

## **Appreciative Inquiry**

*“The practice of asking positive questions not only brings out the best in people and organisations, it also amplifies and magnifies the most positive life giving possibilities for the future” (Whitney et al).*

This article will summarise some ideas central to Appreciative Inquiry (AI), with the aim of giving some understanding of the value of the approach, and then compares them with the Solution Focused approach.

Appreciative Inquiry can be used, as a facilitation tool to help teams and organizations understand how they have created success in the past, and how to do more of it. This article explains a little more about the approach and suggests how AI could benefit teams and organizations in creating sustained and enduring growth.

## **Appreciative Inquiry Explained**

Appreciative Inquiry is a collaborative and highly participative approach to identifying, enhancing and developing the positive and life-giving forces that are present in any system that is working well. In short, when any kind of system; human, economic or organisational, is performing optimally it is doing so for reasons that are very often not designed into the system; things ‘just work’. For this reason it is very often difficult if not impossible to replicate it by conscious effort since nobody knows how success was achieved.

When things are going well most of us just get on with it without consciously appraising our behaviour or our actions. Even if a few individuals can describe what they actually did, this will only result in a list of mechanical steps which, when copied, are unlikely to produce the same results second time around because many of the magical ingredients of success are all but invisible. Furthermore, such descriptions are usually found to be incomplete for the reason already given. (In support of this you might like to refer to what is known as Unconscious Competence).

## **Finding out about success**

Ask most successful people how they achieved their successes and they’ll frequently respond with a list of the obstacles they had to overcome. To compound this they’ll probably preface it with something like *“Well, it wasn’t easy...”*. In many cultures they are also likely to diminish their achievement or

play down their success – or their part in it – because to do otherwise might seem like bragging, immodest, or just plain tempting providence.

We need to know about success because most people are interested in having more of it. Organisations spend (and frequently waste) millions in attempts at predicting or creating success and despite the undoubted good intention, energy and the virtually limitless expertise involved, fail to reach their targets more often than not. Though valiant and convincing attempts are made to have us believe that business forecasting is a science, in all but a few tightly-controlled areas it is closer to alchemy; it relies on faith, hope and the tenuous belief that the elements of business; people, markets (people again) and economics will act in predictable ways. Recent World events in the global market have shown us that we cannot predict outcomes with any degree of scientific reliability.

In science we don't actually have to heat a liquid or a gas to know the reaction we'll get, the laws of physics will tell us. But when a group of people or a market heats up the outcome is less certain. OK, psychology has something to say about predicting human behaviour as economics does on markets, but neither can do so reliably and on the scale required. Incidentally, neither was born out of a scientific tradition either.

The thinking systems we use do not prepare or encourage us to use success-oriented thinking. So much so that getting people – teams and management systems in particular – to review and learn from their successes can be an uphill struggle until they understand the benefits.

Furthermore, the creativity and expertise that usually underpin personal or business success generally occur outside our conscious awareness and are therefore not easily available for inspection. This is why a coherent approach like AI provides a useful framework to shape conversations in organizational development.

In all areas of humans endeavour we develop more by replicating our successes than we can by reliving our failures but until it is drawn to our attention most of us adhere uncritically to our collective and socially reinforced habits that favour failure.

In Western thinking there are two major schools of thought that do the opposite by teaching us to review and build on success; one is Appreciative Inquiry, the other is the Solution Focused (SF) approach. (There is a third if you add Edward De Bono's Parallel Thinking).

## **Success is easy**

Success is just as easy to achieve as failure, in the sense that it is a phenomenon that will occur spontaneously when the circumstances are right, it is also cheaper and more fun. If we accept that the normal way of things is that to avoid failure we actively 'attend to business' and 'make it work', we also have to accept that our thinking (and subsequent behaviour, our actions) are geared naturally towards these ends. Essentially we use the tactics of defence and avoidance in our planning. The limitations of our traditional thinking style and the shift needed to encourage success has been adequately covered elsewhere. It is enough to summarise here with two well known axioms:

*"If you continue to do what you've always done, you'll continue to get what you always got",*

and

*"If it's not working, do something different."*

In short this means that if accepted way of doing things in our societies is avoidant in that it works by identifying and minimising risk, it is not the quickest or surest route to success. SF and AI, in contrast, lead us to identify and amplify success, and to make this new thinking habitual. Success then becomes a natural outcome rather than a fortuitous chance event (which, when it occurs in this way, planners will later attribute to their brilliance).

If an organisation is truly intent on doing something different by actively working towards producing success, then a reliable first step is to understand how it has already produced its successes in the past. AI gives us the tools to do this. Since a great deal of what we do, especially when we are doing it well, falls into the realm of what is known as unconscious competence, this facilitation exercise is best conducted, at least in the early days of adopting these principles, by a competent facilitator.

In the same way that Solution Focused therapists enable clients to get results quickly by enquiring about their successes and resources, so an AI facilitator encourages the group to identify its strengths, resources and what has worked in order to replicate and magnify its successes. Incidentally, in the same way that SF therapy clients are less likely to relapse because they learn new habits in thought and action, so a new style of thinking and behaving in teams and organisations also produces long-term self sustaining benefits.

## **Understanding the approach**

AI and SF approaches come business and therapy respectively – from different stables as it were – but they based on the same principles. For the purposes of this exercise the similarities far outweigh any methodological or theoretical discrepancies.

Both work by encouraging individuals and groups to review, learn from and repeat their successes. Both are researched and proven methodologies that produce surprising and outstanding results in virtually every system in which they have been systematically used, and both eschew analysis; these are process that are learned by doing, not by mentally rehearsing 'yes but' scenarios.

There is also great strength, and commonality, in what the two approaches expressly avoid:

They don't ask "why?"

- They don't expect us to 'learn by our mistakes'
- They don't dictate, patronise or direct
- They don't ask us to examine our hidden agendas, drives or motivations
- They do not seek to identify or attribute a cause to events
- They don't have a pre-determined aim (they are processes, not instructions).

### **What AI and SF do:**

- Encourage collaborative working
- Actively focus on 'what worked'
- Identify and build on abilities and strengths
- Look to the present and the future
- Celebrate achievements and success
- Ask teams to co-construct their future
- Produce sustainable growth and development.

### **The difference in focus**

Traditionally, faced with some impetus for change (or growth, new markets or whatever) the first rational step taken by business organisations is to assess the situation in relation to the goal, let's call it Plan A, and generate information and data about the situation. The information thus gathered will start a chain of events that is both predictable and fateful, because it will lead right back into the 'right/wrong' way of doing things with its talk of obstacles, malfunctions, shortages and problems.

In contrast to this AI starts with an even more fundamental question by deciding on the kind of information to be gathered; consciously choosing to rely on the positive as the focus of the enquiry.

For example, if Plan A involves achieving high sales or better customer retention – whereas usually we might ask why sales have fallen or the customers have left and then attempt to identify corrective action we could take – questions generated by AI would be along the lines of *“When have our clients been happy and satisfied with our services?”*, *“What were we doing then that we could do more of now?”* *“What are the images and metaphors that could lead us to recreate success with our clients?”*, *“What is special about us, as a team, that we could develop to make us even better?”*

It has often been said that the questions you ask will determine the answers you get. Consequently good researchers and scientists understand the value of asking the *right* questions. The choice is simple, but it often escapes our notice; whether to focus on moments of failure and breakdown in the organisation, or whether to focus on, celebrate and learn from moments of empowerment, achievement and success. This is a blatantly over-simplified and inadequate way of explaining Appreciative Inquiry, a bit like expecting to taste the dish by reading a recipe. The proof of the pudding, as they say...

### **What to do**

Any business will know both success and failure. The conventional approach is to celebrate success and to learn from failure in order to avoid repeating the same mistakes. But even 'failures' contain within them some aspects that have worked well, and in both cases there will be hidden nuggets which, if sifted out, will provide information for the organisation and empowerment for its people.

Conversations with the people, facilitated by a skilled AI practitioner, will enable a team to create their visions and turn them into reality more sure-footedly. Specifically it will enable groups to evaluate and understand their strengths and reap the benefits by doing more of what they do well. A natural consequence of this is to provide a firmer platform for teams to grow and evolve.

Evolution is, after all, the story of nature repeating its naturally occurring successes. Were the human race to be a product of nature duplicating its failures you would not be able to read and understand this article.

**Recommended reading:**

Magruder Watkins, J., Mohr, B., 2001), *Appreciative Inquiry; Change at the Speed of Imagination*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco

Whitney, D., et al (2001), *Encyclopedia of Positive Questions; Using appreciative enquiry to bring out the best in your organization*,. Lakeshore Communications.

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