



Civic Reinventions, Inc.

Reinventing Futures Through Strategic Conversation

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

BY MARK K. SMUTNY

Appreciative Inquiry is built on a fundamental shift in how we address organizational change. The common way to facilitate change is to identify a problem, analyze it, and invent a solution. The focus is on issues and problems to solve. You focus on the broken parts and fix what is broken. These methods inadvertently amplify problems by putting a spotlight on the negatives.

Appreciative Inquiry emerged in the 1980s as an alternative approach. David Cooperrider and his colleagues at Case Western University proposed that we look at what works in an organization and build on that. It is a strengths-based approach. Community organizers have known for decades that coalitions and advocacy are most effective when building on the strengths and assets in a neighborhood, not its deficiencies.

Appreciative Inquiry is built on several principles. The first is that every group, business, and organization has something that works, something that is good. Even the most tired organizations have a kernel of success upon which to build.

The second principle is that what we focus on creates our reality. If we focus on problems, our reality will be about problems that need to be fixed. If we focus on strengths, we will see a person's gifts and the good things our businesses and organizations do.

The third principle is that the act of asking questions shapes the way organizations think. Questions mired in problems generate organizations that get mired in fixing problems. Questions that invite creative exploration help organizations embrace the future and innovation. See the difference?

Appreciative Inquiry looks at the history of a group or organization and invites attendees to notice key moments of success: times of vibrancy, creativity, and energy. Here is an example of Appreciative Inquiry in an annual strategy retreat:

Assemble a group for the annual strategy retreat of a business association. The workshop attendees include staff, the board of directors, and a handful of volunteers.

After the preliminaries (the welcome, an icebreaker, and the like), begin the heart of the meeting with something like the following: "Today we are going to discuss these questions: 'What did we do well in the past year? What was it that gave us our greatest success?'"

After participants pick their jaws up off the floor from the shock of being asked to focus on strengths rather than problems, they begin to stream answers.

"It was our block party."

"It was the long table event."

"It was when we invited the whole community into a celebration of good food, great music, and fun."

"I liked when we invited new board members and they brought such great ideas."

"No doubt, the hiring of our new executive director."

In the next stage, the facilitator invites participants to explore another appreciative question. It might be, "In the coming year, how shall we build on our success?" or "Given our successes last year, what bold steps shall we take in the year ahead?"

Again, ideas pour forth.

"We need another block party, only let's shut down three blocks instead of one and invite the entire city."

"We could invite six restaurants to cater the event, instead of one. The variety will increase attendance."

"Maybe we could get corporate sponsors and discount the tickets."

"Maybe we could invite a jazz band. I know a superb group."

Notice the focus on strengths, not problems. The facilitator might have asked, "What shall we do about the problem of some businesses not supporting our work?" That question is draining, devoid of energy, and dripping with fatigue. An

Appreciative Inquiry question would, on the other hand, be something such as, “What makes our association attractive to new businesses and old? How might we strengthen our welcome and engagement for all businesses in our downtown?”

Appreciative Inquiry is immensely adaptable. Appreciative Inquiry can be used in all types of settings from corporate boardrooms to neighborhood groups, and informal conversations. When I see a staff member in the morning, I often ask an appreciative question such as “What good is happening in your life?” They tend to share about hobbies, children, or a new relationship. It is amazing how asking about good things and strengths turns the conversation into an energized moment.

Examples of Appreciative Inquiry questions abound. Here are a few:

- What has gone well in your day? (Great for getting teenagers to talk.)
- What one thing are you most excited about in the next year?

- What’s good in your organization?
- How might we build on our improved safety record in the coming years?
- What organizations and businesses in your neighborhood bring strength to your coalition’s work?
- What has been most helpful to your work in the past year? How might we build on it?

Organizations have more ability to travel into the future if they carry with them the best of the past. If a bookstore has a history of holding political forums that pack in the crowds, there is a pretty good chance that political forums should be a part of the coming year’s schedule. If a congregation has found energy and joy in serving meals to the homeless, then its future will likely be built around food and serving the poor. The past is prologue. Our organizations thrive when we bring forward the best of our past.

The most comprehensive description of AI is *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: For Leaders of Change* by David Cooperrider, Diana Whitney, and Jacqueline M. Stavros.

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