

# Appreciative Inquiry: Operationalizing Strengths As You Coach a Group or a Team

**Appreciative Inquiry** (i.e. the other “A.I.”) is about the search for the best in people, their organizations and the relevant world around them. A.I. is the deliberate discovery of what gives “life” to a system when the people in it are most effective and most constructively capable in economic, systemic and human terms.

A.I. is the art and practice of staying curious about a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate and heighten positive potential, operationalizing each person’s strengths and connections. People and systems that practice A.I. tend to succeed in the alchemy we all look for in our careers: The ability to make money, have fun and do good all at the same time.

**The big A.I. question:** “*What’s working and how can we do more of that?*”

What if someone followed you around, capturing a highlight reel of the moments when you were brilliant? Let’s say that the reel wouldn’t include your flubs and missteps and dropped balls, just the times when you were energetic, enthusiastic, relaxed, connected—and very effective. And then, what if our filmmaker showed your highlight reel to your team? In fact, let’s say our filmmaker shot a highlight reel for each of your colleagues and you got to see their best moments too. I know it would be fun and encouraging—we’re all suckers for praise. But what do you think would happen to your learning and to your performance? To your personal version of excellence?

That is exactly what the founding coach of the Dallas Cowboys, Tom Landry did with his struggling team over fifty years ago. Following six losing seasons in the 1960’s in front of fan base that became demoralized by the assassination of President Kennedy in their city, he figured out that each of his players, like you and me, was capable of getting it wrong in a zillion different ways. But he also figured out that if he could catch his players being brilliant, getting it right in his own position and in his own way, he was likely to do it again. Landry started bringing highlight reels to his team meeting—sometimes replaying them in slow-motion. Magic happened. His expansion team followed their six losing seasons with twenty winning ones.

In its broadest focus, A.I. helps teams to discover what they do to bring more intelligence, learning, creativity, collaboration, better interpersonal behavior and fun to their work together. Behaviorally, A.I. is the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate and heighten its positive potential. You might say that A.I. helps teams to operate at Level III.

As coaches we can, of course, practice A.I. every time we “coach the person or team, not the problem,” and when we are in the role of coach-facilitator with groups and teams and even families, A.I. can feel like magic in the tasks of:

- Identifying a positive change agenda like a new project or performance goal, a new team agreement, or new learning and development goals,*
- Helping a team to tell its story to new members—and welcoming them to add to the story,*
- Creating valued, vivid, vital and vibrant images of desired futures and then*
- Developing strategies and identifying resources for moving forward into those futures,*
- Recognizing and acknowledging the strengths and assets that express with team values and create a safe-enough environment for both advocacy and inquiry,*
- Reframing a deficit-based narrative into a strengths/assets-based orientation,*

- Moving from reactivity (listening only to respond) to self-differentiation (listening to understand and explore) and then*
- Moving toward sustainable implementation of both the process and outcomes*

In addition 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 A.I. stages of exploration and finding next steps: “Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results.”

## 1. Strengths

Appreciating “what’s working?” This stage may involve lots of conversation, interviewing, story-telling: “*What have we overcome, learned, accomplished? What are our best stories?*”

- a. Considering all 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 demonstration of success, to even in small degrees, in any work situation.
- b. Now think beyond your given objectives. In your work and as a member of a team, what experiments, accomplishments—even generative failures—are you proud of?
- c. What contributed to those things? How’d you do that? What fostered the learning and progress? What do you build into your environment that allowed you to do your best work? What team virtues and behaviors did you identify and agree to as a team?
- d. Think about yourself at the beginning of this project or chapter and the person/org you are today. How have you grown in your personal and organizational effectiveness? What specifically did you do that helped you to get better? The things you identify individually and as a team may have occurred at work, at home, individually or in your team relationships.

## 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 and outcomes.

## 3. Aspirations

When we stretch our imaginations: What could be? What do we choose? Outcome-wise, what needs to happen in the coming months in order for us to say we’ve had a successful period? 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 do: More of, less of, same as? Of all the items you listed and describe, which are the ones you will act on?

## 4. Results (desired)

“*How do we build on this? And what can we bake-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, coaching, access to subject matter experts and support staff, equipment, materials, etc.) What resources do you have outside of yourself/your company?

When I’ve got a day with a team that wants to deepen the trust and effectiveness of their work together, as always, I pay attention to alliance, agreements and agenda. I begin with a brief introduction to the Positivity

Ratio and to A.I., inviting interaction with the material. Then, continuing to build trust and working at Level III, I invite the team into a conversation about their personal stories, their shared stories, expectations, values, agreements about how they will work together and their desired outcomes.

As coaches use Appreciative Inquiry with groups, teams and families, as well as in individual coaching, the “agenda” begins to be flavored by what works, by better alternatives, even by visionary and hoped-for outcomes along with personal and team learning. A.I. is inquiry into the “art of what’s possible” beginning with appreciation. Used well, it realistically identifies what is most desirable, possible and compelling and provides a learning experience that will remain in the memory and behavior of both individuals and teams.

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#### Read more about it . . .

[Shawn Achor’s TED Talk, The Happy Secret to Better Work.](#)

[Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change.](#) David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney. 2005.

[The Power of Appreciative Inquiry,](#) Diana Whitney & Amanda Trosten-Bloom. 2010.

[Try Feedforward.](#) Marshall Goldsmith. 2011.

[The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything in Business.](#) Patrick Lencioni. 2012.

## About the Author



As a leader, facilitator, speaker and coach of leaders, Patricia ("Patty") Burgin has advised and mentored thousands of individuals and teams toward better performance, communication and meaning. She is the author of the new and bestselling overview of leadership coaching, *The Essential Coaching Leader*.

Following stints in the international leadership of a Christian nonprofit, as a conference speaker, as a tour leader in the former Soviet Union and as a licensed marriage and family therapist, Patty founded SeattleCoach® in 2003 and began to coach and facilitate exclusively in 2005. In 2008, she launched the SeattleCoach Professional Training and Development Program, which is credentialed by the industry-standard International Coach Federation (ICF).

Whether it's a class or a keynote, Patty values insight creation as the crucial component of content delivery. "I love it when my brain lights up," she says. "And it's even better when everyone else's brains light up." She works with an approach that is warm, practical, innovative, direct, playful and generous.

She holds two master's degrees, one in Theology and a second in Applied Behavioral Science and has joined the top 4 percent of credentialed coaches worldwide to have been awarded the title of Master Certified Coach by the ICF.

A native of the Pacific Northwest, Patty loves just about everything about it: the water, the coast, the mountains, the great IPAs and "not having to squint as much as Californians do." During her freshman year at Oregon State University she was named "Smart Ass of the Year" by members of her sorority. She lives near the Seattle Zoo with her partner, Dr. Kari, a veterinarian--and with a revolving assortment of creatures.

With Patty's background as a competitive rower and as past president of Interlochen Rowing Club in Seattle, she sometimes takes executive teams out on the water with her. When a team sits together in a racing shell (60' x 18"), the experience quickly produces soggy metaphors and boatloads of team learning.

Her faith still informs her life and work, helping her to explore how human brains and relationships flourish, how we make sense of the tough stuff and how we live out those big what's-it-all-about questions that we share through the arcs of our lives. She thinks excellent coaching is like grace: rarely intrusive, usually disruptive, more nuanced than announced and just as much about *how* as *what*.