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## Appreciative Inquiry

*Focus on possibilities, not problems.*

I love each of the frameworks in this book, so it has been like planning a delicious meal for much loved friends to choose which “dish” to serve first. I have picked Appreciative Inquiry because it offers a brilliant entry point to virtually every context, and because it is simple and stunningly transformational. I also welcome how it infuses everything with a joyous sweetness. When we appreciate something, not only does it help us amplify what we have appreciated, we, the appreciators, are uplifted and energized and connected to our wisdom and passion.

At the core of Appreciative Inquiry’s transformational power is one of the most fundamental inner shifts we can make: from seeing problems to seeing possibilities.

Most of us, and most groups, tend to focus on what is wrong. We relish cataloguing what is not working and we glory in

analyzing root causes and how things might get worse.

The same is true for the voices in our heads. “You didn’t do that very well.” “Don’t be so stupid.” “Who do you think you are?” Seldom does our self-talk affirm our strengths or honour our accomplishments.

All this negative focus is debilitating. The bigger the problems we face and the more overwhelmed we are by the weight of what is wrong, the more important it is that we shift our focus to seeing what is right.

Appreciative Inquiry is an approach to life and to working in groups that turns our default-setting on its head. Instead of fixating on problems, the focus is on what is life-giving. The shift is that simple, and the implications are profound – for morale, innovation, creativity, getting things done, and more. See the following Bright Spots sidebar for one vivid example.

## Origins

Appreciative Inquiry began with David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva at Case Western University. In 1980, Cooperrider, then 24, was a doctoral student of Organizational Behavior. While conducting a standard (problem-focused) diagnosis of organizational issues at a Cleveland clinic, Cooperrider was amazed by the positive cooperation, goodwill, and innovation that he found among the staff. Encouraged by Srivastva, his academic supervisor, Cooperrider dug deeper into what excited him, and gained permission from the clinic to do a thorough investigation of the factors in play when the clinic was functioning at its best. The results were so positive that the clinic’s board of directors extended the work to the whole group practice. The term “appreciative inquiry” first appeared as a footnote in a report to the clinic by Cooperrider and Srivastva.

In the 30+ years since then, thousands of people have built on this and each other’s work, teasing out principles and

practices, and generously sharing stories and insights, united by a focus on the bright spots.<sup>2</sup>

## Appreciative lens

Appreciative Inquiry focuses on the “positive core” – the factors and characteristics that are present when an individual, group, organization, or community is at its best.

By asking, “what do you value?” or “what works well here?” – even in the most toxic of communities, workplaces or teams

### Bright spots

A focus on the bright spots allowed a foreign aid worker to greatly improve child nutrition in Vietnam in a mere six months and with zero budget for food. Instead of focusing on the malnourished children, his team located families where babies had above average weight, a direct indicator of better nourishment. The researchers culled out those families that had higher than average incomes, to leave only families with babies doing better than average given their family circumstances. Then local research assistants investigated what these families were doing differently. It turned out that the differences were simple and highly replicable: in place of two to three larger meals, the bright spot families were feeding the same amount of food per day in four to five smaller portions, and they were supplementing their children’s diets with readily available weeds (greens), and small shrimp wild harvested from the rice paddies. By organizing meetings where the bright spot mothers shared with other mothers the specifics of what they were doing, the innovations spread quickly – significantly and quickly improving the nutrition of local children.<sup>3</sup>

2 Learn more about the history and developments in Appreciative Inquiry at the Appreciative Inquiry Commons website. See Further Resources.

3 Adapted from *Switch: How to change when change is hard*, by Chip Heath and Dan Heath. Crown Business, 2010.

– the conversation changes in profound ways. ↻ The appreciative focus surfaces people’s wisdom and goodwill. In place of negativity, despair, and overwhelm, people’s latent good will, wisdom, and engagement are unleashed. Authentic appreciation, and its close cousin, gratitude, shift the energy. For both individuals and groups, that energy shift is like wind in the sails for positive change.

## **Inquiry**

Energized by having discovered something to appreciate, the next questions become, “What are the conditions that supported this wonderful thing to happen? How can we have more of what is working? Can we translate what is working *here* to help us over *there*?”

Inquiry helps us understand how the “bright spots” came to be, and points the way to having many more.

What conditions, for example, contributed to the best meeting you have ever had with your team or board or staff? Was the agenda framed in a positive and inspiring way? Was everyone comfortable to say what was real, thanks to a high level of trust? Was there a dynamic cross-section of people participating? Did it start on an upbeat note?

Looking back at times when your company or organization was performing at its best, was there excellent information flow between sub-groups, or a compelling sense of shared purpose, or people supported to try new things?

If your goal is to help team members to be more punctual, or better informed, or more engaged, get curious about the people who are already punctual, informed, and engaged. Or ask team members to reflect on their best experiences of whatever you want to cultivate. The wisdom on how to have more will be in the group, and when people come up with their own solutions, they are far more likely to implement them.

## Way of life

Over time, working appreciatively becomes a way of being. We change our default setting from focusing on what is wrong to seeing what is right. The more we do this in our personal lives, the better we are able to respond appreciatively in our relationships, groups, and organizations.

In our personal lives, an appreciative focus can include how we see:

- ourselves;
- our parents and siblings;
- our children;
- our neighbours;
- our circumstances;
- our potential;
- and so on.

Take a moment right now to reflect briefly on some aspect of your personal life from an appreciative perspective. Pick something that is challenging or difficult, and let yourself “rip” with complaining, blaming, or negativity. Then choose to shift from seeing problems to seeing possibilities. Do you notice a shift in your energy and outlook? For example, I recently shifted feeling overwhelmed by my workload into feeling excited by and grateful for emerging possibilities and all that I am learning.

Similarly, in the group and organizational aspects of our lives, bringing an appreciative lens has profound impact. Consider framing issues appreciatively when:

- defining the agenda for a meeting, workshop, conference or social movement;
- conducting a performance review;

- setting strategic goals;
- building capacity in teams and organizations;
- creating collaborations and partnerships;
- dealing with crises.

The list of potential applications is endless because focusing on what is life-giving is a stance we take toward all of life. It is a way of being as much as it is a way of doing. As such, we can bring an appreciative lens to virtually everything!

Since most of us are conditioned by the prevailing negativity and problem focus in society, it takes a bit of practice to strengthen the appreciative “muscle.” If you want to be more focused on what is life-giving, you might ask for help from your spouse or a workmate, or you could put a note in your daytimer to explore using the appreciative lens on a daily or weekly basis until you have formed a positive habit.

Another idea is to adapt the Four Ds framework below to your personal or group context.

## The Four Ds

In 1990, the Global Excellence in Management Initiative articulated a four-phase framework for working appreciatively in a group context. The framework is called “the Four “D”s, because the key word for each phase starts with the letter “D.” Results of working with the Four Ds are best when all parts of the system are together, or well represented – everyone from the boss to the mail room clerk – because wholeness weaves connections and builds trust.

Here are the Four Ds in a nutshell:

- **Discover** – Who are we at our best? What is working well, and why?
- **Dream** – Encouraged and inspired by what is already

working, what more would we like to see? What is the best outcome we can imagine?

- **Design** – What steps do we need to take to have our best possible outcome?
- **Deliver** – Who will do what inspired actions, by when, and what support do they need?

Try the Four Ds in your personal life, to help you improve your fitness, take more risks, or strengthen a key relationship. Try the framework in a team, shifting the conversation from what is not working to looking for bright spots. Let the framework inform your approach if you work on the big issues, such as homelessness, poverty, violence, and war. What are the bright spots? How can we have more of them? ⤴

In my experience, an appreciative lens always brings value, whether in a business or community setting, at work or at home. Here is a story about the benefits of an appreciative lens where the outlook was bleak. The storyteller is Glen Griggs, a registered clinical counsellor and consultant.

### **Appreciative Inquiry in Action**

I was once part of a team at a treatment center working with small children who had experienced repeated violence and abuse, and who lived in one of the most economically distressed neighbourhoods in the city. Each of the kids had suffered early peer rejection and academic failure, and had multiple diagnoses, such as post-traumatic stress, dyslexia, inability to sequence, poor impulse control ... They were sponges for discouragement.

The treatment team got together three times a week to coordinate how we did our therapy work, and to keep up morale. We knew about the importance of being appreciative with our clients, and also ourselves. One of the things we appreciated about the team was our willingness to do things that had never been done before:

standard treatment protocols were meaningless in this context.

We also paid close attention any time one of us said something like, “The reality is that this child is so reactive he’d never work on changing that behaviour.” Whenever someone said, “The reality is ...,” we saw this as a signal that our team member’s imagination had shutdown, and also as a call to bring creativity to bear.

We made it part of the group culture to reframe those situations. Instead of, “The reality is ...,” we’d say, “The current limit of my imagination is ...” So instead of saying,

“The reality is this family is so disorganized, I can’t ever see them getting their kids clean, dressed, and to school on time.”

We’d say,

“The current limit of my imagination is that this family is so disorganized, I can’t ever see them getting their kids clean, dressed, and to school on time.”

The reframe gave us space to move, space for inquiry. We knew that if we did not work with creativity and possibility, the only alternative was a downward spiral of more and more control and failure.

In the disorganized family, everyone on the team agreed that the family wanted to get their kids to school clean, dressed, and on time – a huge strength to appreciate and build on. What worked in the end was breaking the process down into seven steps, and posting a photograph for each step along the hallway at home. A written list would not have worked for the illiterate parents. The photographs were of the family members themselves, doing steps like waking up the children, the children getting washed ... Seeing themselves doing each step, and having a simple way to remember the sequence, made it possible for the family to do what we previously couldn’t have imagined. It would have been even better if the family had taken the photographs themselves, but I did not think of that until just now.

As another example, once a girl stormed out of a therapy session, got on a bus, and went across town. When she later phoned and was picked up, we wanted to know how she did it. This was a child who the week before had been so lacking in confidence that she was not able to open her mouth in the group. In running away, she demonstrated autonomous goal-setting, courage, and strong social skills – to be able to get the bus driver to let her onto the bus without a ticket.

Our goal was to help her develop the confidence and social skills to live life independently. This clarity of purpose automatically changed the meaning of every act of “deviance.” Instead of calling us to exert tighter control on her behaviour, we worked to help her value and build on the strengths she had demonstrated. And then to meet the requirement of keeping her safe, we let her know that the next time she wanted to take off, she should ask for a lunch and bus fare, and to go with a friend.

There are dozens more stories of how an appreciative lens helped us work with creativity and possibility in extremely challenging circumstances. Many of them include how team members needed each other’s help when we hit the limits of our imagination.

This story demonstrates the potent impact of framing issues appreciatively in tough situations. It is this power that has caused the Appreciative Inquiry lens to be taken up by thousands of people worldwide and from every sector, generating a large body of experience and wisdom I encourage you to explore (see Appreciative Inquiry section in Further Resources). From my own 20+ years of experience and what I have learned from reflecting with others, here are finer points I have found most helpful, and one possible pitfall to avoid.

## Finer points

- How issues and challenges are framed is one of the most important places to bring an appreciative lens. For example, from my perspective, the “war on drugs” has actually created more of what it is trying to eliminate. What if the same resources and energy were allocated to cultivating the capacity of families and communities to nurture empowered, confident, self-actualizing youth?
- Appreciative Inquiry is often misunderstood to mean “focus only on the positive.” A more helpful approach is to ask, “What is generative?,” meaning, “What is life-giving? What creates new possibilities? What is exciting? What is empowering and dynamic?” The shift from “positive” to “generative” helps keep Appreciative Inquiry out on the edge of what is possible rather than playing safe in the nice-y, nice-y politeness backwaters.
- An appreciative lens deals with problems indirectly by inviting people to focus on what they want more of and to dream about ideal futures. Sometimes certain people are concerned that key issues are being shoved under the carpet. They feel that unless problems are tackled head on, there will not be positive change. In these situations, encourage problem-focused people to define what successfully addressing the problem will look like. Invite them to imagine a vivid, comprehensive picture of what life looks like (note the present tense) without the problem. Then encourage them to appreciate even the tiniest step in the right direction, including what already exists. As Lynne Twist says, “What we appreciate appreciates.” Alternatively, “What we resist persists.”
- Telling appreciative stories is central to the practice and power of Appreciative Inquiry. Stories affirm what is

possible, transfer tremendous amounts of knowledge, build relationships, open space for dreaming about what might be, and help us have energy and passion for making a difference.

Sharing stories also leverages the transformative power of listening. When we have a chance to tell a story about something we value to a partner who gives us their open-hearted and undivided attention, we often make connections and have deeper insights into experiences that have shaped us. The high quality of listening draws us forth, and at the same time helps to build connections and trust between the teller and the listener. ↪

Try an Appreciative Inquiry interview (see following sidebar, Appreciative Interview Exercise) with a friend to get a sense of what is possible. Pick a subject that matches your purpose ☺ (e.g. best experience in a team for team building, or a time when you were courageous if your goal is to identify core values). The exercise in the sidebar takes 20-30 minutes – and longer if you want to debrief themes and highlights in a larger group. Either way, expect the level of energy and engagement to go up!

- Try “provocative propositions” as a great way to shift conversations to be more appreciative. A provocative proposition distills a desired future into a single statement that expands our sense of possibility. ↪

For example, once I was asked to help a community address child hunger. Rather than convening conversations about hungry children, we worked with the provocative proposition: *There is food on EVERY table*. This statement contains an inspiring vision that spawned ten projects, all of which supported greater food security for vulnerable families.

## **Appreciative Interview Exercise**

1. Consider what theme will be engaging and empowering for you or your group to explore. It might be a theme you did not have enough time for in a previous meeting, or that relates to a current goal or issue. Tried and true themes include being courageous, taking a risk, living on purpose, making a difference, feeling alive, and feeling connected to nature.
2. In advance, prepare worksheets or a flip chart with three questions:
  - a. The theme question. Have this start with, "Tell me a story about ... (for example) a time you came through a major transition."
  - b. What conditions supported you to have this experience?
  - c. What was the impact of this experience on you, on others, and on your community/world?
3. Introduce the idea of appreciative interviews – how the approach is based on the premise that organizations and people change in the direction in which they inquire. When we inquire into problems, we will keep finding problems, but when we appreciate what is best in ourselves or a situation, we will discover more and more that is good. We can then use these discoveries to build a new future where the best becomes more common. (1-2 minutes)
4. Start by inviting people to take a few minutes of quiet reflection on the theme, recalling a related experience where they felt fully alive. Encourage them to trust what comes to mind. Often a seemingly "small" story expresses deep and important truths. (2-3 minutes)
5. Invite people to partner with someone they do not know well. Once everyone has a partner, ask the pairs to decide who will be Person A and who will be Person B. Let them know that each person will have 7-10 minutes to share their story. Explain that Person A is the interviewer, and encourage them to open their ears and hearts to Person B.

A's role is to listen appreciatively and to ask supplementary questions that support Person B to tell their story. (This is not about commenting, or sharing similar experiences, but active listening to support Person B to explore the theme.) While listening, Person A also records themes and key words from what Person B says. Person A starts the interview by saying, "Tell me a story of a time when ...." Once Person B has shared his/her story, Person A asks questions 2 and 3 (from the flipchart). (7-10 minutes)

6. Switch roles. (7-10 minutes)
7. After both interviews, invite pairs to take a few minutes to reflect together on what the exercise was like. (2-3 minutes)
8. OPTIONAL: Debrief in the whole circle.

Here are other examples of how issues can be framed as provocative propositions.

Typical Frame	Provocative Proposition
Lack of leadership	We lead with passion, power, and purpose. △
Poor communication	The internal and external flows of information and knowledge nourish every part of the organization/ team/company.
Lack of funding	Through partnerships, innovation, and collaboration, we have the resources we need to do excellent work.
Overwhelm	We take care of what is most important and the rest takes care of itself.

It is energizing when we frame issues as a positive, present time statement or question. Take a moment now to write a provocative proposition for an issue in your life – or create one with a buddy, or in your team as a whole.

## Possible pitfall

- If senior management is fixed in deficit-based and problem-focused approaches, it is unlikely that they will be authentically committed to acting on the energy and ideas unleashed through an appreciative inquiry. In such situations, it is possible for an appreciative approach to debilitate or demoralize the people involved due to lack of follow through. Look for opportunities to create small successes through working appreciatively, and then build on those successes.

## Links to other chapters

As you read the coming chapters, discover for yourself how all the frameworks are either fundamentally appreciative, or that they are greatly enhanced when approached appreciatively. For example, you will see how Enterprise Facilitation is based on what is life-giving, building on where there is passion and capacity, and that Theory U recommends investigating bright spots to learn from what is already working well.

There is a particularly potent link between Appreciative Inquiry and Trust Theory – the next framework: an appreciative approach helps to build trust! Often, in groups, it is as if the fabric of connectedness is too thin or frail for the group to tackle its issues. To work effectively together, there needs to be a higher level of trust. In those instances, an appreciative approach is very helpful. When we reframe problems as possibilities, and when we connect with each other through stories about bright spots and what we value, we weave stronger connections with one another. In these and many other ways, an appreciative approach helps to create trust.

Trust is the most important foundation for groups to thrive. While one of the lesser known of the frameworks in this book, Trust Theory may be the most important.

## Questions

The best way to learn more about the appreciative lens is to jump in and try it. Here are questions you might explore by writing in a journal or having a conversation with a learning partner. These are also questions to come back to any time you want a quick way into the appreciative lens:

- Tell me the story of a time you were:
  - courageous;
  - in major transition;
  - contributing in ways you value;
  - playing a leadership role;
  - enthusiastically engaged ...
- What works well here? What is life-giving? What is inspiring? Name one thing that we are doing really well.
- How can we have more of what is working?
- What do I value in myself, in this person, in this context? Who am I at my best? Who are we at our best?
- What is an appreciative question or provocative proposition that will help unleash the potential for positive change in this context?
- How can we reframe this problem? Imagine what our situation looks like without this problem.
- How can we translate what is working for one issue/department/situation to help us with other issues/departments/situations?