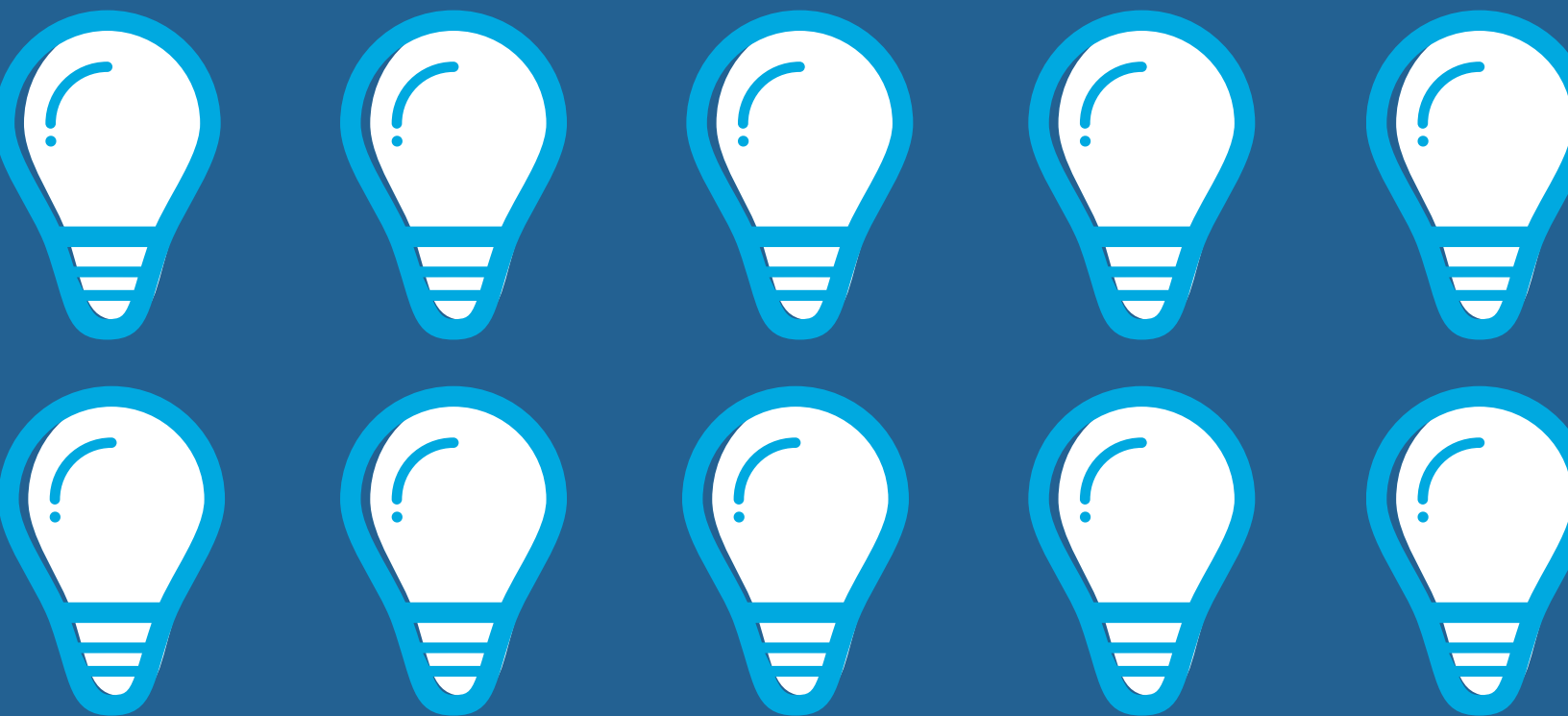# AN INTRODUCTORY GUIDE TO
APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Ap-pre'ci ate, v.,

1. The act of recognizing the best in people and the world around us;
2. Affirming past and present strengths, successes, and potentials;
3. To increase in value...Eg. The economy has appreciated in value

Synonyms: valuing, prizing, esteeming, 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, study, systematic exploration

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a positive, strength-based, participatory methodology that seeks to discover the best in people and their organizations. To call AI a methodology is to use broadest term with which to categorize it. As a methodology, it is a system of principles, practices, and procedures with strong theoretical underpinnings applied to the field of human and organization development. Appreciative Inquiry is just as much a way of being in the world as a way of doing in the world – a philosophy and a practice. The foundational belief is that every living system has something that works well already, where people have experienced some success, some satisfaction, something positive in their lives.

David Cooperrider, the co-creator of AI as a doctoral student thirty years ago, observed increased employee engagement when there were high levels of "positive cooperation, innovation, and egalitarian governance in the organization.' Excited by his findings, Cooperrider was encouraged by his supervisor, Suresh Srivastva, to continue to focus on this uplifting research. The name, Appreciative Inquiry, came later, and Cooperrider delights in telling the story. He was sharing positive and joyful findings of his approach to research with his wife, an artist. In describing how people showed greater positivity and "aliveness" when they spoke of what they valued about themselves and their organizations, it seemed they took on a whole different demeanor and approach when they view situations through a valuing lens. His wife, with her artist's perspective, suggested they were seeing the world with an appreciative eye. That was it! This method of inquiry became Appreciative Inquiry.

THE PRINCIPLES OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

THE CONSTRUCTIONIST PRINCIPLE:

"Words create worlds" – Reality, as we know it, is a subjective vs. objective state and is socially created through language and conversations.

THE SIMULTANEITY PRINCIPLE:

"Inquiry Creates Change" – Inquiry is an intervention. The moment we ask a question, we begin to create a change. The questions we ask are fateful.

THE POETIC PRINCIPLE:

"We Can Choose What We Study" – Teams and organizations, like open books, are endless sources of study and learning. What we choose to study makes a difference. It describes – even creates – the world as we know it.

THE ANTICIPATORY PRINCIPLE:

"Image Inspires Action" – Human systems move in the direction of their images of the future. The more positive and hopeful the image of the future, the more positive the present-day action.

THE POSITIVE PRINCIPLE:

"Positive Questions Lead to Positive Change" – Momentum for [small or] large-scale change requires large amounts of positive affect and social bonding. This momentum is best generated through positive questions that amplify the positive core of the organization or individual.

THE WHOLENESS PRINCIPLE:

"Wholeness Brings Out the Best" – Wholeness brings out the best in people and organizations. Bringing all stakeholders together stimulates creativity and builds collective capacity.

DEFINING WHAT YOU WANT MORE OF...

Defining what we want to inquire into– what we want to create more of — is needed before beginning the appreciative 4-D cycle so that you know what you are inquiring into, what you are focused on discovering, dreaming, designing and delivering. The list of possible Positive Core – Affirmative Topics are limited only by our imaginations. Consider some of the presenting "problems" and resulting affirmative topics we have explored with organizations below. And the list could go on. What do you want to create more of in your organization?

PRESENTING PROBLEM	APPRECIATIVE TOPIC
Low morale	High commitment and sense of shared ownership
High turnover	Magnetic work environments
Lack of follow-through and execution	Instinctive execution
Customer complaints	Revolutionary customer experiences
Resistance to taking responsibility	Cultivating unstoppable confidence
Over reliance on top-down directives	Pervasive leadership, innovation from everywhere
Grid-locked indecision	Lighting fast consensus
Turfism and silos	High performing teams

A NEW AI PARADIGM

PROBLEM SOLVING

Identifying Problem

↓

Conduct Root Cause Analysis

↓

Brainstorm Solutions & Analyze

↓

Develop Action Plan

ASSUMPTION: AN ORGANIZATION IS A PROBLEM TO BE FIXED

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Appreciate and Value "The Best of What Is"

↓

Envision "What Might Be"

↓

Determine "What Should Be"

↓

Innovate "What Will Be"

ASSUMPTION: AN ORGANIZATION IS A WEB OF STRENGTHS

THE 4-D MODEL

In the late 1990s the "4D" model emerged and has become strongly associated with AI. This model identifies four phases in AI that occur after the "affirmative topic" is chosen. The affirmative topic is the focus of the inquiry (e.g., increased customer satisfaction, improved health and safety, more effective operations) but phrased in lively, inspiring language (e.g., inspiring fanatically loyal customers).

1   DISCOVERY – "WHAT GIVES LIFE?" THE BEST OF WHAT IS

During this stage participants reflect on and discuss the best of what is concerning the object of inquiry. Most often, and this appears to be a key innovation of the AI method, participants are interviewed about their own "best of" stories (e.g., tell me about the time a business most inspired fanatical loyalty in you). Another important innovation has been to have organizational members and stakeholders act as both interviewers and interviewees, that is, to fully engage all affected parties in the act of inquiry itself. Telling and listening to meaningful, personal stories is considered central to creating widespread engagement and building relationships in the early stage of the change process. The affirmative topic is turned into a question (e.g., how do companies inspire fanatically loyal customers?) and answers stimulated by the stories are identified and shared.

2   DREAM – "WHAT MIGHT BE?" ENVISIONING, RESULTS/IMPACT

During this stage participants are asked to imagine their group, organization or community at its best in relation to the affirmative topic. An attempt is made to identify the common aspirations of system members and to symbolize this in some way. The dream phase often results in something more symbolic, like a graphical representation, than a mission statement.

3 DESIGN – "WHAT SHOULD BE – THE IDEAL?" CO-CONSTRUCTING

With a common dream in place, participants are asked to develop concrete proposals for the new organizational state. Initially Cooperrider called these "provocative propositions" - a phrase linked to generative theory that still appears in some models. More commonly, social architecture processes are employed where a model of design elements is used to identify categories for participants to organize around and create change proposals, often called possibility statements or design statements.

4 DELIVERY/DESTINY – "HOW TO EMPOWER, LEARN & IMPROVISE?" SUSTAIN & ACCELERATE

In the initial 4-D model the fourth stage was called Delivery but this was subsequently changed by Cooperrider to Destiny as he found that Delivery evoked images of traditional change management implementation. Exactly what ought to happen in this phase has provoked the most confusion and the least consensus amongst AI theorists who recognize that using the outcomes of Design to create new targets, gaps to fill, and objectives to achieve may be counter to the very philosophy of Appreciative Inquiry. The most innovative applications have taken an improvisational, as opposed to implementation, approach. Widespread agreement for the design statements are sought, an event is orchestrated where participants make self- chosen commitments to take action consistent with any design element, and leadership makes clear that there will be no action plans or committees – instead everyone is authorized to take those actions they believe will help bring the design to fruition. Leadership's role is to monitor and support those innovations they want to nurture and create events and processes to energize emergent and self-organizing change.

DISCOVER

DESTINY

AFFIRMATIVE TOPIC

DREAM

DESIGN

WHY QUESTIONS MATTER: THE POWER OF IMAGE

> "Imagination is more important than knowledge."
> —Albert Einstein

AI is based on the power of positive inquiry. But how can a simple question nudge a whole company in a productive new direction? Organizations are manifestations of the human imagination. That is, no organization could exist if one or several individuals hadn't envisioned it first (even if that vision was sketchy or incomplete). The learnings that surface through the AI process begin to shift the collective image that people hold of the organization. In their daily encounters, members start to create compelling new visions of the company's future together, grounded in their understanding of past successes. These visions initiate "ripples" in how employees think about the work they do, their relationships, their roles, and so on. Over time, these ripples turn into waves; the more positive questions people ask, the more they incorporate the learnings they glean from those questions into daily behaviors and, ultimately, into the organization's infrastructure.

To see how we might start to frame such questions, let's suppose a team's performance has fluctuated for a while and its members are now experiencing conflict and low productivity. Which of the following sets of questions is likely to give us information that will generate forward momentum?

Why isn't this team doing better? What's causing this conflict and who is responsible? –OR– Think of a time in your history as a team when performance was high and you felt engaged and valued. Tell me a story about that time. What were you and the others doing? How might this team function if we could expand the conditions that led to past successes?
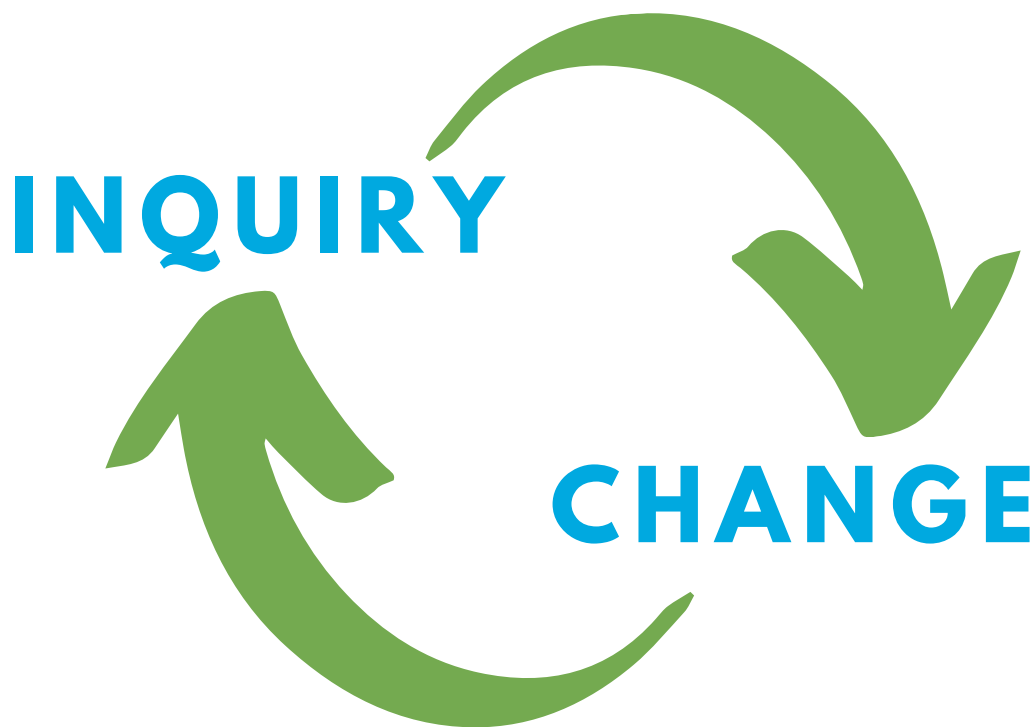
Both sets of questions will generate data that will begin to shift the team's dynamics, but only the first will lead to the blame, fatigue, and resistance that typically accompany problem-focused analysis. Supporting people's passions, skills, knowledge and successes excite and mobilize them to implement innovations they never before thought possible.

ELEVATING OUR QUESTIONS

As Bliss Browne, founder of Imagine Chicago, insightfully explains, "Every question has a direction. Where it leads depends on its often hidden assumptions." If we want to find broken things in our organizations, there are unquestionably broken things to find. If, however, we hold the premise that inquiry is an act of intervention, and the kernels of change are implicit in the very first questions we ask, we will transform our neutral questions into unconditionally positive ones. Consider Bliss Browne's further sentiment that, "few questions are neutral; most carry a generative or destructive energy. What questions build a bridge or turn on a light? Which offer a path into shared understanding? What questions invite new ways of seeing and connecting to a community or country's future as one that citizens have the choice to create working together?" In other words, what questions invite us to envision a better reality, a desired future?

INQUIRY AND CHANGE ARE NOT SEPARATE MOMENTS

INQUIRY

CHANGE

ELEVATING OUR QUESTIONS

DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION	NEUTRAL QUESTION	UP QUESTION
Why do we have all these problems here?	What is going on here?	When have we been at our best?
Why do I have so many challenges in my life?	How do I feel about myself?	What talents do I have that make me unique?
Why are we so resource strapped?	What are our resources?	What assets exist within our organization that no one else has?
What is the biggest issue we need to address?	What should we do in this situation?	What possibilities exist that we have not yet considered?
Why have our past collaborations been unsuccessful?	How have collaborations been in the past?	What might we be able to do together that we cannot do alone?
What are the issues that keep you up at night?	What is on your mind?	What is the smallest change that could make the biggest positive impact?
Why do we keep failing?	What are we trying to do in this situation?	What opportunities are there for us to grow and build on our successes?
Why do our employees keep leaving?	What is retention like in our organization?	How can we create magnetic work environments where employees thrive?
How do we win at all costs?	How can we get what we want?	What solutions would benefit both of us?

WHAT IS AN AI SUMMIT?

The **WHOLE SYSTEM** participates – a cross-section of as many internal and external stakeholders as possible – people and groups that care about and have a stake in the future of the topic. This means more diversity and less hierarchy that is usual in a working meeting and a chance for each person and stakeholder group to be heard and to learn other ways of looking at the task at hand.

TASK FOCUSED – a summit is task focused, not simply an educational even or a conference. We are here to accomplish the task of building our vision and plan of action for parking interest in water and inspiring innovative action to cultivate individual and community-wide change.

Future scenarios are put into **HISTORICAL** and **GLOBAL** perspectives. That means thinking globally together before acting locally. This approach enhances sheared understanding and greater commitment to act. It also increases the range of potential actions.

People **SELF-MANAGE** their work, and use **DIALOGUE** and INQUIRY – not "problem-solving" – as the main tool. That means helping each other do the task and taking responsibility for our perceptions and actions.

COMMON GROUND rather than "conflict management" is the frame of reference. That means honoring our differences and then discovering areas for action where we have strong common ground.

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY (AI) – To appreciate means to value – to understand those things worth valuing. "To inquire" means to study, to ask questions, to search. AI is, therefore, a collaborative search to identify and understand our community's strengths, greatest opportunities,, and people's aspirations and hopes for the future.

COMMITMENT TO ACTION – Because the "whole system" is involved, it is easier to make more rapid decisions and to make commitments to action in an open way that everyone can support and help make happen.

CITED SOURCES

Books:
Books:Encyclopedia of Management Theory
Eric H. Kessler
Appreciative Inquiry for Collaborative Solutions:
21 Strength-based Workshops
Robyn Stratton-Berkessel
The Joy of Appreciative Living
Jacqueline Kelm
Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination
Jane Magruder Watkins, Bernard J. Mohr, Ralph Kelly

Articles:
Appreciative Inquiry – 5 Things It Is...And Is Not
Matthew R. Moehle, Ph.D.
The Essentials of Appreciative Inquiry: A Roadmap for Creating
Positive Futures
Bernard J. Mohr and Jane Magruder Watkins