



When to use Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry works well when you want to involve others in the process of defining change or creating a vision and are then prepared to resource this group to take action to translate the vision into reality.

It doesn't work well if you as the leader have a clear direction in your own mind, and if you would like to stay in control of the outcomes, but it can provide new energy for change and a very different way of challenging the status quo particularly in highly critical environments. It can also struggle in these environments and be hard to maintain for long enough for it to have an impact on what people do

It can offer a new way of creating change when other, more traditional ways have not created the type or amount of change wanted. Appreciative Inquiry is not about achieving consensus, but is an opportunity to hear different views and experiences.

This approach to appreciative enquiry uses the following steps:

- Step 1: Defining the Topic
- Step 2: Discovery - The best of what is (interviews)
- Step 3: Dream - The best it could be (share data and stories)
- Step 4: Design - What we want
- Step 5: Destiny - What will happen

Step One – Defining the Topic

This is an important step in the process. Defining the topic well makes a difference to how much energy people put into the Inquiry and to the questions asked, stories told and the nature of the provocative propositions.

The topic needs to be:

- Important enough for people to want to put energy into creating change
- Broad enough for people to participate through having stories to tell and focused enough for the topic to be meaningful
- Expressed as a positive
- Clear and focused – not just a heading. For example, reviewing team meetings is not sufficiently focused or positive.

Other examples of Appreciative Inquiry topics:

- We retain our best people (rather than "we stop people leaving")

- Customers have an excellent arrival experience at the airport (rather than "we handle baggage delays well").

Step Two – Discovery – The Best of What Is

Next, 'discovery' questions are created and those participating in the Inquiry ask and answer them. The idea is that involving people in hearing the stories creates some of the energy needed to carry the change through. The questions need to be open and designed to encourage people to tell stories about what happens now or has happened in the past, about their positive experiences.

It is important the questions don't hide other agendas. The key is to have a few questions that the group wants to explore, and that will encourage as many stories about the "best of what is" as possible. Example questions:

- Describe a time when you feel the team performed really well
- What were the circumstances?
- When did that happen?
- Who was involved?
- What was your contribution?
- Another occasion?
- Describe a time when you were proud to be a member of the team or group.
- Why?
- What do you most value about being a member of this team? Why?
- Can you give me some examples of times when you have really applied learning from a workshop back at work? What happened?

Things to avoid as the interviewer:

- Probing your own agenda
- Asking "so when didn't it work?" "why isn't it like that all the time?"
- Problem solving and seeking solutions.

Step Three – Dream – The Best It Could Be

This stage involves sharing the data or stories and looking for the key themes within them that will form the basis of the design stage and the provocative propositions. Here you're seeking and sharing what is at the heart of the story, its essence. It is not about consensus as that can dissipate energy by diluting what was different and individual in each story.

So, with the topic we collaborate effectively with our merger partners for the benefit of both parties and the new organisation the key themes from the stories about 'the best of what is' included:

- We are open about successes, challenges and what isn't working
- We attend formal and informal meetings regularly so build relationships over time
- It's great when we do it rather than talk about it i.e. when we work on projects together, like jointly bidding for contract work
- When meetings are off-site and have a social element, we have fun as well as work hard

- We talk about hopes and concerns about the future
- We ask questions about how things are and test out our assumptions.

Step Four – Design – What We Want

Here the group creates "provocative propositions" for future direction and vision. Provocative propositions need to be connected clearly to what already happens – to the data and themes that emerged from steps two and three. In addition, they need to challenge and provoke to stretch beyond the current state. They are your positive vision for the future.

Write them as though they are already happening e.g.

- We devote time to learning more so we keep our expertise current
- We continue to collaborate on real projects to generate income for our organisations, and successfully influence others in our institutions to work together
- Information to help us make good decisions is available at the touch of a button
- We collect information from our customers in an uninterrupted sequence and they talk to only one person.

Step Five – What Will Happen

This step is where action is planned and resource allocated. Without this step, its just talk.

The aim of this step is that the people who have participated in the Appreciative Inquiry identify areas where they would like to take action to put the provocative propositions into practice. The leader's role is to help them have access to the resources they need, and to support them through feedback and positive review. It is important that in reviewing the change an appreciative perspective is maintained.

People tasked with taking steps forward should discuss what they can 'get on with' and where there might need to be further proposals brought back to the group.