

Change through Appreciative Inquiry

A new way to get your employees to change without (much) pain

ALARMED BY A weakening market position and declining staff morale, Really Rapid Transit, Inc. needed to change. Senior management called in organizational experts to diagnose the problems and prescribe solutions. The consultants crafted a plan that would change everything from employee uniforms to customer interaction to the way data got entered. But when it came time for the rollout, Really Rapid's employees balked. Stinging from the implied and direct criticism in the consultants' report, they weren't the least bit interested in a set of changes they found threatening. Wasn't this, they asked, just the latest ham-handed nonsense imposed by their out-of-touch bosses?

Meanwhile, at Enlightened Lighting, Inc., management and staff approached the change process a different way. Employees came together to talk not about problems and solutions, but their greatest successes. What was it like, they were asked, when this organization was at its best? Staff members told stories and reviewed them together to glean common themes. The company then conceived a vision of what it might achieve in the brightest possible future and, working backwards from that, devised the steps and resources that would enable them to realize the vision. When the plan was completed, the employees eagerly embarked on the new course as full partners with management.

Enlightened Lighting was using appreciative inquiry, an approach to organizational change that emphasizes and builds on a company's strengths and potential. Based on social constructionism—the theory that people and organizations create their realities through their interpretations of and conversations about the world—AI was first developed in the 1980s by David

Cooperrider of Case Western Reserve University and is being used by a growing number of corporations and non-profit organizations around the world.

“The more you focus on *problems*, the more you slow yourself down,” says Jane Magruder Watkins, a leading AI practitioner and coauthor (with Bernard J. Mohr) of the book *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*. “The more you seek out what works and create images of where you want to go, the better able you'll be to keep up with the ever-increasing rate of change. The old model is about fixing up the status quo. That's not good enough anymore. By the time you solve one set of problems, 900 more things are wrong.”

Kenneth Gergen, a Swarthmore College psychology professor credited with developing social constructionism, says that the way people talk about their organizations shapes their behavior within them. “It's not clear how much is to be gained from a problem orientation,” says Gergen. “You can find problems everywhere when you start looking. If you take it too far, you create a sense that it's all insurmountable. But if we could construct a world in which something is *possible*, we can talk about that in such a way that we might be able to achieve it together. Suddenly, you create a tremendous positive energy.”

Consider one example of appreciative inquiry in action. The corporate finance division at Bank of Scotland used AI to transform its internal communications. The bank's leaders knew they needed to create two-way information flow between managers and front-line employees, both to keep them up to speed and to draw from their experience and knowledge. Not interested in identifying problems—project designers feared that would devolve into deflating

“whine sessions”—the bank instead held 10 workshops to explore what the company did best and why.

As reported by employee communication manager Ruth Findlay in the February 2001 issue of the *AI Newsletter*, each of the workshops was composed of a mix of people from most departments and all salary grades. Working in pairs, participants interviewed one another about particular instances in the previous six months when they felt energized by the contribution they were making to the bank. They then explored the ingredients of the high moments. The stories were collected and analyzed for common standards of communication and positive actions that could be taken to bring about change.

Out of the stories came a report called “100 Voices,” which mapped out how the division would achieve a quality of internal communications that matched the excellence it had already achieved in corporate finance.

“The information that's needed in an organization is alive at every level,” says Watkins. “It's no longer the case that people at the top know what's best. Most good leaders realize that they really need to access all the intelligence of their organization. AI gives you the ability to do that. It's extremely democratic.”

Watkins identifies five core principles that have evolved into what she calls the “DNA of appreciative inquiry.” They are:

The constructionist principle: an organization's destiny is bound up in people's understanding of it. The first task in changing an organization is to discover what its people think about it.

The principle of simultaneity: the process of inquiry itself influences the direction of change.

The anticipatory principle: the most powerful vehicle for improving an organization is the collective imagina-

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tion about its future, about what it is becoming.

The poetic principle: an organization's "story" is constantly being rewritten by everyone within the organization and everyone who interacts with it. The organization, like a poem, is constantly being interpreted and reinterpreted.

The positive principle: an inquiry based on the positive—achievement, joy, hope, and inspiration—works better than an analysis of what is wrong and how it can be cured.

Anne Radford, a London-based AI practitioner and editor of the *AI Newsletter*, emphasizes that appreciative inquiry depends very much on the participation of everyone in an organization: "Appreciative inquiry isn't something that is done to employees," she says. "They are not on the receiving end of a process. They *are* the process."

Watkins and Mohr suggest the following five steps in an appreciative inquiry process.

1 Make the focus of inquiry positive. When an organization embarks on a course of inquiry and change, it can either collect and analyze data, identify obstacles, and make diagnoses—the traditional approach—or it can seek out what is good and right about the organization. The difference is in the questions that are asked. A company interested in improving client relations could ask: "What can we do to minimize client anger and complaints?" In an AI process, the question instead would be: "When have customers been most pleased with our service, and what can we learn and apply from those moments of success?"

2 Elicit positive stories. The second step uses interviews to evoke stories that illuminate an organization's distinctive strengths. When the organization is functioning at its best, what characteristics are present? Positive stories, unlike data or lists, stir imaginations and generate excitement about the

company and what it is capable of accomplishing in the future. A change process based on telling and hearing such stories is energizing, Radford says, "because it builds on what is already working."

3 Locate themes that appear in the stories. The goal is not to choose the best stories, nor those that represent the norm. Rather, the purpose is to find what elements are common to the moments of greatest success and fulfillment, and are also most promising and inspiring as components of a desired future. "The themes become the basis for collectively imagining what the organization would be like if the exceptional moments we have uncovered in the interviews become the norm in the organization," Watkins says.

4 Create shared images for the future. Riding on the momentum of Step Three, this stage in the process asks organization members to create a future in which the high points identified in the stories are the everyday reality. In addition to "articulating the dream," as Watkins phrases it, the team designs the structure—the policies, business processes, resources, etc.—for achieving the desired future. Pieces of the structure could include such elements as the acquisition and use of a powerful new technology or the commitment to designing a performance appraisal system that rewards rather than punishes.

5 Find innovative ways to create that future. Finally, organization members identify and carry out measures to put flesh on the skeleton created in Step Four; they find creative ways to bring the preferred future to life. This could mean a new way of communicating with customers or provocative new management training programs. For example, a health care organization emerged from this phase of its AI process with a new program for honoring exemplary customer service, a system for soliciting and implementing employees' suggestions, and a more streamlined decision-making mechanism.

Susan Wood, who left her position with a major consulting firm to start a practice dedicated to appreciative inquiry, believes AI can be especially effective for employee retention. Wood, who is based in the Philadelphia area, is using the approach in her work with a hospital concerned about rapid turnover in its nursing ranks. Rather than trying to figure out why nurses are leaving, she and her partners have set out to discover why those who remain are staying. What they've found is a fierce loyalty to the profession of nursing. Among the policies that have emerged are an employee recognition program, a mentoring program, and a new approach to orientation that emphasizes the noble aspects of nursing.

"These nurses were very beaten-down and overworked," Wood says. "But as soon as we started them in a conversation about what they were good at, the tone changed. We've been able to work with them without resistance or complaining. They've gotten on board. And they're coming up with things that are going to work."

Watkins predicts that appreciative inquiry will continue to grow in popularity as the workplace changes. "Once you get this process going, people have this 'A-ha' experience," she says. "They've been wanting a different kind of workplace, one that provides fulfillment and inspiration as well as a paycheck. Appreciative inquiry gives them that, and it makes them the primary means by which it's created." □

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FURTHER READING

Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination
by Jane Magruder Watkins and Bernard J. Mohr
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