

Clarity Works! Special Report

Looking for Answers to all the Wrong Questions? *An Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry and Report on Results*

Asking the right questions is critical to solving problems. As business leaders, you spend your day solving problems by asking questions. But, you may be seeking the answers to the wrong questions because you have been trained in traditional problem solving methods.

Traditional problem solving teaches us to find the cause of the problem and make a diagnosis. We produce page after page of what is wrong, often finding fault and placing blame along the way. Focusing on what is wrong with the organization does not lead to increased cooperation or innovation.

Focusing on *what works* is the core of Appreciative Inquiry (Ai), or as we like to call it "Looking for the Good Stuff". This approach was developed in 1985 at the Case Western Reserve University business school by Dr. David Cooperrider. Even though it is used by some of the most advanced companies in the world, it is not yet widely known by the majority of businesses and organizations. It is in use around the world by businesses and non-profits, community developers and emerging nations, churches and the military. Appreciative Inquiry is a form of problem solving that takes people into account, something that most problem solving methods can't or don't do. This is important because it is the people who solve problems, not the processes.

Appreciative Inquiry has many forms and many applications. In organizations, it is most often done in four stages which we call:

Inquire, Imagine, Innovate, and Implement.™

- Inquire asks "What gives life to the organization?" Stories are gathered through asking questions like, "Tell me about a time you were excited to be part of this organization."
- Imagine asks "What might be?" It invites you to create a vision of the future that includes elements of past successes and excitement. The visions are captured in possibility statements. Then the visions are brought to life through creative presentations like skits, news broadcasts, imaginary tours, etc., making them tangible.
- Innovate asks "What would you look like?" What processes, structures and relationships do you need to create or change to make your vision a reality?
- Implement asks "How do you do it?" This is the delivery stage where resources are allocated, time and priorities are determined. The steps you must take to achieve your vision are identified.

Does it work? Just like duct tape, it works in a variety of situations, some you might not imagine. Here are some of the Ai success stories:

Transforming a Corporate Culture



In 1995, as an internal consultant and trainer at GTE, Bob New was selected to be part of the core team to introduce Appreciative Inquiry to 64,000 front-line employees of Telephone Operations.

The situation was grim:

- GTE Telephone Operations had undergone a major re-organization, process re-engineering and significant downsizing.
- The Telecommunications Act was deregulating the industry. They were no longer a protected public utility. They must now become a competitor in a fierce marketplace and everyone, regardless of position, was feeling the effects of massive change.
- They had to transform the entire culture from one that operated by rules and regulations as a public utility to one that encouraged new ways of communications, cooperation and innovation.

Just two short years later, GTE received national recognition for the best Culture Change Initiative from ASTD, the American Society for Training and Development.

In accepting the award, President of GTE Telephone Operations, Tom White, attributed over 10,000 innovations directly to Appreciative Inquiry. This meant that 1 in every 6 employees had an idea to improve service or reduce cost. The talent was there all along. All that was needed was Appreciative Inquiry as the catalyst.

GTE merged with Bell Atlantic in 1998 to become Verizon Corporation. The merger has been hailed as one of the most successful giant mergers ever, and much of the credit is given to Appreciative Inquiry.

Innovation on a shoestring budget

One of the 10,000 innovations resulting from Ai occurred at the GTE Call Center in Wentzville, Missouri, 50 miles west of St. Louis. A Call Center is the sweatshop of the telephone operations. It is a drab, concrete building, with few windows. Employees, wearing telephone headsets, are literally plugged into their cubicles. All day long, they listen to what is wrong with the telephone service; every customer has a problem.

As you might imagine, absenteeism was up, customer complaints were up and employee morale was down. Bob had just trained the Call Center supervisors in

Appreciative Inquiry, so they decided to try it in this situation instead of their normal disciplinary processes.

The supervisors asked the employees, “Tell me about a time when you were excited to be a part of this company.” They documented the stories and then looked for common themes. They wanted to identify the factors that were important to these employees. They were expecting to see concerns about money, working conditions and other issues that they had no control over.

Imagine their surprise when they found almost all of the stories were about *recognition*.

That was the key, but what are they going to do? There was no budget for recognition and they couldn’t shut down the Call Center just to recognize people. That’s where innovation took over. Each supervisor had a petty cash fund. They pooled their money and bought balloons and a helium tank. The hole-punch and the paper shredder produced lots of confetti. From that point on there was some sort of recognition almost every day.

The Confetti Patrol (that’s what they called themselves) would roam the building, seemingly at random, closing in on the target of the day’s celebration. Excitement grew as heads popped up over cubicle walls like prairie dogs. When they reached the right cubicle, one of the supervisors would take over the headset and the party was on. They only lasted 3 minutes... five at the most. There were mini-celebrations for service anniversaries, birthdays, customer commendations, perfect attendance and once when the family dog had puppies. It was simple, but it worked!

When Bob was there several months later, the supervisors took him on their Confetti Patrol so he could join in the excitement. Then they beamed as they reported “Complaints are down, absenteeism is down and the employees love it.” And they didn’t have to spend a lot of money to get big results.

Culture Change – Diversity

David Cooperrider, the creator of Ai, received a call from a New York consulting firm that specialized in gender and diversity issues. The lead consultant had been working with Avon Products Mexico Division to reduce incidents of sexual harassment. After two years of sexual harassment training, every measure was going in the wrong direction. The numbers of complaints were up and the number of lawsuits were up as well. Every indication showed the problem was growing.

After the training, the employees said they felt less able to communicate with the opposite sex. They felt more distance and less trust, and the glass ceiling for women remained firmly in place.



The consultant was frustrated and asked David, “How would you take an appreciative approach to sexual harassment?”

David had his own question, “What do you really want to do?”

“We want to dramatically cut the incidence of sexual harassment. We want to solve this huge problem.”

“What would that look like?” asked David.

“You mean what do I really want? What we really want is to be a model of positive, cross-gender working relationships!”

There... they had it. It was an awkward phrase, “positive cross-gender working relationships” but do you see that it is an *appreciative* topic for focus as compared to “sexual harassment”?

To fast-forward the Avon Mexico story, they conducted a small pilot program to encourage stories of successful times when men and women worked together. The pilot surpassed everyone's expectations. Hundreds of pairs of male and female co-workers stepped up to tell their stories.

Building on the success of the pilot, 100 people were trained in Appreciative Inquiry interviewing. They learned how to ask for the stories of best experiences. Over the next several weeks, they completed over 300 interviews. Stories poured in. There were stories of:

- achievement
- trust building
- authentic joint leadership
- effective conflict management

All the stories focused on positive cross-gender working relationships. They had collected thousands of examples of the good stuff, the times when men and women effectively worked together. As a result Avon began asking men and women to co-chair teams and task forces and admitted their first woman to the Executive Committee. Appreciative Inquiry changed the focus from sexual harassment to positive cross-gender working relationships. Two years later, Catalyst, a women's business interest group, awarded them the Best Place to Work for Women in Mexico.

Appreciative Inquiry in Community Development

Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) is an offshoot of the Appreciative Inquiry movement. One of the key ideas is that when communities are seen as having assets instead of being seen in terms of their deficits, the effect is positive. When they are seen as needy, they are seen as a problem to be fixed. They rarely change as rapidly as communities that are valued for their assets and perceived as having the means to help themselves.

For example, in one tenement building, it was discovered that 60% of the residents had become skilled plumbers (out of necessity) and suddenly they were helping to revitalize the building. They became a key element in developing the community. They were seen as an asset, rather than as a drain on the community. It is the same reality; it's just seen from a different perspective.

A Simple Success Story

At an Appreciative Inquiry Summit on Child Welfare, one young man who had experienced the child welfare system as a foster child offered an idea that lit up the conference. It was elegant in its simplicity. His possibility statement was about improving the user-friendliness of the court system for children. He said, "Juvenile courts could be physically redesigned. We could use smaller, round tables to instead of imposing long ones. Have the judge come down from the bench and sit at the table with the child and his or her advocates. Create a special waiting room for children so they would feel at ease." The participants stood and cheered as they realized the impact of this idea on the court system for children.

Focus on What You Want

Children's Hospital in Boston was one of the charities supported by GTE. A GTE executive was making a good-will visit, during which he toured the children's cancer ward. What struck him most was the complete isolation of the children. Because of their fragile immune systems, they were isolated from parents, visitors and even from each other. When he talked to the doctors about this, they agreed there was value in human contact but the risk was too great for these children.

Bothered by what he had seen, the executive began talking with the engineers and technicians at GTE, explaining what he had seen and talking about his vision for somehow connecting the children to their parents but more importantly to each other. Several months later when he visited the hospital again, it was to see his vision in action. He was delighted to see the children laughing, talking and playing games with each other on the interactive computer network created and donated by GTE.

Specific Change Agendas and Results using Ai

★ Improving Employee Retention – *Lovelace Sandia Health System*



The 20-30% turnover rate for a staff of 300 nurses meant that at any one time, approximately 75 nurses, or the equivalent of one full shift, was in transition. This meant short staffing, poor teamwork, and sky-rocketing recruiting costs. The VP of Hospital Operations took the appreciative approach and began to focus on why nurses stayed at Lovelace. The first year there was a 30% reduction in turnover. As the nurses' camaraderie went up, so did patients' satisfaction ratings.

★ Improving Financial Performance - *Roadway Express*

Roadway Express was looking for improved financial performance through employee involvement. Their first initiative was a test of the process, focused on producing small but visible victories. Within 5 months after the Appreciative Inquiry Summit, they were able to document a series of substantial wins:



- Padding and packing material costs were reduced 32%, saving \$4,100.
- Cost of skids and pallets reduced 66%, saving \$7,600.
- Airbag costs reduced 53%, saving \$60,000.
- Driver delays due to overloaded rigs virtually eliminated, saving the Akron terminal \$10,000 each month.
- Truck drivers tried their hand at selling Roadway services and increased sales by \$2 million.

★ Overcoming Mistrust - John Deere Harvester Works



JOHN DEERE

Management efforts to create self-directed work teams at John Deere had been met with employee apathy and failure. In an Appreciative Inquiry Summit, they were able to prove to employees that they were serious about supporting change. In one 5-day summit, they achieved the cooperation and involvement that ended 20 years of mistrust, and as a result one plant reduced new product cycle time by two years which created millions of dollars in new market share for John Deere.

★ Improving Customer Service and Satisfaction – ProCare

ProCare, a US subsidiary of British Petroleum, is in the auto repair business. At the end of their first year of operation, customer satisfaction surveys showed 95% of all customers were 100% satisfied - an astounding statistic. However, ProCare wasn't satisfied. They decided to conduct customer focus groups with the 5% who were dissatisfied. Then they posted vivid descriptions of the causes of dissatisfaction in every shop. Within months, customer satisfaction and employee morale plummeted. With great hesitation, the owners agreed to use Ai to interview the satisfied customers. When they posted vivid descriptions of what the customers liked in every shop, they were stunned as the satisfaction indexes began to climb. One of the key principles of Appreciative Inquiry is, "What you focus on expands."



★ Becoming an Employer of Choice – US Navy



Rear Admiral Annette Brown, of the Navy Personnel Command, says the Navy is using Appreciative Inquiry to become an employer of choice, a Fortune 500 equivalent. There are over 30 initiatives currently under way in the Navy. Here are a few of the key projects resulting from Appreciative Inquiry Summits:

- At the Naval Post Graduate School, the Center for Positive Change was established. They now train Naval Officers in Appreciative Inquiry as an approach to leadership and change.
- 360° Feedback Programs have been created to give constructive feedback on desired leadership competencies.

- A mentoring program has produced documented results in increasing retention and advancement and reducing disciplinary actions and incidents of drug and alcohol abuse.
- Virtual tours of shipboard life are widely used in explaining choices during recruiting and duty assignment. They also increase the confidence and reduce the stress of a sailor's first deployment.
- Web-based tools allow sailors to apply for duty assignments and compete on the basis of their qualifications to attain their choice of assignments.

Admiral Vern Clarke, Chief of Naval Operations, said "Appreciative Inquiry... is a method that helps us develop the goals and dreams... that support the future of our Navy."

★ Restoring Lost Values - *Hunter Douglas Window Fashions Division*

Hunter Douglas Window Fashions Division had grown from 27 employees in 1985 to over 700 in 1996 and in the process it had lost much of the intimacy and sense of community that were responsible for both economic success and employee satisfaction. They were a victim of their own success. Employees talked about the 'good old days' and were doubtful about their future. In 1997, Hunter Douglas began the first of three separate Ai initiatives, each working through the four step process, and each addressing a separate change agenda. The first was focused on culture transformation, getting back to their roots. The second initiative centered on strategic planning and the third was on developing better customer service and improving business processes. Here are just a few of their hundreds of innovations:



- Through improved planning, collaboration and cross training, they virtually eliminated mandatory overtime, cited as the #1 employee frustration.
- They created "Focus on Excellence" teams that were credited with a first year saving of \$3.5 million.
- Career paths and a mentoring program opened doors of opportunity that had not been available to many employees.
- English as a Second Language classes were instituted to assist the multi-ethnic workforce. Ironically, this was something the Human Resources department had been trying to do for years.
- Operational improvement suggestions submitted by the workforce went up by 100%.
- Employee turnover reached the lowest level in over 6 years.
- Process innovations avoided \$220,000 in new equipment costs.

Results change when your perspective changes...

- If we find negatives in the past, we talk about doubts in the future.
- If we find positives in the past we talk about potential in the future.
- If we find shortcomings in others, we talk about what they need.
- If we find the good stuff in others, we talk about possibilities.

Appreciative Inquiry *is* a lot like duct tape. The possible applications are endless and the results are almost always unexpected and often spectacular.

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Bob New and Kathleen Rich-New are consultants specializing in increasing innovation and cooperation by helping organizations to begin “looking for the good stuff”.

Clearing the way to Success

Bob and Kathleen are the authors of *Looking for the Good Stuff... a guide to enjoying and appreciating life*, which has been acclaimed as an excellent, fun way to provide clients with a non-technical introduction to the principles of Appreciative Inquiry. It is available on their website or from Amazon.com.



To explore possibilities in your organization please contact us at Clarity Works!

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