

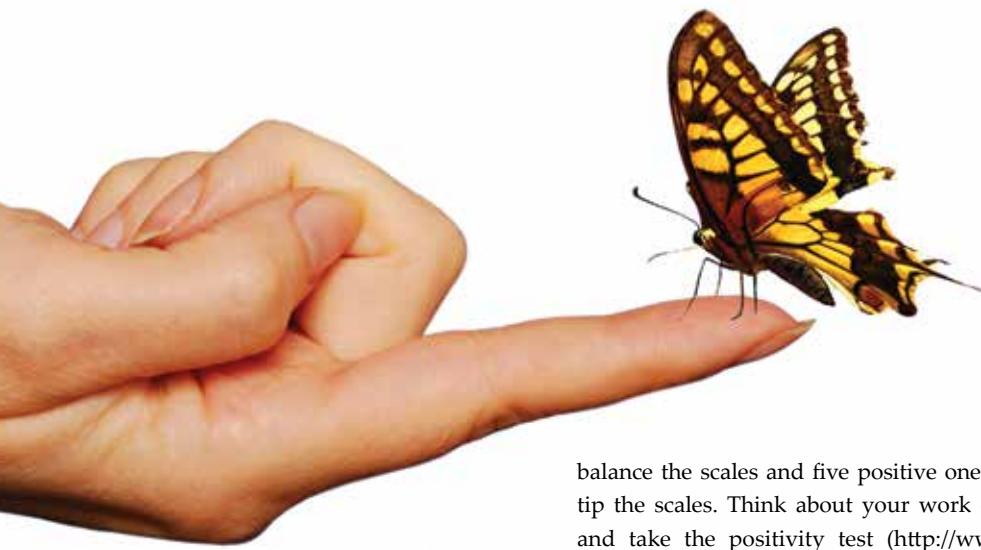
# The art of appreciation

When it comes to change strategies, we have a choice—a deficit-based model focusing on problems, or a positive-based approach that focuses on vitality and transformation. Chris Charteris-Wright explains the benefits of appreciative inquiry.



When seeking change, Western business culture tends to use a deficit-based model, ie, one that focuses on problems, weaknesses and threats. This is a cultural default that is well entrenched in our way of thinking. We notice it in our schools, families, teams and day-to-day conversations.

These deficit-based change strategies place the emphasis on what is not working, seeking to identify problems that need to be fixed. Most of these approaches involve conducting a thorough analysis of key problems, isolating the root causes of failure, developing strategies to remediate the deficiency, and then executing the action plan. Deficit-based approaches often fall far short of their intended target because their inherent nature is backwards looking (ie, fixing the wrongs of the past) and limitation-based. It's little wonder that people fail to get fired up when they are consumed by fixing what doesn't work!



Does this approach support beneficial change? How does a deficit approach orientate people's thinking, feelings and ways of being?

Focusing on where the deficit exists often elicits a blame and defence response, thus limiting expansive thinking and new ways of being—in other words limiting opportunities, adaptability and resilience, the essentials of business in the present white water of change.

As Albert Einstein said: "You cannot solve problems at the same level of thinking you were at when you created them."

If organisations are experiencing disconnected employees, low initiative, resistance to change and high staff turnover, it may be time for a whole new way of managing change. Is your work environment an encouraging place with a positive attitude?

"Positivity transforms people and helps them become their best," says author and principal investigator at the University of North Carolina's PEP Lab, Barbara Frederickson. She suggests that for every negative thought you need three positive ones to

balance the scales and five positive ones to tip the scales. Think about your work day and take the positivity test (<http://www.positivityratio.com/>) to test your workplace positivity. Get colleagues to do the test also.

#### **Creating the positive workplace**

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a positive-based change process. According to its founder, David Cooperrider, appreciative inquiry is the cooperative search for the best in people, their organisations, and the world around them. "It is an appreciative discovery of what gives a system 'vitality' when it is most effective and capable in economic, ecological, and human terms," he says.

Thus, AI promotes far-reaching and sustainable change through its focus on liberating human energy and motivation. In contrast, traditional change management strategies focus on systemic deficiencies.

According to proponents, the very act of discussing positive events is a transformative experience. As Diana Whitney and Amanda Trotsen-Bloom note in *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry* (2010): "By tapping into the accounts of when organizations are functioning at their best, Appreciative Inquiry unleashes information and commitment that

together create energy for positive change."

In contrast, focusing on what's not working is debilitating and demoralising and ultimately provides no guidance on how to grow an organisation into a thriving high performance entity. We empower what we focus on.

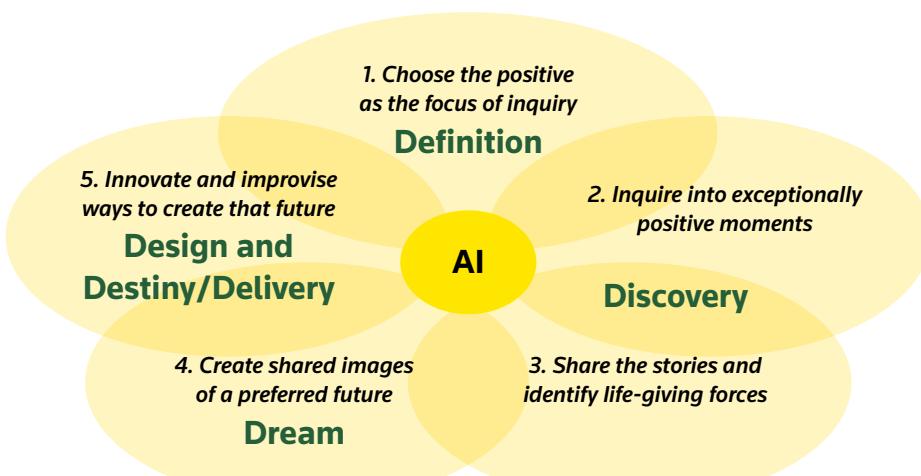
The AI process is a highly robust change technique that is surprisingly straightforward to apply (see examples at <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/>). Because the execution of AI is always specific to each respective organisation, there are few hard-and-fast rules for its application. The most basic rule is that the process is keenly focused on positive events and experiences. The goal of AI is to make these experiences more conscious, deliberate, and prevalent, to be informed by the pre-existing knowledge and to apply this to create the present and future vision.

#### **The 4D process of appreciative inquiry**

##### **Definition phase: What is our focus topic of inquiry?**

Topic choice is fateful to the direction and inevitable outcomes of the inquiry. The focus topic should be far-reaching, one that creates the greatest opportunities and long-term effects—for example, 'economic viability'. Just as fateful is who defines the topic. Engaging a diverse, diagonal cross-section of the organisation's stakeholders is essential to define where the real need for inquiry lies. These willing people become a core group of change champions.

At the beginning of this mini inquiry, people will inevitably focus on problems, gaps, challenges and threats. Once these are aired they need to be prioritised and reframed into 'unconditionally positive inquiry topics'—for example, reframing 'Alleviating poverty' (deficit) to 'Creating wealth' (abundance) creates a whole different way to approach the situation. Through a mini appreciative inquiry, the core group defines organisation-



*Appreciative inquiry: Change at the speed of imagination (Jane Magruder Watkins, Bernard J Mohr & Ralph Kelly)*

ally specific descriptors of what a 'best focus topic' looks like (these can become initial indicators to measure success).

During the process of defining, each champion gets to experience how to be an appreciative inquiry agent, to help guide organisational empowerment in the AI process. The core group also become AI architects, designing the interview protocol and logistics, while considering their business needs and unique environment.

The next step, 'discovery', presents a fantastic opportunity to engage all of the organisation's stakeholders, including contractors, local/national government, customers, in fact anyone who is involved in the business, even competitors. Now let's get outside our deficit box into some expansive thinking.

#### **Discovery phase: Seeking the root causes of success.**

In line with the core group's architecture, the discovery phase gathers stakeholders' input through appreciative interviews. Semi-structured one-on-one (or sometimes small group) interviews are used to gain insights into the organisation's moments of achievement, creativity, operational best practice, core competencies, and traditions/values.

This is a time to isolate and elaborate on the 'best of what is'. The discovery phase helps orient participants to the positive attributes that define the organisation and provides the AI champions with the thematic data used to frame discussions in downstream activities. Interviews can be conducted one-on-one by the champions and consultants, or even online. Even better is a whole organisation gathering where the diverse groups of stakeholders can interview each other. This has the added value of building relationships across the diagonal slice of the business stakeholders.

#### **Dream phase: What is our preferred future?**

The goal of the dream stage is to crystallise all the positive interview stories into a bold,

collective narrative of what participants desire for a 'preferred future'. But this is far more than a collective sharing of achievements. As Whitney and Trosten-Bloom elaborate: "This phase is a time for people to collectively explore hopes and dreams for their work, their working relationships, their organization, and the world. It is a time to envision possibilities that are big, bold, and beyond the boundaries of what has been in the past."

All of the collected stories, dreams, aspirations and best practices are synthesised into succinct provocative statements of what participants want the organisation to become.

Some of you may be thinking: What about the constraints, threats and problems? The question I would ask here is "What do you want to empower"? To empower the AI process will be an on-going commitment the organisation must make. One of the reasons deficit-based change fails is because it is a quick fix mentality—problem-solution-fixed.

AI is about re-wiring the internal culture to seek the positive in how people view the past, present and future. What does this mean to an organisation, to a population, to all of us? It begs the questions: is there a better way of being, and are we willing to put in the good work to get there?

Leaders must be breathing life into the AI process continually, like any change it needs to be consistently role modelled and supported. Change is not a 'problem fixed', it is continuous river of adaption, a sustainable process of sink or swim.

#### **Design and destiny delivery phase: What are our priorities and strategies?**

In this phase, the organisation determines what needs to be done to turn the dream into reality. Design groups come together according to what bold vision statement excites them (not what management gives them), then each group conducts appreciative inquiries into the why, what, when and who. The outcome of this phase should be a set of high-impact strategies that will help

the organisation move towards its desired future backed up by implementation plans to guide individuals, teams and management in positive, whole systems change.

#### **Measuring change**

During the AI process, each working group defines how they will measure their strategies and how to report. Being the designers of the change, they are more likely to be responsible for the outcomes. The core group has the original inquiry definitions, but the greatest indicator of change success is based on the organisation's continued appreciative lens, when people are consistently seeking the opportunities to inquire into a positive-based preferred present and future. AI encourages continuous strategic evolution, an on-going dialogue about what is working as the environment changes.

AI has proven to be a highly effective tool for organisational change, helping to bring communities, nations and businesses into preferred futures. The technique liberates the 'hidden' reservoir of positive energy in the organisation and shifts thinking to a positive, strength and opportunity focus.

It has the potential to change the nature of conversations and interactions between people, to strengthen social bonds and expand the web of organisational relationships. Lastly, the inclusive nature of the technique ultimately reduces hierarchical separation and reduces cross-functional barriers, creating a non-judgemental flow of creative communication throughout the organisation. As organisation wide understanding of the AI process develops, it becomes the preferred way to predict and manage change at all levels.

*See David Cooperrider speaking on AI at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JDfr6KGV-k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JDfr6KGV-k)*

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