

Appreciative Inquiry: A New Way of Leading Change in Schools and Colleges

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Schools and colleges throughout the U.S. and Canada are beginning to use a new and innovative approach to bring about small and large-scale systems change on their campuses. Both a worldview and a process called Appreciative Inquiry (AI), the approach focuses a school or college community on continuously inquiring into what's already working very well within the system under study and deliberately and systematically creating more of it. The human or social system under study can be the school or college as a whole, the leadership or management team, a particular department, or even a classroom.

Traditional approaches to change (e.g., self studies, strategic planning, problem solving, assessment and evaluation, needs assessments, etc.) typically involve focusing the organization or group on what's not working in a system: identifying problems or gaps. People then develop plans to solve the problems or close the gaps. In a sense, the traditional approaches focus attention on "failures" in the system and "root causes" of those failures. While the traditional approaches work very well as ways of trouble-shooting mechanical and electrical systems, e.g., linear, cause-and-effect systems, they work less well as ways of bringing about positive change at the group or organizational levels.

AI focuses the organization or group on what's working and then identifying the "root causes of success" and creating more of those conditions. AI assumes that organizations--human or social systems--are like organisms. That is, they are living, breathing entities that stay healthiest when they are focused on their positive life-giving characteristics, rather than their problematic aspects.

Examples of How AI Is Being Used

Before describing AI in more detail, here are several examples of how AI is successfully being used by school and college leaders George Boggs, Tom Gonzales, Arlene Hogan, and Mary Spangler.

Boggs, President and Chief Executive Officer of the American Association of Community Colleges in Washington, D.C., reports, "We

recently used AI at a variety of meetings, including a Board retreat, a staff retreat, meetings of our AACC Commissions and Council Chairs, and a design team made up of past Board Chairs. AI helped us to accept all ideas as valid, kept everyone focused, and improved the creative thinking of each of the groups, resulting in inspiring new mission and vision statements for the association. Feedback from the field allowed us to identify AACC's positive core, that is, what the members valued the most. From this feedback, we were able to draft and approve a statement of core values, a vision statement, and six new strategic action areas that will guide the future activities of AACC. Our new mission statement is Building a Nation of Learners by Advancing America's Community Colleges."

Gonzales, President of Front Range Community College (CO) says, "What's remarkable about AI is its focus on what has worked successfully in the past and how it applies to the future. Academic institutions are about tradition. What better legacy for faculty and administrators than to share with a new generation an energetic new vision based on what has been successful? AI is about replicating those successes in changing times. I am constantly amazed at the energy that is created when you bring people together and they talk about the essence of their success. AI is not the latest feel-good fad; it's a proven methodology that draws upon the past to create a new positive organizational culture. AI is the antithesis of problem-solving, appreciating people and processes that have worked and revitalizing the organization by emphasizing its many successes."

After the authors co-facilitated an AI session with the leadership team at The Archer School for Girls (CA), Hogan, Head, said, "I'm so very grateful to you both for allowing me and my 'comrades' the space to imagine and to plan a different way of being in our world at The Archer School and in our larger lives. You're changing the world for the better, one step at a time." (Authors' note: It's not the authors who are changing the world; it's AI.)

Spangler, President of Los Angeles City College reports, "Learning about and beginning to practice the concept of focusing on the positive (not the negative) has been a worthwhile and challenging endeavor for our management team. As educators we were trained to use our critical thinking skills in the classroom; as managers we have taken those skills and applied them to administration, often trying to fix problems and find solutions on an issue-by-issue basis. However, by approaching those same issues from a positive perspective, we are able to shift our energy from a problem-solving perspective to a view

of ourselves as doing good work much of the time and naturally wanting to replicate that experience to do more and better work in the future. We share the goal of making a difference to our students, our faculty, our community, our institution. Through a focused inquiry into what it is that we remember about what we are doing right, we can begin to construct a future that we can envision and create together. AI has given us an inspired way to view ourselves and what we have done so that we can repeat those experiences in a habitual way. Now we need more time to apply that learning. We have already set about addressing that objective."

AI: Both a Philosophy and a Way of Leading Change

David Cooperrider (2001) and his colleagues at Case Western Reserve University developed AI, both a theory of positive change and a process for implementing positive change, in the 1980s. It is now beginning to gain visibility and viability as a non-traditional organization development intervention. It is being used internationally for community development, in business and corporations, and in non-profit, governmental and religious organizations for both large-scale and small-scale change. The first international conference on Appreciative Inquiry was held in Fall 2001 in Baltimore.

AI involves focusing on positive elements already existing in a given situation, and builds on them. AI is the cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives a system life when it is most effective and capable. It posits that resistance to change occurs because of how change is implemented, not because of the particular change itself.

Five Core Principles

According to AI practitioners and authors Mohr and Watkins (2002), the AI philosophy is captured by five core principles that serve as the foundation for AI's five generic processes:

(1) The Constructionist Principle: Our organizations evolve in the direction of the images we create based on the questions we ask as we strive to understand the systems at work.

(2) The Principle of Simultaneity: Change begins the moment we ask questions.

(3) The Anticipatory Principle: Our behavior in the present is influenced by the future we anticipate.

(4) The Poetic Principle: Just as poets have no constraints on what they can write about, we have no boundaries on what we can inquire and learn from.

(5) The Positive Principle: The more positive the questions used to guide a change process, the more long-lasting and effective that process will be (p. 5).

Over the last 50 years or so, a body of research has emerged, focused on the holistic nature of self, that "explains" why AI works. A few examples include the Placebo effect, the Pygmalion studies, and internal dialogues (i.e., self talk) (p.2-3).

Five Generic Processes

AI is composed of five generic processes: (1) Choose the positive as the focus of inquiry; (2) Inquire into exceptionally positive moments; (3) Share the stories and identify the life-giving forces; (4) Create shared images of a preferred future; and (5) Innovate and improvise ways to create that future.

A typical AI process goes something like this: People in the system (i.e., the school or college as a whole, the leadership or management team, a department, students in a classroom) choose a positive topic as the focus of inquiry. When they first begin to use AI, most people choose an issue or problem that then needs to be re-framed into a positive topic. People--especially in schools and colleges--are habituated to be critical in nature and problem solvers; that is the way they frame their organizational reality.

An example of a proposed problem to be solved in a school or college might be declining enrollment. If people study declining enrollment--the traditional approach--they will look for the "root causes" of failure or what's not working and work toward eliminating those causes. However, if people study increasing enrollment, they will inquire into the "root causes" of success or what's working. Once they've identified the "root causes" of success, they can deliberately set about creating more of those causes or supporting conditions.

Next, people in the organization create questions to explore the topic. They use those questions to conduct interviews throughout the

system, storytelling sessions that explore the conditions that support positive change. After the interviews, people in the process locate themes that appear in their stories and select topics for future inquiry. From these themes, they create shared images for a preferred future. Finally, they find innovative ways to create that future.

Appreciative Inquiry helps people create visions for a system based on people's personal experiences, the best things about their system from the past and present that they have experienced and that they want to carry forward and build on in the future. Traditional visioning processes, while focusing the system on a positive future, tend not to be grounded in the organization's reality. As a result, people in the organization tend not to have energy for realizing the vision, even when they have helped create it.

Sustaining or Institutionalizing the Positive Changes

One of the challenges of any organization development strategy, including AI, is to ensure that the system supports and sustains the positive attitude and energy for change initially generated in an AI cycle. According to organization development experts, attitude is only one of three interacting components of successful organizational change; the other two are structure and process. LACC is attempting to institutionalize the creation of positive energy for change by developing, in collaboration with the authors, an organizational assessment model called OASIS. OASIS is an acronym for Organizational Assessment of Services, Information, and Systems that deliberately echoes LACC's vision statement: to "create an urban oasis of learning." The annual implementation of OASIS will focus the attention of the college community on the services of the college's four service units (the President's Office, Academic Services, Administrative Services, and Student Services). In addition to being an effective assessment and evaluation tool, OASIS was deliberately designed to be a way of sustaining positive energy for change. Now being pilot tested, OASIS will focus the people in the college on what the service units are doing right, thereby changing their perception of the service unit services. It also will motivate the people in the service units-- administrators, faculty, and support staff--to create more of what they're already doing right, with little or no resistance to change.

Change Without Resistance

In the years to come, amid chaos and turbulent change, this promising approach to leading change--Appreciative Inquiry--can help schools

and colleges stay focused on the best of their organizations. When institutionalized as an routine way of doing business, this approach also can help people continually find new energy for positive change.

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Biographical Sketches

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