East and West</b><br/>Questionnaire for the interview in Dues<br/><b>Appreciative Inquiry</b></p>   |
| <p><small>Please, conduct the interview in Dues. 30 min for each person. You may take notes on the same day if you prefer at the workplace.</small></p> <p>1. Describe an outstanding situation in your work with older people. A situation when you were highly motivated and performed very well. What's going on when things are great? What contributed to this success?</p> <p>2. Without being shy, What do you appreciate most<br/>a) of yourself as an expert in the work with older people?</p> <p>b) of your job?</p> <p>3. Thinking about your work with older people: What are the things that make your work and your organisation unique?</p> <p>4. What do you wish for the future of the work with older people in your country to achieve a better quality of life and vitality?</p> |

The following questions are central during the Destiny phase: *Which projects must we initiate today? What do I want to take responsibility for? What support do I need for this, and from whom?* Responsibility of individuals and teams are central elements here. The result is a concrete plan of action which specifies who undertakes what, when and with whom. Concrete actions and deadlines are agreed. The binding force of the action plan is increased by the voluntary nature of taking on responsibilities. As this is a transparent process, each person involved becomes collectively responsible for the implementation of the agreements.

The process described here faces us with the interesting question: What happens with the problems? Various challenges abound and cannot be removed simply through appreciation. The simple answer to this question is: The existing problems enter the process through the last interview question concerning wishes. The problems are thereby transformed into positively formulated wishes and therefore no longer constrain progress. On looking more closely, one realises at the same time that challenges are always going to be a permanent component of our experienced reality and it is simply perspective which decides if we see them as barriers or stimulus to action. Appreciative Inquiry integrates both sides of reality to a unified world view, as the language that we use creates the reality that we experience. Problems are not ignored through this, but they are also not allowed to become the dominating bottom line which provokes weakness and helplessness. Thus endless discussions concerning who is to blame for a problem and whose problem it actually is can be avoided. This positive tone alters the challenges into milestones on the road towards the future that we collectively desire.

**The role of the facilitator**

The role of the facilitator can best be described as an “Agent of Inquiry”. In common with other large-group methods, the facilitator manages the process through space and time and has no personal goals in terms of content and no personal agenda. In addition, it is helpful for them to:

- Understand an organisation as a living organic system and not as a purely rational construction which operates under one-dimensional cause – effect relationships
- Work collaboratively with the group in searching for the factors which increase the vitality and the quality of life inside the system
- Understand themselves to be a facilitator of new visions, exciting ideas and plans, and
- Work constantly towards the goal of making themselves redundant in order to place the responsibility for the process in the hands of the participants.

It is the task of the facilitator to support the group in their search for possibilities, not to make decisions about the direction in which the group departs. This also means not becoming involved in uncertainties and affording space for opinions, values and impressions which are not one's own. It is equally important to integrate minority opinions and not to marginalise them. That being said, the facilitator is not responsible for the emotional comfort of the participants or for the consideration of their every need.

## Case studies

### *Example A*

A charity organisation needed to formulate a mission statement. Swiftly growing departments threatened to become estranged from each other, shared basic principles were becoming blurred. The mission statement was not to be designed and then imposed in a top-down manner; instead it should be the product of co-construction. In order to begin this process, 100 employees, members and volunteers provided the shared values and key factors which became the foundation for the mission statement in a Appreciative Inquiry process.

### *Example B*

A social service organisation for young people used Appreciative Inquiry in a pre-strategy conference meeting to review and acknowledge the past. They were convinced that the past cannot be altered but that lessons can be learned from it and developments can find their roots in it. Around 120 co-workers, clients, funders and external partners of the organisation compiled their positive experiences from their past collaboration. The final result was a set of core statements which ultimately provided the emotional and material basis for the following strategy planning process.

### **Example C**

The Youth Welfare Department of a local authority was busy with introducing the new concept of neighbourhood-oriented youth support, which can only be successful when everyone affected and involved work together in a new manner. The Youth Welfare Department invited representatives from all the interest groups in the young people's support system and related areas to participate in a two-day workshop. With the help of Appreciative Inquiry, the different groups got to know each other better, exchanged their positive experiences, worked out a vision and planned new, joint projects.

### **Example D**

Many couples want to maintain and strengthen the positive aspects of their relationship. Everyday life poses great challenges which can stand in the way of this. If we want to enjoy satisfying, thrilling and inspiring partnerships then we must constantly work towards this goal – it takes effort. Appreciative Inquiry makes it possible to bring creativity, recognition, shared visions and *Joi d'Vivre* (back) to life. The pre-conditions are:

- The desire to focus oneself with the positive side of oneself and one's partner
- An interest in encountering a new pattern of thinking
- Exchange with other couples

“Appreciative Inquiry for Couples” workshops are offered with the aim of stimulating more vitality and improved quality of life in relationships.

These four examples show how broad the range of occasion is for Appreciative Inquiry to make a valuable contribution to the construction of professional and personal relationships. The mixed backgrounds of the participants and the range of ideas create synergies in very brief periods of time and release energy for the achievement of new, shared goals. Appreciative Inquiry is applicable, therefore, wherever it is important to:

- Introduce positive change
- Improve co-operation and communication between departments or stakeholders
- Build effective team development processes
- Introduce changes in organisational structure and behaviour
- Plan strategy and future projects in a participative manner
- Respond to major changes in the organisational environment
- Open and integrate new points of view and perspectives
- Remove conflict between partners
- Network various change-oriented initiatives

- Create processes leading to merger and integration
- ...

Appreciative Inquiry should not be employed when the result is preordained, when there is no will for positive change in the majority of those involved or when significant interest groups or stakeholders are unable, unwilling or prohibited from taking part.

## Outlook

What would our world look like if the appreciative disposition of this approach found its way deeper into the everyday working life of our organisations? Would problems suddenly cease to exist? Clearly not, but problems would be seen in a new light as challenges. They would inspire us and prompt creativity instead of spreading paralysis and hopelessness. The new, positive disposition would stimulate us to reach the magnitude of our potential. We would be more concerned with working together than with competition and getting our own way. The ability of our working structures to adapt to constantly changing circumstances would be strengthened. Vitality and quality of life in the workplace could improve immeasurably: Is this all just a pleasant pipedream?

## Further reading

### *Books*

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- Srivastva, S., Cooperrider, D.L., 1999, *Appreciative Management Leadership: the Power of Positive Thought and Action in Organization*, Williams Custom Publishing.
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Holman, P., Devane, T., 2007, *The Change Handbook. Group Methods for Shaping the Future*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Berrett Koehler Publishers, Inc. San Fransisco.

### ***Journal entries***

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Appreciative Inquiry: Aus Erfolgen lernen (Learning from success), Carole Maleh, ManagerSeminare Vol. 44/2000.

Appreciative Inquiry, Bestehende Potenziale freilegen und für die Organisation nutzbar machen (Unearthing existing potential and making it accessible for organisations).

Das Feuer für den Wandel entfachen: Appreciative Inquiry (Fanning the Flames of Change), Walter Bruck, Trainer Kontakt-Brief Nr. 30/2000.

Wertschätzendes Erkunden – Appreciative Inquiry, Konrad Elsässer, Agogik 2/1999.

Appreciative Inquiry, Friedrich Glasl, Trigon Thema 3/1999.

### ***AI in the Internet***

<http://ai.cwru.edu>, This is a good starting point for discovering the world of AI in the internet. Countless links, recommended reading, case studies, video films and a mailing list. There is also a substantial historical outline of the origin of the approach.

[www.appreciative-inquiry.org](http://www.appreciative-inquiry.org), Articles, quotes and links relating to the topic.

[www.taosinstitute.net](http://www.taosinstitute.net), The TAOS Institute counts as one of the “heavyweights” in Appreciative Inquiry. One of the discoverers of the approach, David Cooperrider, works there.

[www.aradford.co.uk](http://www.aradford.co.uk), The British practitioner Anne Radford has made available an “AI Resource Centre” here with articles, event announcements, links, an e-Shop and a newsletter.

[www.aiconculting.org](http://www.aiconculting.org), A network of professional AI practitioners mainly from North America use this site to present their courses and client references.

[www.appreciative-inquiry.de](http://www.appreciative-inquiry.de), Walter Bruck presents here a multitude of resources and links relating to appreciative Organisation Development – in German.