

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY: NEW THINKING AT WORK

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Abstract: Many of us have been taught that legitimate knowledge derives from an emphasis on what is rational, objective, empirical, and problematic. Called 'critical thinking,' this ability to identify and successfully solve problems is viewed in most workplace settings as crucial for organizational effectiveness and change. Other means of understanding reality - "appreciation," "valuing," and "affirming," - are considered *Pollyannish*, i.e., soft-headed and non-essential.

By legitimizing only the first form of thinking we shut down an entire mode of *learning* and severely limit the capacity for innovative approaches to organizing and change. A new and inclusive philosophy and approach, however, legitimizes the second form of thinking and facilitates positive organizational change. By connecting people to the organization's strategy, capturing their imaginations, respecting their contributions, and energizing the change process, this approach, called *Appreciative Inquiry*, enables organizational members to increase their influence on their organization's structure and nature.

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WHAT IS APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY?

David Kolb (1984), in his theory of experiential learning, describes the importance of both *appreciative apprehension* and *critical comprehension* as different processes of knowing. Critical comprehension is based on skepticism and doubt, while appreciative apprehension is based on belief, trust and conviction.

One mistake we make is to define “appreciative” in a limited way as meaning only “gratitude.” Appreciative also includes the meanings “to see” (where you pay attention), “to value” and “to increase in value.” When Kolb says, “Appreciation is the process of valuing,” he is reminding us that it takes more than just the facts to make effective choices about the world.

“Appreciation of an apprehended moment is a judgment of both value and fact. To appreciate apprehended reality is to embrace it. And from this affirmative embrace flows a deeper fullness and richness of experience.”

–David Kolb¹

David Cooperrider (Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1990), of Case Western Reserve University, who is one of the original developers of Appreciative Inquiry, describes it as engaging people in “...an inquiry process that tries to apprehend the factors that give life to a living system.” Based on information derived from the inquiry, people would then “seek to articulate those possibilities that can lead to a better future.”² The Appreciative Inquiry process as he has presented it, is about finding ways to successfully translate best intentions into reality, and values and beliefs into practice.

“It is important to recognize that the problem-solving method of organizational inquiry quite systematically paints a picture of organizational life in which a whole series of colors are considered untouchable. In this way, the totality of being is obviously obscured, leading to a narrowed conception of human nature and cultural possibility.”

–David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva²

In other words, the expected outcome of the Appreciative Inquiry is an organization which has affirmed its strengths and fundamental values, used that information to engage in a process to envision a collectively desired future, and moved forward towards enacting that vision in daily worklife.

PROBLEM SOLVING VS. APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Because it is highly counter-intuitive in Western culture, it's difficult to understand how affirming strengths and values can lead to transformational change. In fact, most leaders would feel remiss if they failed to engage in a rational process using problem-solving methods to identify ways to improve the cost effectiveness of internal systems. We need to question, however, whether problem solving has already fixed that which is *solvable*, and begin to focus on what is yet *possible* – the untapped potential beyond fixing what's already in place.

Carl Jung, early 20th Century psychological researcher and therapist, noticed that a person's problems faded when they were confronted with a new or stronger interest. He asserted that the greatest and most important problems in life were fundamentally unsolvable and could only be outgrown (Jung 1923).

For Jung, Cooperrider and others, problem solving appeared inherently conservative, limiting and slow. The philosophy and approach they sought to introduce instead focused on the future of the system as a whole, on engaging participants in collectively imagining new possibilities for their future, and on bypassing the process of solving yesterday's problems.

Thomas White, President of GTE Telephone Operations, expressed his concerns with the limits of problem solving by asking this question: "Should we demoralize a successful group by concentrating on their failures, or help them over the remaining hurdles by building a bridge with their successes?" He felt that using Appreciative Inquiry helped GTE attain much better results than just trying to fix problems – that by shifting their internal conversation away from its focus on negative problems and toward valuing their capabilities, the re-energized organization improved financial results beyond what was expected with traditional problem solving alone (White, 1996).

"We are among the best problem solvers in the world. We trouble shoot everything. When used continually and over a long period of time, however, this approach can lead to a negative culture. If you combine a negative culture with all the challenges we face today, it could be easy to convince ourselves that we have too many problems to overcome--to slip into a paralyzing sense of hopelessness."

-Thomas White - President, GTE Telephone Operations

Table 1 identifies some of the differences between problem solving, and Appreciative Inquiry.

As many organizational leaders are far from achieving the results they want, the need to reinvent the tools used in helping them is clear. The choice appears to be to stay in the incremental problem based, diagnosis/treatment frame, or to move on to a fresh perspective which can simultaneously address the compelling triad of strategy, structure and culture during change.

The Appreciative Inquiry process makes available a whole new array of alternatives to support organizational learning and expand possibilities for action. Using it, change leaders have an opportunity to reframe their philosophical stance in a fundamental way-- that is, during organizational improvement efforts, to be deliberately *appreciative*. They would thus be working with optimism and hope, actively

Table 1 Problem Solving vs. Appreciative Inquiry

<u>PROBLEM SOLVING</u>	<u>APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY</u>
Identification of the problem	Setting a context of appreciation of (seeing) what is
Analysis of Causes "What's going on"	Inquiry: Discovery Phase "Valuing the best of what is"
Proposed Solutions "Fix the problem at hand"	Envisioning: Dream Phase "What might be"
Action Planning "How to get it done"	Dialoguing/Aligning: Design Phase "This is what will be"
Action "Fix the problem"	Innovating: Destiny Phase "Creating and sustaining it now"
<i>BASIC ASSUMPTIONS . . .</i>	
Problem Solving: That the organization is a problem to be solved	Appreciative Inquiry: That the organization is a mystery to be embrace

engaged in valuing and celebrating the human spirit, while creating an enspirited environment welcoming to creativity and imagination.

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