Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

Sometimes we forget to reflect on what we do well. Most human beings have a tendency to dwell on negatives and deficits and to believe that change is about eliminating problems and removing negatives. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) encourages us to notice and specifically identify what is working and what is strong in ourselves and in our organizations. It does not deny negative data or information but chooses to notice it and then move on. Appreciative Inquiry accentuates the positive, the strong, the excellent; to put individuals and organizations to work observing, experiencing, defining, describing, and dreaming these. AI believes that it is powerful and productive to focus on what we do well and explore how we can build on these qualities or skills or services. It comes from a place that is creative and life-affirming – and so generates energy for change and growth. It avoids giving energy and attention to the fearful, cautious and doubt driven. According to theories of Appreciative Inquiry, change comes from a place of passion and strength, not from a dwelling on what has not worked.

Coaching and Appreciative Inquiry

Coaching is, in essence, a strengths-based model of bringing about change and growth. In this way, it has strong alignment and connection to the field of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). AI is more frequently employed in working with organizations or groups, though there has been much made available on its implications for work with individuals. This makes AI theory and approaches worth exploring for organizational, leadership, and individual coaching.

Coaches do not enter a coaching relationship with the belief that their clients are broken, but with the belief that their clients have limitless potential and can achieve great things. Positive psychology is easily seen to be a compatible influence, in this way, on both AI's positive focus and coaching's deep belief in client potential for discovery, growth, and full and effective living and achieving. Coaches tend to believe that their clients know the answers they seek (even if this is at a deep and buried level of consciousness), so the AI technique of asking very powerful questions (inquiry) is also at the heart of coaching.

Coaches look for the secret of clients' energy to motivate action and change in the directions they desire. They are curious about what brings energy and notice changes in tone or language in sessions that inform what moves clients forward and what stalls them. AI is also interested in moving away from spending time 'circling the drain', and its methods and structure may provide a helpful perspective as well as tools for coaches.

AI may also assist coaches themselves in the process of discerning and developing business and client streams compatible with the strengths they bring to the work.

Appreciative Inquiry Resources

We have selected a number of resources that provide additional information about Appreciative Inquiry. Sample article highlights are included for your perusal.

1. **Wikipedia Entry - Appreciative Inquiry**

"Appreciative Inquiry (sometimes shortened to "AI") is primarily an organizational development method which focuses on increasing what an organization does well rather than on eliminating what it does badly. Through an inquiry which appreciates the positive and engages all levels of an organization (and often its customers and suppliers), it seeks to renew, develop and build on this. Its proponents view it as being applicable to organizations facing rapid change or growth. David Cooperrider is generally credited with coining the term 'Appreciative Inquiry'.

As a self-defined 'asset-based approach', AI starts with the belief that every organization, and every person in that organization, has positive aspects that can be built upon.

Some researchers believe that excessive focus on dysfunctions can actually cause them to become worse or fail to become better. By contrast, AI argues, when all members of an organization are motivated to understand and value the most favourable features of its culture, it can make rapid improvements.

Appreciative Inquiry utilizes a cycle of 4 processes, which focus on what it calls:

1. DISCOVER: The identification of organizational processes that work well.
2. DREAM: The envisioning of processes that would work well in the future.
3. DESIGN: Planning and prioritizing processes that would work well.
4. DESTINY (or DELIVER): The implementation (execution) of the proposed design.

The basic idea is then to build - or rebuild - organizations around what works, rather than trying to fix what doesn't. AI practitioners try to convey this approach as the opposite of problem-solving. They take a positive focus on how to increase exceptional performance instead of improving poor skills and practices. AI assumes that this line of reasoning is motivational. Progress does not stop when one problem is solved: it naturally leads on to continuous improvement. The method draws from

2. **Five Theories of Change Embedded in Appreciative Inquiry** Gervase R. Bushe, PhD http://www.gervasebushe.ca/ai5.pdf

"All social organization is an arbitrary, social construction. Our ability to create new and better organizations is limited only by our imagination and collective will. Furthermore, language and words are the basic building blocks of social reality. Rather than seeing language as a passive purveyor of meaning between people, postmodernists see language as an active agent in the creation of meaning. As we talk to each other, we are constructing the world we see and think about, and as we change how we talk we are changing that world.

...social systems evolve toward the most positive images they hold of themselves. These images are not necessarily conscious in that they may not be discussable by the members of that social system...

The change theory is: If you change the stories you change the inner dialogue. Nothing the 'rational mind' decides it wants will actually happen if the 'inner dialogue' is resistant to it.

Appreciative process theorizes that you can create change by paying attention to what you want more of rather than paying attention to problems."[2]

1.http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appreciative_inquiry
2. Five Theories of Change Embedded in Appreciative Inquiry, Gervase R. Bushe, PhD
http://www.gervasebushe.ca/ai5.pdf

3. **The Appreciative Inquiry Summit: An Emerging Methodology for the Whole System Positive Change** Diana Whitney, PhD and David L. Cooperrider, PhD.

"It is instructive to consider that the word 'health' in English is based on an Anglo-Saxon word 'hale' meaning 'whole': that is, to be healthy is to be whole. . . All of this indicates that [man] has sensed always that wholeness or integrity is an absolute necessity to make life worth living.

What is it about the experience of 'wholeness' that brings out the best in people, teams and organizations? This question has been with us since the inception of the Appreciative Inquiry Summit as we have watched over and over again, tension turns to enthusiasm, cynicism to collaboration and apathy to inspired action.

...the experience of 'wholeness' is akin to John Glenn's spiritual experience as he looked upon the whole planet earth from outer space. When the 'consciousness of the whole' is evoked in us, we human beings want to organize our life and our work to serve the highest good of humanity."[3]

4. **From Deficit Discourse to Vocabularies of Hope: The Power of Appreciation** By James D. Ludema, Benedictine University http://www.stipes.com/aichap29.htm

"We can live three weeks without food, three days without water, and, yes, we can even live three minutes without air, but we cannot live without hope." Mumford

When people inquire into the unexplored reaches of their collective norms, beliefs, and assumptions; values, mores, and purposes; plans, desires, and wishes; visions, ideals, and dreams, they engage in the act of hoping by prefiguring a valued and vital future that they hope someday to build, inhabit, and enjoy. These hopeful images of the future, in turn, become powerful catalysts for change and transformation by mobilizing the moral, social, and relational energies needed to translate vision into reality and belief into practice.

[Man], like every living being, is concerned about many things, above all about those which condition [his] very existence, such as food and shelter. But [man], in contrast to other living beings, has spiritual concerns--cognitive, aesthetic, social, political. Some of them are urgent, often extremely urgent, and each of them, as well as the vital concerns, can claim ultimacy for human life or the life of a social group.

Vocabularies of hope come in all shapes and sizes-theories, ethnographies, case studies, vignettes, empirical data, personal narratives, rhetorical speeches, stories told in the classroom, boardroom, or around the kitchen table. One of the most famous and influential vocabularies of hope in the United States is Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech given at a civil rights march in Washington, August 28, 1963. The speech, and particularly the sentence, 'I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character,' gave voice to the aspirations of an entire nation and has served as a hopeful harbinger of cultural change for more than a generation."[4]

[3] **The Appreciative Inquiry Summit: An Emerging Methodology for Whole System Positive Change**,
Diana Whitney, PhD and David L. Cooperrider, Ph.D., http://worldcafe.de/lit/appinq/appinq05.htm

Self Application

Become aware of your own dialogue - is it "problem" or "deficiency" based?

1. Practice responding to everyday "problems" with powerful questions instead of offering up solutions.

2. Reflect on how applying a "strengths-based" model might change the way you, your family or your workplace operate. What would need to change? How would a strengths-based approach make a difference?

3. Make a list of your strengths, and of what gives you energy. How can you express, build on, and accentuate these? Determine to do so.

Coaching Application

1. Look for opportunities to use "hope" as a way of motivating or shifting your clients.

2. Practice coaching using powerful questions and "appreciative inquiry".

3. Record a coaching session and go back to listen for how often you jump in to "solve" problems.

4. Practice inviting clients to discover and focus on strengths, and notice any changes in their energy, productivity, motivation.

[4] **From Deficit Discourse to Vocabularies of Hope: The Power of Appreciation,** James D. Ludema, Benedictine University, http://www.stipes.com/aichap29.htm

Reflection

1. AI is usually associated with organizational development but to what extent do you think you could apply the same model and approach to individuals? What might the differences be?

2. Why do you think AI is advocated as particularly appropriate for organizations in a state of rapid change? What advantages might it have over more traditional problem-solving approaches?

3. Gervase Bushe in the Five Theories of Change Embedded in Appreciative Inquiry article recommended above, notes that AI is very helpful in the "right time and right place" and that some people seem to believe it will "always have a positive effect". Are there situations or settings or clients where you would be hesitant to employ AI? Read the first few pages of his article and determine how this influences your thinking.