Appreciative Inquiry

Olivier Serrat

Asian Development Bank
Appreciative Inquiry

Abstract

(Excerpt) Every organization has something that works right, even if only in small quantities. Hence, it might be easier to foster organizational effectiveness by focusing on what one wants more (not what one wants less of). Getting people to inquire into the best examples of what they want more of creates a momentum toward the creation of more positive organizations. Of necessity, such inquiries should be appreciative, applicable, provocative, and collaborative. To sum up, an organization that tries to discover what is best in itself will find more and more that is good: its discoveries will help build a future where the best becomes more common.

Appreciative inquiry is a relatively new form of action research that originated in the United States in the mid-1980s and is now being used around the world. It studies the positive attributes of organizations to create new conversations among people as they work together for organizational renewal. It involves in its broadest focus the systematic discovery of what gives life to a human system when it is most alive, most effective, and most capable in environmental, economic, societal, political, and technological terms. It 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. It is based on two assumptions: first, organizations always move in the direction of the questions their members ask and the things they talk about; second, energy for positive change is created when organizations engage continually in remembering and analyzing circumstances when they were at their best rather than focusing on problems and how they can be solved. The approach invites organizations to spend time creating a common vision for their desired future and developing the images and language to bring that vision to life.

Keywords
Asian Development Bank, ADB, poverty, economic growth, sustainability, development

Comments

Suggested Citation

Required Publisher's Statement

This article was first published by the Asian Development Bank (www.adb.org)
Appreciative Inquiry

by Olivier Serrat

**Rationale**

Most organizational change processes are based on problem-solving. We ask “what is the problem?” but in so doing focus energy on what we want less of. We then work to fix things (and keep finding problems). However, organizations change in the direction in which they inquire. Appreciative inquiry is based on the following propositions:

- Organizations are not machines.
- Organizations are a social reality—that reality is co-constructed.
- Important organizational processes, e.g., communicating, decision making, and managing conflict, hinge on how the people involved make meaning out of their interactions, not so much on the skillful application of techniques.
- Endeavors to identify or develop the right formula for successful change are often misguided—one cannot treat social reality as if it were objective.

Every organization has something that works right, even if only in small quantities. Hence, it might be easier to foster organizational effectiveness by focusing on what one wants more (not what one wants less of). Getting people to inquire into the best examples of what they want more of creates a momentum toward the creation of more positive organizations. Of necessity, such inquiries should be appreciative, applicable, provocative, and collaborative.

To sum up, an organization that tries to discover what is best in itself will find more and more that is good: its discoveries will help build a future where the best becomes more common.

**Definition**

Appreciative inquiry is a relatively new form of action research that originated in the United States in the mid-1980s and is now being used around the world. It studies the positive attributes of organizations to create new conversations among people as they work together for organizational renewal. It involves in its broadest focus the systematic discovery of what gives life to a human system when it is most alive, most effective, and most capable in environmental, economic, societal, political, and technological terms. It 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. It is based on two assumptions: first, organizations always move in the direction of the questions their members ask and the things they talk about; second, energy for positive change is created when organiza-
Appreciative inquiry is usually worked out by using a 4-D Cycle\(^2\)

- **Discovery**: People talk to one another, often via structured interviews, to discover the times when their organization is at its best. These stories are told as richly as possible.
- **Dream**: The dream phase is commonly run as a large group conference with the help of facilitators. People are encouraged to envision the organization as though the peak moments identified in the discovery phase were the norm rather than the exception.
- **Design**: A team is empowered to go away and design ways to create the organization dreamed in the large group conference.
- **Delivery**: The final phase delivers the dream and the new design. It is one of experimentation and improvisation. Teams are formed to follow up on the design elements and to continue the appreciative process. This phase may itself contain more small-scale appreciative inquiries into specific aspects of organizational life.

**Table: A Generic Appreciative Interview Questionnaire**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Think of a peak experience or high point in your work or experience in your organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In that experience, think about the things you valued most about yourself, the nature of your work, and your organization itself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think about the core factors that give life to your organization, viz., the really positive values it can build upon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What three wishes would you like to have that would heighten the vitality and health of your organization?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^2\) The 4-D Cycle is not the only way of thinking about the process of appreciative inquiry. Some favor the 4-I Model of initiation, inquiry, imagination, and innovation.
Applications
Appreciative inquiry can help
- Build a common vision where one is lacking.
- Challenge preconceived notions of what might be by locating the best of what already exists.
- Discover, understand, and amplify the positive forces that exist in organizations.
- Create openness and rapport between people and groups where a negative work climate has prevailed.
- Forge new approaches to human resource issues that will be accepted by staff and lead to positive change.
- Provide an alternative to conventional team building processes.
- Demonstrate the power and value of teamwork by highlighting ways in which teams give life to organizations.
- Open up opportunities for continuous organizational improvement by illuminating the principles, core values, and exemplary practices that support successful teams.
- Develop communities in various ways.

Further Reading


For further information
Contact Olivier Serrat, Head of the Knowledge Management Center, Regional and Sustainable Development Department, Asian Development Bank (oserrat@adb.org).
ADB, based in Manila, is dedicated to reducing poverty in the Asia and Pacific region through inclusive economic growth, environmentally sustainable growth, and regional integration. Established in 1966, it is owned by 67 members—48 from the region. In 2007, it approved $10.1 billion of loans, $673 million of grant projects, and technical assistance amounting to $243 million.

Knowledge Solutions are handy, quick reference guides to tools, methods, and approaches that propel development forward and enhance its effects. They are offered as resources to ADB staff. They may also appeal to the development community and people having interest in knowledge and learning.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) or its Board of Governors or the governments they represent. ADB encourages printing or copying information exclusively for personal and noncommercial use with proper acknowledgment of ADB. Users are restricted from reselling, redistributing, or creating derivative works for commercial purposes without the express, written consent of ADB.