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**Appreciative Inquiry:  
*Overcoming Barriers to Change in Police Organizations***

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Abstract

**Appreciative Inquiry (AI)**, a derivative of social constructionist theory, is an approach to organizational change which identifies as operational “reality” that aspect of the objective setting of experience upon which we focus our attention. When addressing organizational change processes, it is critical that a common understanding of reality is shared if participants in the process are expected to adopt changed behaviors and/or circumstances. Organizational change processes are often recommended as a mechanism for addressing specific organizational problems. Conventional “problem solving” assumptions are premised on the belief that organizations have problems to be solved. In sharp contrast, Appreciative Inquiry reflects the belief that all organizations are capable of *outstanding work*, and organizational change efforts can be most effectively conceptualized as opportunities to engage in a collaborative effort to recreate the circumstances under which outstanding work can be more easily accomplished. When problem solving is taken as the operational reality of organizational change, fear of being blamed for the problem, denial of responsibility for mistakes, and related forms of resistance to change commonly arise. What starts as an effort to enhance effectiveness or improve efficiency often results in groups within an organization fighting to either change or maintain the status quo. This commonplace scenario is played out within city councils, police organizations, community non-profits, and volunteer agencies. Appreciative Inquiry suggests that by focusing on problems we focus on deficits and lose sight of strengths.

## Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry looks for ***what is going right*** and attempts to purposefully move the organization in that direction,<sup>i</sup> reflecting the belief that the greatest potential for improvement comes from embracing what works well in an organizational setting. Appreciative Inquiry has been introduced as a method to design change, manage conflict, and build team strategies for a variety of organizations. In communities all across the United States, Land Grant University Extension operations, through their educational programs, play a significant role in the knowledge-creation process and thereby in shaping communities. Washington State University Extension has initiated an Appreciative Inquiry process that builds upon a base of experience in organizational change processes, institutional systems modification, and community participation. Local government officials, police organizations and community non-profits all participate in moving their organizations and communities to a place where change is embraced as a positive mechanism intended to enhance both communities and the various organizations in those communities which are devoted to public service or civic affairs.

The core assumptions underlying AI include the following: *social constructionist theory, simultaneity, story telling, the self-fulfilling prophecy, and the principle of the positive*. Social constructionists argue that we create our own reality through our patterns of communication; and our use of language creates a reality that is shared among people with whom we work and live. The principal way in which we generate commonly shared views of reality is through the types of questions we ask and the answers we receive. We “grow toward what we persistently ask questions about.”<sup>ii</sup> AI recognizes the principal of *simultaneity*, the idea that learning and change happen simultaneously, and that the act of asking a question influences the understood reality and in fact constitutes an “intervention.” AI places a high value on the process of *story telling* as a method for generating valid and accepted knowledge. Stories encourage listeners to assign meaning to this shared information, and from this meaning choose their own lessons, thus creating a story worthy of belief. What we discover becomes the stories out of which the future is created. AI places emphasis upon the importance of the self-fulfilling prophecy in many social settings, including organizations. In studies of the self-fulfilling prophecy, or “*The Pygmalion Effect*,” in educational and workplace training settings have demonstrated that a learner’s performance is greatly affected by their teacher’s (or supervisor’s) expectations. Finally, AI advocates place considerable faith in *the principle of the positive* (celebrating what achievements have been made and seeking to build on those rather than focusing on what is wrong).<sup>iii</sup> AI processes directed toward

organizational change seek to apply the principle of the positive to the sharing of stories of success among organization members to solidify a shared reality. AI builds a collective commitment toward favorable outcomes which are grounded in shared past experiences and born of positive success stories.

AI is a strategy for purposeful change that identifies the best of "what was and what is" and projects these favorable efforts and outcomes into the future. AI is a *collaborative* and *inclusive* inquiry, and it is based on third party interviews and questioning that is directed to the task of collecting the definitive *bonding* and *bridging stories* of a community or organization that constitute its social capital. This self knowledge is a powerful tool in the community-shaping process. It might even be said that what a community knows about itself becomes its destiny. Because knowledge is such a powerful element in the organizational culture-shaping process, educational programs that create knowledge about community and organizational successes and assets are important activities in any social entity.

The Appreciative Inquiry process entails a four-phase process referred to as the Four Ds: 1) **D**iscovering the best of what is. 2) **D**reaming about what might be. 3) **D**esigning an ideal future. 4) **D**elivering action to transform the community.

*Discovering the Best of What Is.* Phase one focuses on the social arrangements that are effective for the organization or community. This process involves a series of interviews where participants are asked to relate stories about the most successful and rewarding experiences of their careers, their personal lives, or in their community interactions. These stories provide "real-life" lessons, feature themes of connectivity and mutual appreciation, and elicit shared values. Often these discussions yield a clearer set of shared values among the organizational team or community members. Validated values and shared experiences allow the groups to become energized and committed to examining the future with a sense of common cause and optimism.

*Dreaming About What Might Be.* Shared stories tend to focus participants on their ultimate concerns and expand their images of what might be possible. From the collection of stories, participants are asked to develop "provocative propositions" describing the ideal future, outcome, or situation. This vision can be depicted through the tools of *asset futures* or *impact mapping*, insightful pictures or diagrams, creative videos, or the collaborative development of global mission statements. Story themes help to transform ideas into strategic intent or proposition statements. Often there are multiple priorities depicting the varied and inclusive process used to design a plan for the future.<sup>iv</sup>

*Designing an Ideal Future.* In the third phase of an Appreciative Inquiry process, participants use the shared knowledge created in the first two phases to redesign the social, political, economic, or physical aspects of their organization or community.<sup>v</sup> An important aspect of this phase is the development of criteria for success. *What must occur for our future to be viewed as successful? What are the characteristics of success?* Active engagement in exercises relating to these questions not only serves to identify future benchmarks against which to assess progress, but also allows provides the basis for consensus among participants in the process.

*Delivering Actions.* While in the final phase it is important to recognize that the AI process does not terminate with the formation of projects. Rather, the activities related to carrying out the projects during the Delivery phase will continue to generate new ideas. Because the group has previously agreed upon criteria for success, the projects developed during this phase are undertaken with relative ease. Strategic deliverables, detailed accounts of achievements attained, and the development of timelines and evaluation protocols are all important activities. .Additionally, a third party formative evaluation, drawing attention to the collective social processes including ongoing changes within subgroups, is essential to ensure continued regeneration of the organization's effort.

*Team Development.* A very useful aspect of AI is found in its attention to improved working relations/conflict resolution. Gervase R. Bushe, PhD,<sup>vi</sup> in his work with teams, has used AI processes effectively to explore and understand the "undiscussables," those troublesome topics that are not talked about because they tend to bring about conflict in a group. Group members are asked to recall their best team experience. Even for those who have had few favorable interactions with others in a group, there is a 'best' experience. Each group member is asked to describe the incident and explore what it was about themselves, the situation, the task, and others involved that made this a "peak" experience for them. On the basis of what has been discussed, the participants develop a consensus on the attributes they want in this highly effective group. These characteristics can be reformed into "working agreements" or common understandings about how the team wants to work together.

Although these agreements are often not much different than those which might have been offered by the participants when they were asked to describe appropriate behaviors, the **stories** shared about the characteristics encourage understanding and empathy which build commitment to the group. Bushe<sup>vii</sup> describes a team development process using a group of young men that came

together regularly to play pick-up basketball with a shared sense of what they were there to do, their lack of rigid roles, and an ability to easily adapt to the problems of any particular situation. Using the basket ball effort as a model, the group was able to characterize both the competitive and collaborative nature of the team. Each person competed with all the rest to play the best ball, to come up with the neatest move and most clever play. Once having executed it, he "gave it away" to the other players in the pick-up game, showing them how to do it as well. This was a very meaningful image for this group, and the process allowed the pick-up team to embrace competition within the group tempered with a focus on the development of cooperation for the group.

This "building the best team Appreciative Inquiry approach" may be most effective with **new teams** as it allows participants in the process to share expectations and needs without accusing others of inadequate behaviors. Groups often move through a difficult stage of growth when attempts to establish individual power bases can tear apart the group.<sup>viii</sup> Sharing best team stories allow individuals to articulate what is important to him/her, while not imposing a specific role on others. This is a solid mechanism for opening opportunities for role clarification without giving rise to power struggles.

Appreciative inquiry will not be most effective with all change processes. Ideal conditions require commitment to asking questions, discovering creative ideas, valuing past accomplishments, and commitment to open participation and an ongoing process. AI is usually not effective when predictable, linear process and outcomes are required. Its effectiveness, however, has been demonstrated in both large and governmental entities

### **Appreciative Inquiry Applications**

Appreciative inquiry is best seen as an approach to change, rather than one particular or singular methodology. Some have referred to it a "change at the speed of imagination"<sup>ix</sup>. The most appropriate form of engagement or application depends largely upon the change agenda or purpose that is intended, the amount of time and level of participation required by potential participants and resources available.

In practice, Appreciative Inquiry processes have been used to accomplish organizational change, build organizational capacity, produce and sustain community development, promoting global change, develop greater potential in small groups, resolve conflict and improve processes, and to produce personal or

relational transformations such as leadership development, and performance appraisal.

Applications of the processes have successfully occurred in a diverse range of environments, including the large companies of McDonald's Corporation, the Hunter Douglas Company and GTE, and governmental entities such as Chicago, Berkley, the University of California at Berkley and the United States Navy. From small "Mom and Pop" businesses to large metropolitan communities, and from international business conglomerates to non-governmental organizations, Appreciative Inquiry processes have proven them selves to be valuable in producing sustainable and transformative change.<sup>x</sup>

### **Examples of the Application of AI in Organizational Change Processes**

*Washington State Department of Social & Health Services (DSHS) Technology Department (IT):* A team building application of AI was undertaken in the setting of a state agency. The IT unit in the Department of Social and Health Services was concerned about negative reports concerning their customer service. The unit provided IT assistance, both in the form of system development and maintenance **and** research, to the state's children's assistance social workers. When asked, "How can we address complaints and improve our customer service?" the response yielded defensive and blaming behavior. It was evident that the team knew they weren't providing the best service, but they were unable to identify mechanisms to improve the service, so they fell back into the "we can't because... not enough money, people, time, resources, training, etc".

In this effort, the issue of customer service provided the basis for question development. The Key to question posing was proper framing, so that the questions allowed for the "problem" to surface in a format that encouraged creative thinking. Using the AI process, the department members were asked to think about the most effective service team each had participated in, talk about it, and identify why it worked? The focus questions used included the following:

- What was the most rewarding experience for you when you worked with your clients?
- What did you do that they felt was most useful?
- What was accomplished?
- How were you rewarded?

Interestingly, after the IT unit stories were told, several common themes emerged, and one in particular stood out as a noteworthy discovery. The team

realized that they did not really know what is most important to their clients. Several employees noted that they had heard that clients really appreciated the everyday help, solving the "little insignificant problems", such as finding the "f" drive or helping to reset an office desktop after a crash. These were easy tasks for computer technicians, but were seen as critical and timely help by the social workers. In contrast, the IT technicians received little praise or understanding for their development or programming efforts. As the conversations progressed it became evident that the team members really wanted to know what types of assistance would be useful, as well as how these services could be provided in a more effective manner. This process was seen as an *awakening* for the team, the AI process produced knowledge that they could improve their services in ways that were not overly taxing of their energies but would generate a great deal of organizational good will for their unit. In the design phase the IT group crafted mechanisms for soliciting ideas for service enhancement from the social workers, and developed plans for forming an agency advisory group to help in the development and research phase of their work.

Before the AI process the IT group's workplace climate had been seriously damaged by resentment that had developed between members of the unit as a result of customer complaints. It seemed reasonable to blame each other as well as "the system," thereby obviating the need to look for ways to address the frequency and nature of client complaints. The AI process made it possible for members to talk about successes and make use of the rewarding feelings and sense of satisfaction when they provided valued assistance in the development of systematic mechanisms that would ensure improved client services over time.

*Washington State Extension Master Gardener Program:* Washington State Extension sponsors numerous Master Gardener programs, which represent an effective training and volunteer program designed to spread knowledge and information about gardening to Washington communities. Teams of volunteers often become embroiled in conflict over roles, responsibilities and mutual expectations. If such issues are left unresolved, membership can decline and leaders will abandon the effort. In a Northwest County, the Master Gardener Program was embroiled in a longstanding conflict about who controls the decision making within the core leadership team. In order to preserve the trust and camaraderie of the volunteers, an intervention was attempted with the volunteer leadership to address the issues at hand. The AI process developed for this intervention focused on targeting core values, describing these values, and most importantly identifying the types of behaviors these values ought to give rise to in the Master Gardner setting. Stories about how core values have been implemented, what it means to share values, and examples of how values

assisted with decision making and problem solving all serve to build empathy and understanding among program participants. The discussion held under the auspices of an AI intervention resulted in consensus agreement around a number of core values. From the core values the leadership team developed a set of working agreements that act as ground rules for appropriate behavior. Working agreements cover a broad range of expectations for such things as decision-making processes and attendance at regular meetings. When individuals build a joint blueprint for appropriate behavior and have empathy with each other's stories, the end result is a new level of trust.

*Skownan First Nation Project<sup>xii</sup>*: Between January 2000 and June 2001 in Northern Canada, the Skownan First Nation Community Values Project was developed to integrate Aboriginal Values into Land Use and Resource Management planning within Manitoba's land use plan. The process was designed to contribute to the larger goal of sustainable community development, providing economic opportunities that are self-sustaining, consistent with local values and priorities, and supportive of environmental stewardship. The project used AI to determine the ways an Aboriginal community values the forest. This evaluation was as holistic as possible, including trapping, subsistence gathering and hunting, medicinal plant harvesting, and spiritual, religious and cultural values derived from living in a forested landscape by Aboriginal people themselves. The AI process was modified for this special application, but the process used followed the four-stage AI process rather faithfully. Initially, training was made available for a local team in the use of the AI process. The trained local team then interviewed over 100 community members in the spring, summer and fall of 2000. At the end of each round of interviews, the visions and values shared by community members were identified. Six community workshops were held during which community values and visions were clarified further, and an action plan for the community was initiated. The outcomes of the AI interviews were captured during three video shoots that took place during the spring, fall and winter of 2000. Focus group workshops were held to enable the people of Skownan First Nation to communicate their values and vision to decision-makers, explore the benefits and opportunities of using AI, and stimulate discussion on how to engage in collaborative processes when working with Aboriginal communities. Some rather key outcomes included the development of a common understanding of four sustainable development values: stewardship, shared responsibility and understanding, public participation, and integrated decision-making and planning.

*Porch Cookie Projects*: The Porch Cookie Project (PCP) represents an Extension adaptation of AI in the State of Ohio. The project was generated out of

a fond childhood memory of sitting on the porch and eating cookies, drinking lemonade, and talking with friends and neighbors. The goal of PCPs was to transform such positive memories into community knowledge, which ultimately shapes the community future. As indicated, in *Shaping Communities Through Extension Programs* by Chester J. Bowling and Barbara A. Brahm, "By using processes that focus on community members acting at their very best and the self-organizing aspects of their communities, Extension can simultaneously extend and accelerate the rate of desired behavioral change and therefore improve effectiveness."<sup>xii</sup>

*Community Policing and Organizational Change in WRICOPS:* In 1998 the Ada County Sheriff's Department requested and received an onsite organizational assessment from the Western Regional Institute for Community Oriented Public Safety (WRICOPS). WRICOPS represents a consortium of 5 state police training academies and Washington State University, and is operating in its 10<sup>th</sup> year. Over the course of the past seven years the Sheriff's Department implemented several of the WRICOPS recommendations designed to assist the agency to implement community oriented policing. In 2005, the newly elected Sheriff asked for an appreciative inquiry intervention focused primarily on helping patrol and line personnel come to a common understanding of the value and substance of customer service. The expressed goal of the Sheriff is that the agency will become the first choice for criminal justice services in Ada County. Critical to the accomplishment of this goal is an organization-wide commitment to the provision of excellent customer service. The AI effort includes asking patrol officers to identify specific times when the public responded positively to their efforts with the expression of genuine appreciation. From this understanding, the officers articulate the type of behaviors involved in effective police services in the setting of the provision of police services in Ada County. The AI process for the Ada Co. Sheriff's Department is designed around the following steps:

Line Personnel describe their value system in their own words.

AI process participants (cross-section of the department) identify concrete behaviors and events that are successful at generating citizen appreciation and are fully congruent with organizational values.

The identified past positive experiences provide the impetus for moving to the future with appropriate replication when possible, and creative adaptive modification when necessary.

Line personnel speak from the familiar environment.

The AI process questions include the following:

High point experiences: "Describe a time when you, while working, felt that the citizen or citizens of Ada County really made you feel alive and excited about your work."

Valuing: "What do you value most about yourself, your work, and your organization?"

Core factors: "In your own view, what are the core attributes of this organization without which it would not be the same?"

Service: "Describe a project or partnership you have been involved in that helped you to feel alive, respected and appreciated."

Wishes for/images of the future: "What three wishes do you have to enhance the vitality of this system? Imagine this organization five years from now, healthy and vibrant - what does it look like?"

From the results of a minimum of 100 interviews, two ***Appreciative Inquiry Summits*** are planned to create bold statements of ideals and determine "what should be" the character of the Ada County Sheriff's Department. The "what should be" concept is a consensus statement about principles and priorities of the department. Mixed work groups reach into the community to identify specific services that are needed, and a series of team, pilot or project groups are developed to test out ways to deliver these services.

The most important part of this exercise is allowing the patrol and line personnel to share their own experiences, have those experiences validated as real and valuable, and then use these real life experiences as a basis for the development of departmental policy. The results of the AI process lead to good projects, but more importantly the activities are carried out by personnel who are committed to maintaining a citizen service-oriented police agency.

### **Conclusion:**

Communities, management and work teams, and organizations large and small are shaped through workplace interactions that are influenced by the ways knowledge is created and shared and operational realities are defined. Bringing people together by getting them to reflect on their positive experiences can indeed be a powerful tool for positive change. Methodologies based on reflective

sharing of peak experiences and visions of preferred futures such as Appreciative Inquiry permit the creation of new knowledge and the definition of hopeful shared operational realities. A relatively simple process based on the principles of Appreciative Inquiry can affect groups of various types positively. Often potential conflict can be dealt with effectively, especially when the focus is maintained on the appreciation of individual experiences.

Appreciative Inquiry is still in its infancy as a technique for organizational change. Even though still in its early stages of development, it is clear that the principles of asking questions leading to the telling of stories about peak experiences, the sharing of those positive experiences, and the use of those stories to identify themes and common dimensions of experience represents a powerful method for generating important new knowledge within a group or community. When there is a supportive social connection between members as well as a shared positive view of an hopeful future, the organizational changes undertaken tend to be substantial and the effect of the change process put into play tends to be longer lasting.

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- <sup>i</sup> Bowling, Chester J. and Barbara A. Brahm, "Shaping Communities Through Extension Programs," *Journal of Extension* 40, no. 3 (June 2002), <http://www.joe.org/joe/2002june/index.html>.
- <sup>ii</sup> (Cooperrider and Whitney 1999)
- <sup>iii</sup> (Fry et al. 2002; Whitney 1998; Zemke 1999)
- <sup>iv</sup> Bowling, Chester J. and Barbara A. Brahm, "Shaping Communities Through Extension Programs," *Journal of Extension* 40, no. 3 (June 2002), <http://www.joe.org/joe/2002june/index.html>.
- <sup>v</sup> Whitney, D. and A. Troken-Bloom. *The Power of appreciative Inquiry: a Practical Guide to Positive change*. San Francisco: Berrett Koehler Publications, 2003.
- <sup>vi</sup> Bushe, G.R., "Appreciative Inquiry as an Organization Development Intervention," *Organization Development Journal* (1995): 13:3, 14-22.
- <sup>vii</sup> Bushe, G.R., "Appreciative Inquiry as an Organization Development Intervention," *Organization Development Journal* (1995): 13:3, 14-22.
- <sup>viii</sup> (Srivastva et al. 1977)
- <sup>ix</sup> (Watkins and Mohr 2001)
- <sup>x</sup> (Whitney and Trotsen-Bloom 2003)
- <sup>xi</sup> Parry, Jo Ellen, "Integrating Aboriginal Values into Land Use and Resource Management," Northern Canada, Skownan First Nation Community Values Project. Appreciative Inquiry and Community Development. *International Institute for Sustainable Development* (2005), <http://www.iisd.org/ai/waterhen.htm>.
- <sup>xii</sup> Bowling, Chester J. and Barbara A. Brahm, "Shaping Communities Through Extension Programs," *Journal of Extension* 40, no. 3 (June 2002), <http://www.joe.org/joe/2002june/index.html>.