GUIDE TO APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY [1]

OVERVIEW OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

What is appreciative inquiry?

Appreciative Inquiry (sometimes referred to as AI) is the study and exploration of what gives life to human systems when they function at their best. This approach to personal change and organizational change is based on the assumption that questions and dialogue about strengths, successes, values, hopes, and dreams are themselves transformational. Appreciative Inquiry suggests that human organizing and change, at its best, is a relational process of inquiry, grounded in affirmation and appreciation.[2]

AI is *not* about looking at the world with rose-colored glasses and being overly positive. Instead, it focuses on how the future can be built on the best parts of the past, believing that we all have experienced what success looks like, even if only fleeting, and we have the capacity to create the world we want.

AI is both *a philosophy and a set of principles and practices* based on the following assumptions:[3]

1. In every society, organization, or group, something works.
2. What we focus on becomes our reality.
3. Reality is created in the moment, and there are multiple realities.
4. The act of asking questions of an organization or group influences the group in some way.
5. People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known).
6. If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be only the best parts.
7. It is important to value differences.
8. The language we use creates our reality.

While the benefits of AI are many, the following stand out as good reasons to use this approach where systems change is desired. Appreciative Inquiry:

*   Reframes the study of problems into the study of successes.
*   Offers new language that allows greater honesty about difficult topics.
*   Unleashes creativity through whole-systems, participatory, and energizing processes.

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[1] This guide was largely developed by Hallie Preskill and Arani Grindle in 2015.

[2] Whitney, D. and Trosten-Bloom, A. (2010). The power of Appreciative Inquiry. 2nd Ed. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

[3] Hammond, S. A. (2013). The thin book of appreciative inquiry. 3rd. Ed. Thin Book Publishing. Pp. 20–21

- Creates opportunities for developing new relationships, networks, and communities of practice.

As a complete process, Appreciative Inquiry involves engaging participants (from a small group to many hundreds) in a four-phase process described below. However, it is possible to implement only one or two phases, depending on the purpose of the inquiry. As the literature has shown, the process is highly adaptable to many cultures, contexts, and purposes. (See the AI Commons for many examples of its use https://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu.)

How can appreciative inquiry support systems thinking and practice?	
✔ Context	• Identify how various contextual factors *(e.g., social, political, cultural, or economic developments and events)* influence a topic or goal. • Put a group's progress and challenges in context *(e.g., relative to external factors, key activities, funding levels).*
✔ Connections	• Explore various actors' roles in the system. • Encourage participants to make new connections. • Strengthen relationships and build trust among participants. • Consider how relationships, roles, or information flows are changing. • Explore the relationship between the group's activities/achievements and other actors' activities/achievements.
✔ Patterns	• Break old thought patterns and catalyze new ideas and thinking. • Identify areas of common interest, concern, or excitement. • Determine where there is energy in the system and where there are gaps or blockages. • Understand how policies, structures, or social/cultural norms are changing.
✔ Perspectives	• Explore a topic from multiple diverse perspectives. • Ensure equal footing among participant voices. • Understand beneficiary experiences of the issue or initiative. • Understand partners' and other key stakeholders' perspectives on the issue or initiative *(i.e., why it matters).* • Understand participants' individual values, beliefs, and priorities. • Identify partners' and stakeholders' learning priorities.

WHEN TO USE (AND NOT TO USE) APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

AI is extremely well suited to addressing complex systems change issues and challenges, and is best used when there is a desire to:

- Create a positive change; develop new and exciting images and plans for the future.
- Enhance strategic cooperation, overcome conflict or competition, and move away from silos.
- Catalyze whole-system culture shift.
- Facilitate high-participation planning.

- Mobilize design and development.
- Facilitate organizational learning.
- Integrate multiple change efforts.
- Support mergers and acquisitions.
- Support a participatory and collaborative evaluation process.

However, when the following conditions are present, Appreciative Inquiry *would not be* an effective approach when:

- You are already getting what you want.
- There is no commitment to positive change (clinging to deficits, problems) or a willingness to implement the outcomes of the AI process.
- The issue is technical, and the solution is clear and known.

As noted earlier, Appreciative Inquiry involves engaging participants in one or more of the following phases. The number of participants can be as few as six, or as many as hundreds or thousands. It is important to note that each phase builds upon the findings of the previous phase. Therefore, one likely wouldn't start with Phase 3 because the foundation for Phase 3 conversations wouldn't have been built unless participants had been engaged in Phases 1 and 2. See Appendix A for additional facilitation guidelines.

The following section briefly describes the four phases of AI and includes the minimum time estimate needed to implement each phase. It is useful to note that in much of the literature, AI is described as using the 4-D model (Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny) (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). After using Appreciative Inquiry with a wide variety of groups, Preskill and Catsambas (2006) decided to replace the 4-D terms with the "4-I" set of labels: Inquire, Imagine, Innovate, and Implement. Regardless of the terms used, the process is exactly the same.

Phase 1 – Inquire - What gives life? What's working?
This phase is for the discovery and appreciation of the best of "what is" by focusing on peak moments of excellence from the organization or community's history. In this phase, participants discover the unique factors (e.g., leadership, relationships, culture, structure, rewards) that made those moments possible. This builds the capacity for effective and sustainable change. Members become ready to let go of parts of the past and become aware of what they want to take into the future. This phase involves paired interviews, sharing stories, identifying themes, and observing similarities and differences across groups (about 60–90 minutes).

Phase 2 – Imagine - What might be? What are we being called to become?
In this phase, participants challenge the status quo by envisioning more valued and vital futures. Images of the future emerge out of the stories and examples from the best of the past. They are

compelling possibilities because they emerged from the extraordinary moments of the organization or community's history. People have a tendency to move toward the shared, positive images of the future. Together, the organization or community creates a positive image of its most desired and preferred future. This phase involves individual reflection, small group conversations, identifying themes, visualizing the future, and observing similarities and differences across groups (about 45–90 minutes).

Phase 3 – Innovate - What should be? What's next, and who will benefit?

The goal of this phase is to envision how the organization or community should be designed to fully realize the shared dreams and ideals. Elements, or the "social architecture" (e.g., values, leadership, culture, staff/people, structures, strategy, communications, processes, practices, results), are first identified. Participants then create "provocative propositions" or "possibility statements" about what the organization or community would look like if it were doing more of its "bests." In this phase, the organization or community begins to set new strategic directions and align its visions of the future with its systems and processes. This phase involves individual, pair, or small group brainstorming, sharing, and development of themes (about 75–120 minutes).

Phase 4 – Implement - Who will do what, by when? What else is needed to support the changes?

The task in this phase is to implement the provocative propositions from Phase 3 and to "set the organizational compass." It is a time of continuous learning, using monitoring and appreciative evaluation tools and processes as well as improvising or making course corrections in pursuit of the shared vision. The momentum and potential for innovation, creativity, and productivity is high by this stage of the inquiry. This phase involves individuals or groups choosing which actions they wish to be responsible for making a reality (about 60–120 minutes).

GUIDELINES FOR USING APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

In this section, we briefly describe the best times to use AI within systems change efforts and provide implementation guidance that is important for ensuring success. *Note: refer to Appendix A for additional suggestions on how to structure your appreciative inquiry session.*

Phase 1 – Inquire

This phase helps establish relationships, develop understandings of success, and identify the best of the past — to build on the future.

Best time to use:

When stakeholders are coming together to discuss what success would look like in their work.

Implementation Guidelines:

Determining a specific and focused topic is essential to the success of the AI exercise. Pick **one topic** for discussion and craft a *stage setting introductory paragraph* and *interview guide*. Participants get into pairs

(preferably with someone they don't know and haven't worked with) and interview each other for 7–20 minutes, depending on the time available). The interview guide typically includes the following types of questions relevant to the AI topic (see Appendix B for sample questions):

1. **Best or Peak Experience:** Reflect for a moment and remember a time when *[insert topic]*, and it was exciting, effective, and memorable! In fact, remembering this time fills you with pride and joy. Describe this experience and the qualities that made it so satisfying and successful.
   - What was it about this experience that made it so memorable?
   - What were the conditions that made this experience so successful?
   - What did you do to make it so successful? What did others do?
   - What do you think was the root cause of this success?
2. **Values:** What do you value most about both:
   - Yourself?
   - This topic?
3. **Three Wishes:** If you had three wishes that would ensure a more successful experience like the one you just described, what would they be?

The quality of the stage setting introduction and peak experience questions is essential for promoting rich stories versus sound bites. The following guides should be shared with participants:

- Be honest about your story.
- Remember that there is no right or wrong story; try not to change your story as you hear what others are saying.
- Be respectful of each other's stories; listen hard as your partner is sharing his or her story; take notes.
- Be mindful of time restrictions and allow everyone the opportunity to share their stories and opinions.
- Respect the privacy and confidentiality of others in the group; we ask that you not share what individuals say in this meeting outside this group.

Once participants have interviewed each other, they join two or three other pairs (forming groups of six or eight). Each person in the circle shares her or his partner's story in *2 minutes or less*. Someone in the group should be assigned the time keeper role to ensure everyone has the same amount of time to tell their stories. The group is instructed to listen for themes in the stories as they are told.
After all of the stories have been shared, the group (of six or eight) discusses the themes they've heard and notes them on a flipchart page (three to five themes is typical, but more can be offered if desired).
Once all of the themes have been flipcharted, each group reports out. The facilitator asks the large group, "What do you see across the flipcharts (themes)?" He or she would then facilitate a conversation about what was surprising, what the activity and its outcomes reinforced, and any other observations.

Ensuring Success – Important Facilitation Guidelines
- To put participants "in the mood" to reflect on an experience, first read the framing paragraph out loud. Then, provide them with 3–5 minutes to think, to remember, and to write down a few

notes to help them tell the story. Most of us cannot pull a coherent story out of the blue, so it's important to provide this quiet time for participants to recall their peak experiences. After this reflection time, instruct participants to pair up and share their stories.

- Ask listeners to just listen to their partner's story and not to try to tell their own story at the same time — it's not a dialogue. When roles are switched, they can tell their own story.
- Ask listeners to listen hard — with curiosity, focus, and authentic interest; they can ask probing questions to gain clarity and deeper understanding. And remind them that they will be telling their partner's story, so taking a few notes will help!
- If someone thinks she doesn't have a story to tell, ensure her that the story can be small — it could have been a momentary experience. Remind them that it's a time when they felt proud, excited, emerged, and happy about what they were seeing or feeling.

Phase 2 – Imagine

This phase engages participants in envisioning the future based on the best of the past or co-generating a desired vision of the future.

Best time to use:
When developing a vision and strategic direction; to align hopes, dreams, and aspirations; to find commonality and agreement as preparation for moving forward; to develop guiding principles; to generate ideas about additional stakeholders for engagement.

Implementation Guidelines:
This phase requires developing a scenario that is 3, 5, 10, or even 20 years from now. In this scenario, all of the hopes, dreams, and wishes (and best parts of the past as identified in the participants' stories) have come to fruition. After reading the scenario to the group (let them listen and start to imagine), provide the following instructions:

- Reflect individually for 2–3 minutes; jot down some thoughts.
- Share your ideas with the others at your table. ***Speak in the present tense as if the future were now*** (this is critically important to the success of this activity) (15–45 minutes, depending on the time available and how much discussion might be possible).
- Discuss and flipchart the themes represented in your visions (10–15 minutes).
- On a separate piece of flipchart paper, draw a picture of the themes noted on the flipchart paper (5–10 minutes).
- Each group reports their themes; the larger group discusses similarities, differences, and implications (30–60 minutes, depending on size of group and amount of discussion desired).

Ensuring Success – Important Facilitation Guidelines

- To achieve the goals of this phase, participants MUST speak in present tense. If participants are not doing this, politely ask them to do so.
- Since the goal is for participants to engage in a *generative* conversation about their imagined future, listen in on their conversations to ensure that they are building off of one another's

comments — that they are co-constructing their vision in new, expansive, and provocative ways. This activity should not be people just throwing out ideas one at a time.

- To ensure that different kinds of learners can see their visions reflected in the synthesis, consider using visual and tactile methods, in addition to text (which would be on a flipchart page). More innovative ways could involve having them build something with manipulatives (e.g., Legos, pipe cleaners, tinker toys) or using stickers, colored markers, sticky notes, and other craft materials to create another visual representation of their visions.

Phase 3 – Innovate

This phase focuses on translating the vision — the themes from the Imagine phase — into reality to generate concrete and innovative ideas for living in the desired future.

Best time to use:
When a commitment to act on the vision has been agreed to, and now it's a matter of articulating the necessary changes.

Implementation Guidelines:
Participants are provided with a brief overview of what a social architecture means and what is expected in this phase. They are then asked to reflect individually, and then in pairs or triads, to develop three to five provocative propositions (i.e., possibility statements) written in present tense that would bring the vision into reality. These may be paragraphs or individual sentences and should be action oriented and stretch the status quo. The provocative propositions should be grounded in the stories, wishes, and imaginings participants developed in Phases 1 and 2. Participants are asked to write each provocative proposition on a sticky note (30 minutes).

While participants are doing this, the facilitator labels a series of flipchart pages with the themes that have emerged from the previous two phases. As participants finish writing their propositions, they place them on the flipchart pages that match the theme of their proposition.

When this is all done, participants are invited to view all the provocative propositions on the flipchart pages. The facilitator might read some or all of them as well. The facilitator might also ask participants for their reactions to and thoughts about what was generated.

In constructing provocative propositions, the task is to describe what is needed to create the conditions for the future state. The beginning point is to consider the current organization or community's architecture, that is, the social and technical elements that make up the organization or community. Typical elements of the social architecture include:

- Strategy
- Societal purposes
- Communication
- Leadership
- Structures
- Systems

- Culture
- Values
- Competencies
- Staff/people
- Relationships
- Business processes
- Results
- Management practices

It is important to note that at this stage, there is usually a great deal of excitement and momentum in the room. The future and how to proceed are coming into focus, and what seemed impossible earlier is now possible. Thus, it's critical that the work from this phase continue into Phase 4 where participants (and others they invite into this work) actually commit to making the provocative propositions "come alive."

Ensuring Success – Important Facilitation Guidelines
Tell participants that it's important to make sure that the propositions are aligned with the vision(s) and are provocative — they go beyond the status quo. And they should not be challenging whether something is possible. This phase is about making the vision more concrete and actionable, and therefore, should be written as if the future were now. Encourage participants to think hard about what would be happening if their vision were a reality.

Once the provocative propositions are written on sticky notes, participants should place them on a sticky wall or a series of blank flipchart pages. If possible, they should be labeled and grouped by common theme (e.g., Values, Structures, Relationships).

To debrief, the facilitator should read each of the provocative propositions to the whole group, move those that are not categorized accurately, and remove any obvious duplications. Be sure to invite the group to add any final propositions that might have surfaced during the report out.

Phase 4 – Implement

In this phase, participants create commitments to implementation while maintaining learning, celebrating successes, and identifying the next cycles of affirmative topics and appreciative inquiry.

Best time to use:
When the provocative propositions have been developed and participants are ready to move forward in making them a reality.

Implementation Guidelines:
It's important in this phase to ensure participants keep the vision as a driving force in their work and take responsibility for acting on their commitments. This is particularly critical as a raft of changes will likely be occurring simultaneously as a result of the AI process.

While this phase can be accomplished in several ways, one is to invite participants to reflect on all of the provocative propositions and to select one or more that would be desirable for their organization or

community (and relevant to their ongoing work). Being able to self-select the provocative propositions individuals are most interested in and passionate about is critical to this phase. They would then discuss next steps for implementation and develop action or project plans that include others they would reach out to. This could be followed with a large group debriefing where people volunteer to share what they have discussed and planned.

Ensuring Success – Important Facilitation Guidelines

- Invite participants to sign up to work on the propositions that they are most excited about. Not everyone has to work on all aspects of the vision. Encourage them to begin developing an action plan with clearly articulated actions, timelines, and responsibilities.
- Invite participants to reach out to others not in the room to work with them on making the propositions a reality.

Encourage participants to celebrate accomplishments along the way — this will be important for maintaining momentum and commitment to the vision.

NEXT STEPS

At the conclusion of the appreciative inquiry session, consider providing participants with a clear overview of next steps. For example:

- If participants did not complete all four phases, you may wish to share information about whether or when they will continue the appreciative inquiry process.
- Inform participants about how the information and insights shared during the session will be used and with whom they will be shared.

APPENDIX A. ADDITIONAL FACILITATION GUIDELINES

Room Set-Up
- Round tables that seat 6–8

Materials Needed
- Flipchart paper for each table
- Markers
- 2" x 2" sticky note pads
- Interview guides and other handouts as needed

Ground Rules
- All ideas are valid
- Everything is captured (flip charts, PC)
- Listen — really listen
- Observe time frames
- Seek common ground and action
- Differences and problems are acknowledged — but not worked on
- Confidentiality – Understand that what participants say is part of a process

Group Member Roles
- Each small group manages its own discussion, data, time, and reports. Here are the roles for self-managing this work. Roles should be rotated. Divide the work as you wish:
    1. Discussion Facilitator - Ensures that each person who wants to speak is heard within the time available. Keeps group on track to finish on time.
    2. Timekeeper - Keeps group aware of time left. Monitors report-outs and signals time remaining to person talking.
    3. Recorder - Writes group's output on flip charts using speaker's words. Asks people to restate long ideas briefly.
    4. Reporter - Delivers report to large group in time allotted.

Characteristics of Great AI Questions
- Are stated in the affirmative.
- Help forge a personal connection between the interviewer and interviewee.
- Build on the assumption that "the glass is half full" (rather than half empty).
- Give a broad definition to the topic. They give room to "swim around."
- Are presented as an invitation to tell stories rather than abstract opinions or theories.
- Value "what is." They spark the appreciative imagination by helping the person locate experiences in the past or present that are worth valuing.
- Convey unconditional, positive regard.
- Evoke essential values, aspirations, and inspirations.
- Draw on people's life and work experience.
- Suggest action.

APPENDIX B. SAMPLE APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY QUESTIONS

- As you reflect on your experience with the program, tell me a story about a highpoint.
- At what point in time did you feel most alive?
- When did you know it was working? How did you know it?
- When did you feel most successful in terms of your contributions to the project?
- Thinking about your department's contribution to the mission of the organization, what have you done to make the biggest difference?
- What are the most outstanding moments or stories from this organization's past that make you most proud to be a member of this organization?
- What are the things that give life to the organization when it is most alive, most effective, and most in tune with the overarching vision?
- What are we doing that should be preserved as we make changes?
- What were major milestones along the way?
- What kept you going and what was nurturing to you?
- Can you think of incidents or times that were exhilarating for you?
- Were there times when you said to yourself, "This is working, this is working!" What was happening during those times?
- If you could have waved a magic wand and the project would have turned out exactly as you had planned, what would it look like?
- Where might you have planted seeds that may sprout? What would things look like if these seeds did sprout and grow? What can you do to further support this growth?
- Looking at your entire experience, can you recall a time when you felt most excited about what you were doing? What were you doing? Who else was involved?
- What is the best team experience you've ever been involved with?
- What would be three wishes you have for this program/organization/community?
- Describe a time when you felt listened to. What was happening in the group?
- Describe a time when someone went out of his or her way to do something for you. What made it possible?
- If you could transform the ways in which you do your work, what would it look like and what would it take to happen?
- Tell me about a time when you were forced to do more with less and the results exceeded your wildest expectations. Who was involved? How were the results achieved? What did each person specifically do or contribute?
- When you think of a time when you collaborated with another group and did so successfully, what comes to mind? What circumstances allowed the collaboration to occur?
- Think about a time when you felt incredibly well supported by someone or a group of people from another organization. Tell me about that time.

APPENDIX C. SELECTED REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

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