Definitions of Appreciative Inquiry

The following is a collection of definitions of Appreciative Inquiry which have developed over the years. We invite you to quote these definitions or develop your own. Let us know how people respond to these as you share them with clients, students, colleagues, and inquirers.

“Appreciative Inquiry 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 in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to heighten positive potential. It mobilizes inquiry through crafting an ‘unconditional positive question’ often involving hundreds or sometimes thousands of people.”


“The traditional approach to change is to look for the problem, do a diagnosis, and find a solution. The primary focus is on what is wrong or broken; since we look for problems, we find them. By paying attention to problems, we emphasize and amplify them. ...Appreciative Inquiry suggests that we look for what works in an organization. The tangible result of the inquiry process is a series of statements that describe where the organization wants to be, based on the high moments of where they have been. Because the statements are grounded in real experience and history, people know how to repeat their success.”


“Appreciative Inquiry focuses us on the positive aspects of our lives and leverages them to correct the negative. It’s the opposite of ‘problem-solving.’”


“Appreciative Inquiry [is] a theory and practice for approaching change from a holistic framework. Based on the belief that human systems are made and imagined by those who live and work within them, AI leads systems to move toward the generative and creative images that reside in their most positive core – their values, visions, achievements, and best practices.” “AI is both a world view and a practical process. In theory, AI is a perspective, a set of principles and beliefs about how human
systems function, a departure from the past metaphor of human systems as machines. Appreciative Inquiry has an attendant set of core processes, practices, and even ‘models’ that have emerged. In practice, AI can be used to co-create the transformative processes and practices appropriate to the culture of a particular organization.” “Grounded in the theory of ‘social constructionism,’ AI recognizes that human systems are constructions of the imagination and are, therefore, capable of change at the speed of imagination. Once organization members shift their perspective, they can begin to invent their most desired future.”


“[Appreciative Inquiry] deliberately seeks to discover people’s exceptionality – their unique gifts, strengths, and qualities. It actively searches and recognizes people for their specialties – their essential contributions and achievements. And it is based on principles of equality of voice – everyone is asked to speak about their vision of the true, the good, and the possible. Appreciative Inquiry builds momentum and success because it believes in people. It really is an invitation to a positive revolution. Its goal is to discover in all human beings the exceptional and the essential. Its goal is to create organizations that are in full voice!”


“Appreciative Inquiry is a form of organizational study that selectively seeks to highlight what are referred to as “life-giving forces” (LGF’s) of the organization’s existence. These are – the unique structure and processes of (an) organization that makes its very existence possible. LGF’s may be ideas, beliefs, or values around which the organizing activity takes place.”


“AI is an exciting way to embrace organizational change. Its assumption is simple: Every organization has something that works right – things that give it life when it is most alive, effective, successful, and connected in healthy ways to its stakeholders and communities. AI begins by identifying what is positive and connecting to it in ways that heighten energy and vision for change.” “...AI recognizes that every organization is an open system that depends on its human capital to bring its vision and purpose to life.” “... The outcome of an AI initiative is a long-term positive change in the organization.” “... AI is important because it works to bring the whole organization together to build upon its positive core. AI encourages people to work together to promote a better understanding of the human system, the heartbeat of the organization.”


AI 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 centrally involves the mobilization of inquiry through the crafting of the “unconditional positive question, often involving hundreds or sometimes thousands of people. ...AI deliberately, in everything it does, seeks to work from accounts of the “positive change core” – and it assumes that every living system has many untapped and rich and inspiring accounts of the positive. Link the energy of this core directly to any change agenda and changes never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilized.” ...As people are brought together to listen carefully to the innovations and moments of organizational “life,” sometimes in
Storytelling modes and sometimes in interpretive and analytic modes, a convergence zone is created where the future begins to be discerned in the form of visible patterns interwoven into the texture of the actual. ...Images of the future emerge out of grounded examples from an organization's positive past. ... [This convergence zone facilitates] the collective repatterning of human systems.”


“Appreciative Inquiry is a form of action research that attempts to create new theories/ideas/images that aide in the developmental change of a system (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987.) The key data collection innovation of appreciative inquiry is the collection of people’s stories of something at its best.... These stories are collectively discussed in order to create new, generative ideas or images that aid in the developmental change of the collectivity discussing them.”


“AI is intentional inquiry and directed conversation and story-telling that leads to a place of possibility. Possibility is fresh, new, and sacred. The story is the genesis of all that is human. Societies are stories, as are companies, schools, cities, families and individuals. There are bricks and mortar and flesh and bones, but all of it comes from a story. Even the flesh and bones of one person comes from a story of two people uniting to form another. I can think of a many moments where groups reached a profound spot with Ai and touched a sense of freedom. Usually one person would say something like, "From what we heard in these stories, we could__..." and there follows a collective deep breath and then silence as people consider the new "we could". Possibility sits in the room as a space of silence and then thought fills the space. Where does the thought that enters at that time, which has a feeling of vitality and newness, come from? It does not come from the person who spoke because that person would not have developed that thought without the conversations that led to synapses firing in a certain way. The thought is not merely a product of the collective because an individual must form the thought. The thought comes out of relationship, conversation, and newly created images. This "thing called Ai" is one of the finest ways to experience the power of language and to hone our skills with words, ideas, and stories. There are times when the possibility is so stunning the group has to sit in silence if just for a couple ticks before saying, "well, yes, maybe, why not, let's do it." There must be a gap that arises in the field of the known to entertain the unbridled possibility of novelty. There is a break in the routine story and supporting conversations so something new can creep in. This is the opening where novelty can arise. With no gap, we only have the billiard ball predictability of continuity. The openness to new ideas is not coerced. People don't have to force each other to listen to other's ideas and possibilities: minds are opened because the nature of the stories are so compelling and energetic.”

Steinbach, John. Contribution to the AI Listserve, July 2005