

Focusing On Possibilities Through Appreciative Inquiry

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Ap-pre'ci-ate, v., 1. valuing; the act of recognizing the best in people or the world around us; affirming past and present strengths, successes, and potentials; to perceive those things that give life (health, vitality, excellence) to living systems 2. to increase in value, e.g. the economy has appreciated in value. Synonyms: VALUING, PRIZING, ESTEEMING, and HONORING.

In-quire' (kwir), v., 1. the act of exploration and discovery. 2. To ask questions; to be open to seeing new potentials and possibilities. Synonyms: DISCOVERY, SEARCH, and SYSTEMATIC EXPLORATION, STUDY.

Cooperrider and Whitney (2005)

We all have a choice about how we see the world, how we act, and how we react based on what we see. Appreciative Inquiry is a transformational process to enact positive change and is used across all sorts of industries, with origins outside of the human services field. It shifts the outlook from a deficiency-driven approach where the spotlight is on problems and what's not working. Instead, it focuses on identifying and amplifying an organization's strengths, and applies lessons learned from those strengths to areas where there is opportunity to improve.



Appreciative inquiry is an excellent way to inspire the human services field – direct support staff, organizational leadership, and other stakeholders – to look beyond what anyone thought was possible. When you are ready to explore your organization through the lens of appreciative inquiry, you should be prepared to:

- Look at what is working best for now vs. what the problems are and how they are going to be fixed.
- Appreciate and therefore value the best of what is.
- Envision what might be.
- Talk about what should be – make sure the people you support and your direct support team members are front and center for this.
- Innovate by identifying your assets, and then consider the potential and the possibilities.
- Focus on what works. What we focus on becomes our reality, and there is always something that works.
- Help people bring out the best and leave the rest behind.
- Value differences.

Appreciative Inquiry In Human Services

The human services field is rooted in compliance-based models built on evaluations and assessments. Oftentimes, shortcomings and weaknesses are provided greater attention than an organization's assets and proficiencies. Since Appreciative Inquiry flips these concepts, it has the potential to be transformative to an agency's culture and entire operational approach.

Here are some useful tips to begin viewing your organization through the lens of Appreciative Inquiry:

- Look closely at what is working. Make that a habit. Find the good ideas and then make them your own. Find the root cause of success.
- Consider who should be part of the conversation – as self-advocates say, “nothing about us, without us.”
- Collaborate, learn from each other, co-create.
- Be a strength-spotter – and when you see it, share it, and celebrate it.
- Share five positives for every one negative.
- Develop imagination, experimentation (value mistakes and learn from them), optimism and a can-do attitude.
- Learn to ask positive questions. Rather than “what did we do wrong?” ask, “what did we learn from this?”
- Do not interrogate, instead converse and discuss. Move from “no, but” to “yes, and.”

The 5-D Cycle Of Appreciative Inquiry

The originators of Appreciative Inquiry have developed a step-by-step cycle that can be used to guide change-makers through each phase and lead to more effective results. The latest iteration of this process is now known as the ‘5-D Cycle’ – Define, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver (AI Commons, n.d.).

1. “Define: What is the topic of inquiry?” (affirmative topic of choice)
2. “Discover: Appreciating the best of ‘what is’”
3. “Dream: Imagining ‘what could be’” (what the world is calling for)
4. “Design: Determining ‘what should be’” (the ideal)
5. “Deliver: Creating ‘what will be’” (how to empower, learn, adjust) (AI Commons, n.d.)

An Example Of The Appreciative Inquiry Cycle

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Considering that Appreciative Inquiry and its associated 5-D Cycle may appear to be an abstract concept, we can apply it to the human services field through a hypothetical scenario that may feel familiar to you. So, let's take an Appreciative Inquiry approach to generate some ideas:

1. “Define: What is the topic of inquiry?” (AI Commons, n.d.)

Through a staff survey, organizational leadership realized that numerous direct support professionals wanted better internal communication, especially about the organization as a whole and how its mission is impacting people.

2. “Discover: Appreciating the best of ‘what is’” (AI Commons, n.d.)

A direct support professional was given time and space to lead discovery discussions with focus groups throughout the organization. She learned that different departments had varying methods of communication. Some emerging themes were that there must be a variety of methods used to communicate – email, newsletters, agenda items for meetings, townhalls, etc. She also discovered that the development department was very successful in communicating with current donors and connecting with future donors. They were quite effective in raising money for the organization through their use of sharing stories.

3. “Dream: Imagining ‘what could be’” (AI Commons, n.d.)

The focus group team met and discussed the themes and findings from that discovery discussion, and began envisioning better communication strategies based on how the development department connects with donors. They wondered if they might be able to apply those strategies for all people – direct support professionals, people receiving services, management, families, donors, and other stakeholders. These strategies would be more transparent and include stories, while also addressing varying languages, communication styles, frequency preferences, etc.

4. “Design: Determining ‘what should be?’” (AI Commons, n.d.)

The team designed a comprehensive communication plan that addressed the diverse needs of the agency. They created social media accounts to reach a larger demographic of donors and an internal communication network that allowed people to share news, ideas, and stories. They created a decision tree to determine how and with whom information should be shared (to address any privacy concerns). They also began publishing an electronic newsletter to share with other stakeholders. This plan also addressed closing the feedback loop.

5. “Deliver: Creating ‘what will be’” (AI Commons, n.d.)

This team initiated their communication strategy by recruiting people supported and staff to write and distribute the newsletter, to give input and share ideas, and to help gather continuous feedback. The decision tree is also shared widely so people know what to expect and how to ensure they are respecting privacy. The team then found people within the agency who are willing to monitor and update the organization’s social media sites. All of these efforts – which started with the team identifying and applying internal strengths – have led to staff feeling more informed, engaged, and invested in the agency and its mission.

Using Appreciative Inquiry In Your Work

The next time you have a challenging opportunity to tackle, you may want to consider the Appreciative Inquiry approach. Take some time to remind yourself and others of past successes on which you can build. When you go down this path, think about what made you successful and how you can replicate that in your current situation. By taking time to focus on the positive, you will very likely inspire collaboration, boost creativity, and lead to outcomes perhaps beyond what you may have even thought possible!

“When you focus on problems, you get more problems. When you focus on possibilities, you have more opportunities.”

- Zig Ziglar

References & Resources

- AI Commons (n.d.) *5-D cycle of appreciative inquiry*. Champlain College. <https://appreciativeinquiry.champlain.edu/learn/appreciative-inquiry-introduction/5-d-cycle-appreciative-inquiry/>
- Cooperrider, D., & Whitney, D. (2005). *Appreciative inquiry: A positive revolution in change*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.