APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY: IDEAS AND SUGGESTIONS

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What is Appreciative Inquiry?

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) 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 to study organisational behaviour.[1,2] It is a collaborative, strengths-based approach to change that encourages the formation and realisation of shared endeavours by getting people to remember, consider and analyse circumstances when they were at their best rather than focusing on problems.[1-3] In this way, AI enhances a system's capacity to anticipate, appreciate, heighten, and realise their potential by making better use of what already exists within organisations.[2-5]

A closer look at AI

The Table below is based on the work of David Cooperrider[6] and highlights the differences between traditional deficit-centred thinking (seeking to understand what employees don't like about their environments[5,6]) and AI's affirmative approaches (focussing on what excites employees about their work, their teams and their company[2,4,6]).

Problem solving	Appreciative Inquiry
Mentality Organisations are problems to be solved	**Mentality** Organisations have infinite capacity to achieve great things
Perceived need Identification of a problem	**Appreciating** Valuing the best of what is
Proposed action Possible solution	**Yarning** What should be
Implementation Treatment	**Innovating** What will be

Paul Perkins is an associate Professor at the University of Canberra and a member of the Australian Institute of Sport High Performance Coach Development Team. He is a dedicated, passionate and experienced coach, educator and researcher with an extensive background in the Australian sport sector and a passion for helping others and seeing people succeed. Paul is skilled at, and highly experienced in developing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating multi-layered sport-based development initiatives and has a thorough understanding of deductive, inductive and abductive reasoning and how these different processes can be used to draw conclusions, make predictions, and/or construct explanations. Whilst Paul's research has been multi-disciplinary and positioned within the broader societal context, he is currently exploring the benefits of more social and collaborative approached to coach learning and is interested in contributing to long-term positive outcomes through the use of Australian First Nations methodologies.

Philosophical assumptions and guiding principles

AI projects use an interpretivist approach to investigation and are underpinned by the following principles[1-4]:

> **The constructionist principle:** Refers to an individual's subjective beliefs about what is true and the ways in which that belief produces different actions, thoughts and behaviours.[7,8]

> **The simultaneity principle:** Maintains that passionate and persistent inquiries that utilise the insights and inputs of organisational members can result in positive and transformative change.[4,6,9]

> **The poetic principle:** Is centred around the concept of co-existence and a belief that organisational histories are co-authored and told in stories.[1,9] Words and the ways they are used are therefore considered vital for creating positive and optimistic visions.[4,6]

> **The anticipatory principle:** Builds on the above and posits that current actions and behaviours are largely shaped by an individual's vision of their future.[10,11]

> **The positive principle:** Deals with momentum and the ways in which positive emotions such as enthusiasm, hope, happiness, and togetherness encourage creative thinking and are able to provide opportunities for change within socially-constructed human systems.[2-4]

Something to note

The five principles summarised above are the most commonly cited in the AI literature and have become well-established guidelines.[3,6,10] However, in recent times researchers have proposed and started to use other principles, including:

> **Wholeness:** The need to have *"the whole system in the room"* - everyone responsible for or affected by a change.[12]

> **Enactment:** Ensuring the processes used to create and drive change are living models of the ideal future.[12]

> **Awareness:** Being conscious of any underlying assumptions and personal beliefs.[11]

> **Free choice:** Understanding that people perform better and are more committed when they have the freedom to choose what and how they contribute.[12]

> **Narrative:** A belief that storytelling is a powerful mechanism for change.[12]

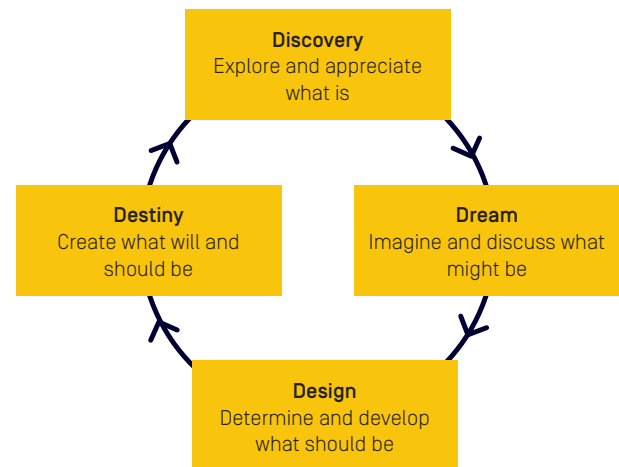> **Synchronicity:** Embracing diversity and using it to create unity.[13]

Characteristics

In addition to the above, AI projects share a common goal and are framed by the following characteristics:

> **Strength-based:** AI approaches are based on an assumption that every human system has existing strengths, skills and expertise that give life and meaning to an organisation or group.[3,6,9]

> **Artful search:** Is the ability to discover, value and deeply appreciate the above factors through interviewing, yarning and storytelling so that the best of the past is discovered and the re-imagining of what could be is achieved.[3,6,9]

> **Collaborative:** AI requires collaborative efforts and involves people working together to discover and create healthy, positive, successful, and impactful work places.[3,6,9]

> **Inclusive:** AI creates opportunities for existing social structures to be challenged through the sharing of stories that give voice to new possibilities.[3,6,9]

> **Generative:** AI makes use of everyday conversations, stories and yarns that cultivate scenarios, themes and theories about what could and should be possible.[3,6,9]

The 4-D model

The model below is a visual representation of the AI process[6,10] and aims to highlight it's self-organising nature.

Discovery
Explore and appreciate what is

Dream
Imagine and discuss what might be

Design
Determine and develop what should be

Destiny
Create what will and should be

Breakdown of steps

The following summarises the four phases of an AI project that can be either homogeneous (organisational members only) or heterogeneous (organisational members and their partners working together).[10-12]

Phase 1. The discovery stage: The focus during the first phase of an AI-led project is to identify the factors that have enabled past successes by reminding participants of what success looks and feels like.[6,9]

Suggested approach: Participants engage in paired yarning sessions and focus on the following areas of discussion:

> **Peak experience:** What were the conditions that contributed to a time in which you felt most alive, engaged and energised whilst performing your role?

> **Values:** What do you value most about yourself, the organisation and the work you do?

> **Wishes:** What three things do you aspire to do so that the organisation is able to thrive and prosper in the future?

Once completed, participants share their responses in slightly larger groups so that individuals can develop a deeper understanding of their experiences and start to link personal accounts to other stories. Overarching themes are then defined and used throughout the subsequent steps.[6,9]

Phase 2. The dream stage: The aim of the second phase is to expand participants' thinking by getting them to imagine, discuss and describe what the desired future state looks like by linking the overarching themes to that vision.[1,4,6]

Suggested approach: Participants engage in small group yarning sessions and use positive language and imagery to co-create the common elements of their desired future state by building on known strengths and imagining the consequences of extraordinary efforts.[9-11] This process is often referred to as "visioning", as it aims to prepare participants for the challenges associated with the design and implementation (destiny) phases of a project.[6]

Phase 3. The design stage: It is during this phase that participants transform their stories, dreams and ideas about the future into aspirational statements of intent. These propositions are vital for success and provide the blueprints and motivational prompts for expanding the system's current cooperative capacity in order to achieve what is now collectively desired.[6,9,11]

Suggested approach: Participants work in small teams and are asked to create statements that bridge the gap between the current perceived state of the organisation and the future desired vision by connecting "what is" with "what might be" through a concept known as social architecture – utilising the critical elements within an organisation necessary for implementing its desired future state.[9-11] However, because this step is considered to be the most challenging phase of an AI project[6,11], the following guidelines have been developed to help support the process:

> Is it provocative – to what extent does the statement stretch, change, or disrupt the status quo?

> Is the vision grounded in the organisation's values and reality?

> Do other members see merit in the work?

> Are the words stated affirmatively?

> Is the work participative?

> Will the tasks stimulate intergenerational and interprofessional learning ? [6,9]

Phase 4. The destiny Stage: This is where intention is translated to action. Here participants, based on their preferences and motivations, select interests to pursue and work with other like-minded members to construct positive and impactful futures "through innovation and action".[14, p:158]

Suggested approach: Whilst the aim of this final phase is to encourage participants to build upon the work they have accomplished in the earlier phases, it's worth noting that the destiny step is not defined in terms of how it should proceed and there is generally a lot of improvisation during this stage.[6,14] Nevertheless, the following questions should receive attention and could help guide the process:

> How shall we structure ourselves and undertake the work?

> Will our approach promote and encourage shared leadership and thought leadership?

> What could limit our ability to self-organise and perform the tasks (time, resources, existing social structures, etc.)?

> What tools will we use to document and report our progress and learnings?

> How can we encourage and celebrate success once it emerges?

> What must we do to ensure our excitement about the future stays high?

> How could recognition of achievements inspire further action?[15]

> *"I am because of who we are"*
> –Ubuntu philosophy

Potential Pros and Cons of AI

The Table below provides a list of potential advantages and disadvantages of AI that practitioners may need to consider when designing their own projects.

Pros	Cons
It encourages the development of learning cultures and promotes collective inquiries.[3,16]	It takes considerable time and is not a quick fix.[18-20]
It empowers people to enhance proficiencies and existing skills.[3,17]	It can be resource-intensive.[3,9,10]
It promotes situated and job-embedded learning.[10-12]	Governmental applications of AI can be problematic.[19,20]
It encourages creative thinking and innovative approaches.[3,18]	It requires the involvement of key personnel for sustained periods.[3,18-20]
It seeks to foster commitment rather than resistance.[18-20]	It relies heavily on, and requires positive, supportive and open environments.[3,18-20]
It offers an holistic approach to long-term change.[10-12]	It requires careful planning and long-term commitment.[8-20]

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Key take aways

> AI is a strengths-based, approach to leadership development and organisational change that can be used by individuals, teams and organisations to create shared visions and strategic innovation.[1-6]

> It has a theoretical framework in positive psychology and organisational development and has been employed by scholars and practitioners around the world.[1-6]

> It pushes against traditional problem-solving techniques and makes use of existing skillsets and knowledge to enhance a system's capacity and capability.[1-6]

> It encourages the development of skilful custodians and adaptable leaders through use of identity formation processes that create a sense of belonging for members and unites visions, dreams, goals, and standards.[1-6]