Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is about the search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them. Think of AI as a powerful application of Positive Psychology. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives "life" to a living system when people are most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. Appreciative Inquiry involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential in a way that is grounded in affirmation and appreciation.

As coaches we can, of course, practice appreciative inquiry every time we "coach the person, not the problem," but when we are in the role of coach-facilitator with groups and teams, Appreciative Inquiry can feel like magic in the tasks of:

- ☐ *identifying a positive change agenda,*
- ☐ *reframing deficit-based thinking patterns into strengths/assets-based patterns,*
- ☐ *moving from reaction to self-direction,*
- ☐ *locating unique strengths and associating them with strong positive values and emotions,*
- ☐ *exploring the results of personal assessments and inventories,*
- ☐ *creating valued, vivid, vital, and vibrant images of desired futures,*
- ☐ *developing strategies and identifying resources for moving forward into those futures,*
- ☐ *and then moving toward sustainable implementation of both the process and outcomes*

In contrast to the traditional S.W.O.T. approach *(i.e. an acronym for "strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats")* someone has suggested S.O.A.R. as an acronym for the AI stages of raising awareness and forwarding action: "Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, (desired) Results."

1. **Strengths**: Appreciating "what's working?" This stage may involve lots of conversation, interviewing, story-telling: What have we overcome, learned, accomplished?
   a. Considering all of your objectives, what are you proudest of? What have you accomplished? and What are you doing that works? Give yourself credit for every little thing you do that brings you a feeling or demonstration of success, to even the smallest degree, in any work situation.
   b. Now think beyond your given objectives. In your work and as a member of a greater community, what achievements, accomplishments, or activities are you proud of?
   c. What contributed to those successes? How'd you do that?! What caused those things to work? What has allowed you to do your best work? (Consider your team leader, team, clients, circumstances, physical situation, and opportunities.)
   d. Think about yourself at the beginning of the year and the person/org you are today. How have you changed? Again, give yourself credit for every little improvement in your professional competencies or personal effectiveness. What did you do that helped you improve? The activities may have occurred at work, home or in the community.

2. **Opportunities**: "What's possible? Observable? Coming up? What could be?" This is a stage for reviewing our calling and values, for stretching our imaginations.

3. **Aspirations**: When we stretch our imaginations: What could be? What do we choose? This can become a powerful time of aligning values, structures, mission with what's achievable. To make yourself even more effective in the future, what do you want to continue to do, do more of, do better, or do differently? Of all the items listed and described above, which are the ones you are inspired to act on. (This is where your team leader can help prioritize your objectives.)

4. **Results** (desired): "How do we build it? And what gets baked-in? Along the way, what can we keep from this process as we've built more of a learning, appreciating organization?" What support do you have to do the things you identified? (Money, time, training, access to subject matter experts and support staff, equipment, materials, etc.) What resources do you have outside of yourself/your company?

For most of the past forty years, organizational vocabulary has focused on deficits, weaknesses and threats:

- *Gap analysis*
- *Down time*
- *Customer complaints*
- *Performance evaluation*
- *Missed commitments*
- *Silos*
- *Debug*
- *Bureaucratic red tape*
- *Employee turnover*

- *Low morale*
- *Delayed orders*
- *Missed commitment*
- *Organizational stress*
- *Job dissatisfaction*
- *Group think*
- *Burnout*
- *Inter-group conflict*

In contrast, check out the emerging vocabulary and influence of Appreciative Inquiry and Positive Psychology:

- *The organization's founding story and organizational legacy*
- *Innovations*
- *Shared values*
- *Peak experiences*
- *Turning points*
- *Proudest achievements*
- *Best practices*

- *Leveraging strengths*
- *Empowering traditions*
- *Moments of courage*
- *Tests of integrity*
- *Learning from difficult times*
- *Organizational capacity*
- *Leadership at all levels*

Here's an AI process I've used with teams at off-sites. The directions for each team member:

1. *Ask other members for positive examples things you do that help the whole team to do better.*
2. *Clearly and simply, tell the team about a behavior you'd like to get better at in the coming 30-60 days.*
3. *Ask for suggestions about how, when, where you can improve. Encourage creativity.*
4. *Listen carefully and take notes.*
5. *Thank the people who have shared their ideas.*
6. *In the following 30-60 days, everyone experiments and appreciates--both efforts and improvements.*

As coaches use Appreciative Inquiry with groups and teams as well as in individual coaching, the "agenda" begins to be flavored by what works, by better alternatives, even by visionary outcomes along with personal/ organizational learning. AI is inquiry into the "art of what's possible" beginning with appreciation. Ideally, it identifies what is most compelling and provides a learning experience that will remain in the memory of both individuals and teams.

Further AI Resources

> *Shawn Anchor's TED Talk, The Happy Secret to Better Work.*
> *From A Positive Revolution in Change: Appreciative Inquiry by David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney.*
> *Diana Whitney & Amanda Trosten-Bloom: The Power of Appreciative Inquiry, Berrett-Koehler 2003.*
> *Try Feedforward Instead of Feedback by Marshall Goldsmith.*