



GETTING COMFORTABLE WITH APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Questions

Answers

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As co-directors of the Global Excellence in Management Initiative (GEM), Ada Jo Mann and I have had many opportunities over the last three years to answer questions about Appreciative Inquiry — an innovative process of capacity building that challenges our habits of mind and invites us to work in new and unfamiliar ways. For GEM, this process is central to our work with U.S. Private Voluntary Organizations (PVOs) and with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) worldwide.

CEOs, managers, and internal champions of Appreciative Inquiry need to have a way of talking about this work convincingly so that staff, boards, and other stakeholders feel comfortable enough to try it out. Most need some reassurance that if they take up the challenge of engaging in appreciative change work, they are doing more than applying a “feel-good formula.” This is especially true because in our society we have been trained to distrust any approaches that are viewed as too hopeful or too positive and to characterize them as having little substance.

An organization’s first introduction to Appreciative Inquiry can affect the experience

that its members have of the overall change work — in particular, the ease with which they move into the work and the results they are able to achieve. Therefore, how we describe Appreciative Inquiry, how we answer the many questions about it, and how we help organizations “get onboard” is important. We have found that a combination of sharing information and stories about the experiences of others, answering questions, encouraging initial small-scale experimentation with appreciative approaches, and experiencing the process seems to work best.

*While there are many applications of Appreciative Inquiry, the questions and answers that follow are based on our use of the 4-D Model — a cycle of activities that guide members of an organization, group, or community through four stages: **discovery** - finding out about moments of excellence, core values, and best practices; **dream** - envisioning positive possibilities; **design** - creating the structure, processes, and relationships that will support the dream; and **delivery** - developing a plan for implementation.*

We hope this article will be of interest to

individuals just learning about Appreciative Inquiry, to practitioners who must answer similar questions, to people considering whether to move forward with an intervention, and to those who want to convince others of Appreciative Inquiry's merits. There are a range of questions that are on people's minds as they hear about Appreciative Inquiry for the first time and as they face the prospect of using it within their own organization or perhaps to find common ground among multiple organizations or to help a community understand and use its assets to build a better future. For those embarking upon an organizational change effort, the questions can be quite personal. Can I trust my colleagues and myself to move in the right direction? What can I expect to happen during the journey? How risky is

it? Is the process one I can commit myself to? What roles will the facilitators play?

What follows are answers to these questions and others that we, as GEM's Washington staff, most frequently hear. Although each of us has her own way of responding, the answers we provide here are a composite of replies we have found most effective. The questions are written as though addressed to Ada Jo and myself, and the answers are responses we might make in an initial contact; at a meeting to discuss a potential intervention or participation in a GEM program; during an introductory workshop on Appreciative Inquiry; or in discussions among people interested in strength-based approaches.

Q. What is Appreciative Inquiry?

A. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a capacity-building process that begins by valuing the organization and the culture in which it is embedded; by learning about the organization, its relationships, and its environment; and by identifying and building on existing strengths rather than examining in detail problems and deficiencies. Appreciative Inquiry puts organizations back in touch with their "deepest living values." And it can help an organization create its niche by identifying its collective hopes and dreams and then designing a process for realizing them.

Over time, Appreciative Inquiry develops four important competencies that support the unfolding of an on-going appreciative learning culture: affirmative competence — the capacity to focus on what the organization has done well in the past and is doing well in the present; generative competence — a capacity to allow members to experience the impact of their contribution toward a higher purpose; expansive competence — the ability to go beyond familiar ways of thinking; and collaborative competence — the power of dialogue to transform systems. (These ideas are from *Creating Appreciative Learning Cultures* by Frank J. Barrett.)

The initial Appreciative Inquiry change intervention that we most frequently use guides participants through activities that follow the 4-D model (discovery, dream, design, and delivery), and takes place in a retreat setting over the course of three to six days. Appreciative Inquiry is based on the premise that many participate in the process and that, by their doing so, commitment to the organization is deepened and members are actively helping to create it's future. The process can be a helpful approach in any planning effort requiring strategic vision, collective action, multiple parties, and an empowering context for innovation and development.

Q. Is there a theoretical framework that supports Appreciative Inquiry?

A. Yes. Appreciative Inquiry was developed in the mid-eighties by David Cooperrider and his colleagues. David is an associate professor in the department of Organizational Behavior at the Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University. Drawing on research and writing from diverse fields such as organizational behavior, psychology, sociology, and education, and on his own extensive experience in working with organizations, David challenged the traditional change-management theories and created a new set of ideas that have been tested by practitioners over the years. Appreciative Inquiry is an evolving set of theories and practice shaped by the contributions of many who, attracted by its potential, then add their own ideas and experiences in an ever-expanding global learning forum.

These are among the most important concepts underlying Appreciative Inquiry:

- **Image and action are linked.** The research that David Cooperrider has done shows this relationship quite clearly, with many examples from diverse fields such as medicine (the placebo effect) and education (the Pygmalion dynamic). The behavior of human beings is influenced not only by the past and current environment, but also by our images of the future. Successful organizations have a positive guiding image widely shared that galvanizes action. Therefore, in the Appreciative Inquiry 4-D process, a great deal of time is spent in creating a shared dream for the organization.
- **Organizations move in the direction of the questions they ask.** The seeds of change are implicit in the first questions asked. The kinds of questions you ask of each other determine what you find, and what you find sets the direction for the journey. This has tremendous implications for how to first enter organizations or communities. What is the starting point? Does one look for what is wrong or get curious about what works, where the innovations are, what excites people about the place, what they are most proud of, and what their most deeply held values are? The first step in the 4-D cycle is to discover what works in your organization.
- **All organizations have something about their past to value.** All organizations, no matter how conflicted at the moment, can find a best practice, a set of experiences, or a time in history when things worked well. Instead of spending all of the time searching for deficits, we believe in balancing things out by spending time analyzing what has worked well in the past. This work provides a platform from which to spring toward the future. The stronger the focus on what worked in the past, the further out and more vibrant the dream of the future. Many organizations are not fully aware of their own potential. By preceding the visioning process with an inquiry aimed at discovering moments of excellence, the stage is set to allow richer and more provocative possibilities to emerge.
- **Organizations are not fixed.** So often our organizations are maligned rather than appreciated and understood. They are seen as problems or, worse yet, as unavoidable evils that are needed to make things happen in the world. It is

easy to start thinking about organizations as if they cannot be changed, yet human beings created them in the first place! Virtually any pattern, system, or structure created by humans is open to alteration.

- **Building appreciative skills is a key leadership task.** Appreciative leaders are those who notice and heighten positive potential within an organization and see radical possibilities beyond the boundaries of problems. The processes of appreciation have a tremendous mobilizing affect. Leaders understand how to use this effect to bring people together around issues of mutual concern. They are able to engage organizational members in provocative dialogue by asking questions such as: "If we were able to start doing one thing tomorrow that would change for the better the way we do business forever, what would that one thing be?" These leaders develop skills within the organization to recognize, study, and celebrate small and large successes; to engage in dialogues for learning; to be creative; to dream; and to act.

Q. *What actually happens during an Appreciative Inquiry change process?*

A. The first step is to design and conduct appreciative interviews — our alternative to the more-common organizational assessment that is often the starting point for any major change effort. The specific focus of the inquiry is defined by each organization or group, but we help set the "organizational gaze" toward the affirmative. This is an important first step in the change process, for our work is based on the premise that organizations move in the direction of what they study. When an organization directs its attention to those areas in which strides are being made or innovation has occurred, it begins to build its own affirmative competence.

We guide the group in selecting topics of interest and then creating an interview guide with questions designed to elicit examples of excellence in relationship to each topic. For instance, for the topic *teamwork*, questions might be, "Think of an example of the most effective team or group effort you have been a part of in this organization. Tell a story of what happened. What made the teamwork effective? As you look to the future, describe one thing this organization could do to heighten teamwork." The organizational members themselves collect the stories by interviewing key internal and external stakeholders. The process of doing the appreciative interviews is as important as the data collected, for it is through the doing that the internal conversations within organizations are changed. As the conversation changes, the stance toward the future becomes more hopeful. This allows bigger and more meaningful visioning to occur.

The telling of stories helps create a sense of wonder; hearing a good story fills one with delight. Stories get beyond the hard quantifiable data and language of organizational assessments to the most inspiring moments of organizational life. They carry meaning and truths which elude even the most sophisticated information systems. Members then extract from the stories core values and best practices upon which to build a vision of the future. This stage is called **Discovery**.

In the past, this NGO support organization in India had done all of its strategic planning with the top management group. After it was decided that a change was needed, the NGO involved all stakeholders in an Appreciative Inquiry that included donors, governing board, partner NGOs, and staff. The donors were asked, "What gives life and vitality to our longstanding relationship?" The board was asked, "What are the high points of the relationship between our organization and the governing board?" The partners were asked, "What do we do to be relevant to our partners?" The staff was asked, "What are our strengths?" Afterward the NGO reported: "For the first time we dwelt more consciously on our strengths, our good practices, our achievement. This not only lifted our morale but was also a highly empowering process."

During the **Dream** stage, which seems to work best when it involves as many organizational or group members as possible, the interview data actually gets put to use. Members use it as an artist uses a palette of colors — to create an image. These images emerge from a connection to the best of the past that the appreciative interviews have uncovered. With these moments actively in mind, members create a vision of the future organization and its impact in the world by developing provocative propositions that stretch the realm of the status quo, challenge common assumptions or routines, and suggest real possibilities.

The next step is to **Design** the ideal organization so that it can support the realization of the provocative propositions. All members are involved in this effort, and there are lots of opportunities for discussions. The essential question that focuses the work is this: "What would our organization look like if it were designed to maximize and realize our dreams for the future?" During this stage, organizational elements like structure, systems, partnerships, donor relations, and learning processes are considered. Finally, plans are developed by which members can bring about and sustain initiatives developed in order to deliver the full impact of the change effort. In the **Delivery** stage organizational members work together on an implementation strategy for moving forward in the immediate future. Challenges of sustaining the momentum, bringing other stakeholders into the process, and taking action on the provocative propositions are addressed.

Q. *Why should we spend time looking at what's going well? If it's not broken leave it alone.*

A. We introduce Appreciative Inquiry as a new way of working in organizations that develops an appreciation and understanding of what has worked in the past and what is working today in order to envision the full potential of what could be possible in the future. Studying what is going well helps you to understand something about the conditions for success that made the exceptional moment possible. When an organization directs its attention to those areas in which strides are being made — where, if only for a brief time, innovation occurred or extraordinary work was being performed — it begins to build its own affirmative competence and deeply influences its potential as a learning organization. If you

can better understand how you achieved those moments when you and your colleagues experienced your own organization as high performing, you are in a good position to replicate them and increase their frequency.

Q. What will we do with the data we generate from the inquiry?

A. Some organizations have turned the data collected into a special commemorative report celebrating the successes and exceptional moments in the life of the organization. Others have written up the results and circulated them back to all members of the organization. Still others have been content to let the data serve as a powerful springboard for their visioning work in the dream stage of the Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Model.

*A document entitled **The Fabric of the Future** was created from over one hundred interviews held with the board, staff, overseas partners, donors, and other stakeholders of one of the largest and oldest PVOs in operation for more than 50 years. It includes sample quotes and stories and is intended to capture a vision of the organization when it is working at its best. It represents a snapshot of present strengths and future dreams. The organization used the document to begin a system-wide process of constructing its future.*

Q. Can I trust my colleagues and myself to move in the right direction? What can I expect to happen along the journey?

A. When facing a change effort it is natural to feel challenged by the task. You may feel it is important to involve experts to shape the future and help guide next steps. However, we believe that an organization has much of what it needs for this work in the skills, wisdom, and experience of its present members. Of course, there are times when an outside view or technical advice can be invaluable, but it never takes the place of the thinking done by your own organizational members. You are the ones who must create your own future.

An organizational-change effort built on an appreciative approach can be viewed as a journey — but not the kind that you plan well in advance with hotel rooms reserved at each stop. This journey involves more adventure and risk because there is a process that guides the general direction but allows for unexpected sidetrips. As on any journey, there are a set of attitudes or beliefs that help keep the team moving forward. Perhaps the most important of these is hope — hope that things can be better, that organizational life can improve, that your impact as an organization can be greater, that personal satisfaction can grow, and that you and your colleagues can make a bigger difference in our world.

No one can predict what will happen on your organizational journey. Bringing in something new requires clearing a space so the new can take root and flourish. It can mean upheaval and even chaos for a period of time. For those of us who thrive on order and feel more comfortable in knowing exactly where we are going, this can be a little disconcerting. We may be called upon to activate our faith and trust in the process and in the potential of

our... es and our colleagues.

The journey can be transformative. During the course of its Appreciative Inquiry intervention, one PVO changed its name and its core purpose and line of work, although it had entered the process with none of these goals in mind. Another made a transition from the founding CEO to a newly appointed leader. Both founder and new leader participated in the process, providing a live example of the importance of balancing continuity and change.

We have had the privilege of guiding many different kinds of organizations through this process. They have varied tremendously in their mission, structures, activities, and size. The AI process is a flexible one that is influenced by the interests, needs, and hopes of each organization. Some use this opportunity to envision and put into place far-reaching changes; others are comfortable with gentler changes and a slower pace. That is up to you.

Q. How do the results differ from those gained through more-conventional approaches?

A. The data we have received so far at the organizational level indicates that when the process “takes,” the results can be far more compelling than those experienced through more traditional methods. Perhaps the most important early messages that we bring are those of hope and of possibility. These can have a powerful effect on people who feel disempowered to make a difference in the life of their own organization. So often people have long ago accepted the status quo and in so doing lost a part of their own vitality. This accommodation to the mediocre can be a little like having a blister that you ignore while still knowing it is there; you’ve made a pact to limp along year after year without ever really healing it. So it is with organizations that become accustomed to and even comfortable with living at a lower order of their potential.

Some organizations find it easier, for a variety of reasons, to embrace Appreciative Inquiry immediately. Others are more comfortable in taking their time and in making more minor changes. Some organizations want their Appreciative Inquiry change work to culminate in specific strategies, plans, and timetables. There are others for whom the action planning is less important and the “product” may be an openness in the organization, an eagerness to move forward, and a new sense of the possibilities. The AI process allows for both of these outcomes.

Four changes that often occur as a result of an Appreciative Inquiry — but not so often after traditional strategic-planning process — are these:

- **Heightened creativity and an enlarged sense of the possible.**

One PVO developed a provocative proposition about creating a global forum of mountain organizations. Scarcely a year later, the Mountain Forum was inaugurated as a network of diverse nongovernmental, intergovernmental, scientific, and private-sector organizations and

individuals having an interest in preserving mountain cultures and environments.

- **More congruence between the organizational structure and its values and vision.**

One busy and expanding PVO reinvented its social architecture and gave birth to the idea of cross-departmental, self-directed work teams to conduct the organization's essential work — an innovation that over time has proven valuable for soothing its internal growing pains.

- **Movement beyond organizational boundaries to form new relationships to get things done.**

Representatives of eight urban and community development organizations from around the U.S. used an Appreciative Inquiry process to explore the possibilities of collaboration. The week-long inquiry into common values and aspirations, stories of accomplishments, and ideal models of partnership gave birth to an alliance.

- **More productive and fulfilling relationships between board members, donors, and organizational staff.**

This organization changed the basic nature of its relationship with donors by holding a philanthropy retreat utilizing an Appreciative Inquiry approach. Donors now actively make overseas visits, and participate in the program. Three have joined the board of directors.

Q. Does Appreciative Inquiry have any place for problem solving and strategic thinking?

A. Yes. However, most people already have a high level of competence in problem solving; it is the affirmative, generative, expansive, and collaborative competencies that need to be strengthened. Appreciative Inquiry is good at inspiring and mobilizing people to change and at generating high levels of creativity and “out of the box” thinking. Rather than trying to fix something in the current situation, Appreciative Inquiry attempts to bring something new into being — to nurture a stronger life urge that sees possibilities. As an organization becomes firmly attached to its own enlarged sense of what is possible, the commitment to the collective dream becomes stronger and excitement mounts. At this point, when it can no longer inhibit expansive thinking and consensus building, problem solving can play a role in strategy development and action planning. There is no way to completely eliminate problem solving, nor is that our intent.

Q. What kinds of organizations and groups can work best with Appreciative Inquiry?

A. Appreciative Inquiry has been used with a wide variety of organizations including international development organizations, domestic nonprofit groups, corporations, universi-

ties, and, in a more limited fashion, governments. Organizations of all sizes and ages have used Appreciative Inquiry to their advantage. For example, organizations that have undergone extensive strategic-planning processes and those that have not can both benefit. The approach will "fit" with wherever an organization finds itself in its own evolution.

There are, however, some indications as to whether an organization is a particularly good candidate for this approach:

- *Does the organizational leader have some level of comfort with appreciative ideas?*
- *Is there a shared sense that the organization is poised for a positive future?*
- *Are some organizational members risk-takers?*
- *Does the organization have members who are able to see possibilities that others cannot?*
- *Is there a feeling among a core group that change is timely?*
- *Does the organization have a history of using participatory processes for planning?*
- *Is the environment (stakeholders, development trends, global events, etc.) supporting change?*

If these conditions exist within an organization, the potential for making dramatic changes is there. However, even when these indications are not present, the process itself can help create them, and Appreciative Inquiry can be a valuable way to move forward.

Q. Does Appreciative Inquiry translate across cultures?

A. Yes. Our experience so far indicates that it translates very well. For example, Appreciative Inquiry processes have been used in Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Egypt, Peru, Panama, India, Senegal, Uganda, and Russia, to name a few countries. In some cultures storytelling, a valuing of the best of the past, and community-wide processes for consensus building are common. But what about cultures where they are not? Often, people wonder about the difficulty in using an Appreciative Inquiry process in a "fatalistic culture." Those who have worked extensively in such cultures have said that it is particularly important to stimulate hope where people are already overcome by the weight of fatalism. An unbalanced focus on problems and their structural causes can be overwhelming. It is precisely in cultures where fatalism is dominant that approaches centered around attitudes and values can make a contribution.

A Peruvian NGO participated in GEM's Organizational Excellence Program. As a part of its visioning work, it developed a provocative proposition about creating a network of NGOs in Peru and changing its own role from that of a provider of direct services to one of capacity-builder of other organizations. In a bold attempt to take action, it organized a workshop called Imagine Cono Norte

that brought together NGO staff and grassroots leaders of Cono Norte (Northern Cone region of Lima — an area of about two million people) to identify assets of the region and create propositions for the future.

Q. Can Appreciative Inquiry be used at the community level?

A. Yes. Experiments are under way using an Appreciative Inquiry approach in community development work. Because the development paradigms are still steeped in a problem-solving mentality, villagers may find it difficult at first to identify their assets, insisting that they are needy or even making their problems seem worse in order to receive funding. However, over time and with patience this view will change, particularly as donors begin to change their own criteria for giving.

In Tanzania, community development workers are helping rural villagers appreciate the potential the community already has. What are the best farming practices in the community? Who are the experts in child raising? What is the most successful experience the village has had in gaining the collaboration of its members? The community development workers use an adaptation of the 4-D model to work with villagers in creating a positive image of the future and a plan to get there.

Q. Are there other ways that Appreciative Inquiry is being applied?

A. Although the bulk of our experience has been with using Appreciative Inquiry to build organizational capacity, it has also been used to help form partnerships between organizations, bring multiple organizations together to find common ground, and strengthen and empower communities. There has been a great deal of healthy experimentation going on with appreciative processes and ideas. Here are three examples that illustrate the wide variety of applications being tested.

Russia. In an effort to influence national-level public discourse in a more positive direction, a project entitled "VOSTOK 21 - Images Of The Future Russia" used appreciative interviews with members of the Russian parliament, public officials, NGO leaders, journalists, and young professionals to stimulate positive images of a future nation. These have been published in one of the more influential newspapers.

United States. Projects aimed at dealing with complex issues of diversity have often approached the situation from a problem orientation. In one major corporation, an appreciative process was used to gather data about successful experiences with diversity within the corporation. Stories about working in high-quality cross-gender teams were collected and shared widely as a first step in designing a strategy for

the future.

East Africa. Here, an experiment is using appreciative processes to create an NGO network that will organize to build the capacity of each of its members through the trading of best practices. Appreciative inquiries are the starting point for discovering pockets of excellence and best practices within network organizations.

Practitioners of Appreciative Inquiry are part of a larger movement to find ways to encourage more innovation, hope, possibility, creativity, self-directed change, and learning within and between organizations, networks, and communities. Throughout the world these approaches are being tried out and adapted to local situations. Appreciative processes have been combined with large-group methodologies such as Future Search and other strength-based approaches.

These are the most common questions asked us in our work as co-directors of the GEM Initiative and some of our favorite answers. The answers seem to help potential users get comfortable enough with Appreciative Inquiry to allow themselves to experience the process. But there are many ways to answer these questions. Our answers reflect our own experiences with Appreciative Inquiry as well as our values and the context in which we find ourselves. Perhaps you are having quite a different experience with Appreciative Inquiry. What kinds of questions are you hearing? What have you found to be effective ways of answering them? What questions do you have about Appreciative Inquiry? We are interested in hearing about your current thinking and experience. Please call us at (703) 528-8200 or E-mail us at GEM@VITA.ORG.