

## Appreciative Inquiry

### What is appreciative inquiry?

Appreciative Inquiry is an approach to strategic planning that focuses on the positive. It asks the question "What is working well in the organization?". It poses a series of questions designed to reveal the existing best practices and to carry forward what has been learned into the future.

It has a highly structured process, moving through a series of steps sometimes called the Five "D" Cycle.

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| Define   | Determine the area or topic of interest.  |
| Discover | Conduct interviews using a positive open-ended questions focusing on strengths and unique attributes.<br>Identify patterns and themes from interview responses. |
| Dream    | Create ideal possibilities.   |
| Design   | Decide what should be.  |
| Deliver  | Take and maintain action.   |

### Core principles of appreciative inquiry

1. In every group or organization something is working.
2. How you ask questions is important – language matters.
3. Asking questions influences groups in some way.
4. There are a variety of ways of seeing the same thing - it is important to value diversity.
5. Resistance to change is reduced when you carry forward stories of your success.

### Case Study Appreciative Inquiry

A large national charity embarked on its strategic planning process by beginning with an appreciative inquiry (AI) session. The charity had recently resolved a prolonged labour dispute and the board identified that staff morale was low. Due to disruptions in programming and recent 'bad press' about the charity, a growing number of clients had a negative attitude towards the organization and some of its programs.

The charity's board and senior management selected a planning approach that would help bring stakeholders together to focus on what was 'going right'.

The first step involved convening an open meeting for staff, board and clients. A skilled AI facilitator led the group through a series of directed, open-ended questions.

Questions included:

- What was the best experience you ever had with this organization?
- What has the organization accomplished?
- What unique attributes does the organization bring to its program areas?
- What unique skills do staff members bring to their work?
- What positive benefits have you witnessed?
- Where has the organization made the most difference?

From there, the group identified common themes by grouping similar responses together. Next, they documented these key ideas and produced recommendations to the board.

Key ideas about organizational strengths became the basis of the board's second strategic planning session. The board focused on replicating success stories within all areas of its operation. Organizational goals were framed in positive language and strategies were informed by what was already working.

A side benefit to using this AI approach was that it improved trust between stakeholders, and created an increased sense of 'ownership' as people saw their own feedback incorporated into the organization's goals and objectives.