



## **Appreciative Inquiry: Solving Our Problems by Looking at What is Going Right**

*Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a new approach to community development, based on the simple assumption that every community has something that works well and those strengths can be the starting point for creating positive change.*

*This document was created for the CultivateNC program by Dr. Susan Jakes and Jacqueline Murphy Miller (<http://communitydevelopment.ces.ncsu.edu/fact-sheets-2/>)*

### **Background**

Back in the 1980's, the Cleveland Clinic purchased the Omni, a low budget hotel located across the street from the clinic. The idea was to provide a convenient place for the families of clinic patients to stay. The clinic completely restored the hotel facilities retaining the original management and staff. Although the restoration provided a good opportunity for business growth, the staff and management were locked in a setting of distrust and backbiting. The staff was bickering and the service was poor.

The clinic hired PhD student, *David Cooperrider* to resolve the problems. The conventional approach would have been to hire a new management team or send them off for training, but *Cooperrider* had a different idea. He asked the staff to spend a week in a highly rated, five-star hotel. They were NOT supposed to think about their hotel. Their only job was to write down everything the hotel staff did well, that made their stay more enjoyable. At the end of the week they wrote a report and presented it to the five-star hotel manager. The manager was so pleased they put on a celebratory banquet for the Omni managers. The Omni hotel managers returned to their hotel inspired and full of ideas. Incorporating these new ideas brought about immediate changes in staff attitude and service; the Omni quickly gained a four-star status.

Since that time, *Cooperrider* has worked with many leading corporations, not for profit organizations and government agencies, using the process of Appreciative Inquiry to help those organizations grow and develop. AI began as a tool for organizational development, but more recently AI has gained recognition as an equally effective tool for building community capacity and community development.

## Concept

What is Appreciative Inquiry?

AI is based on the simple assumption that every organization/community has something that works well and those strengths can be the starting point for creating positive change. This is fundamentally different from the problem-solving Deficit Approach, which focuses on the things that are not working and tries to fix them. Building the capacity of an organization or community is a fundamentally different task than fixing the old processes that are no longer working.

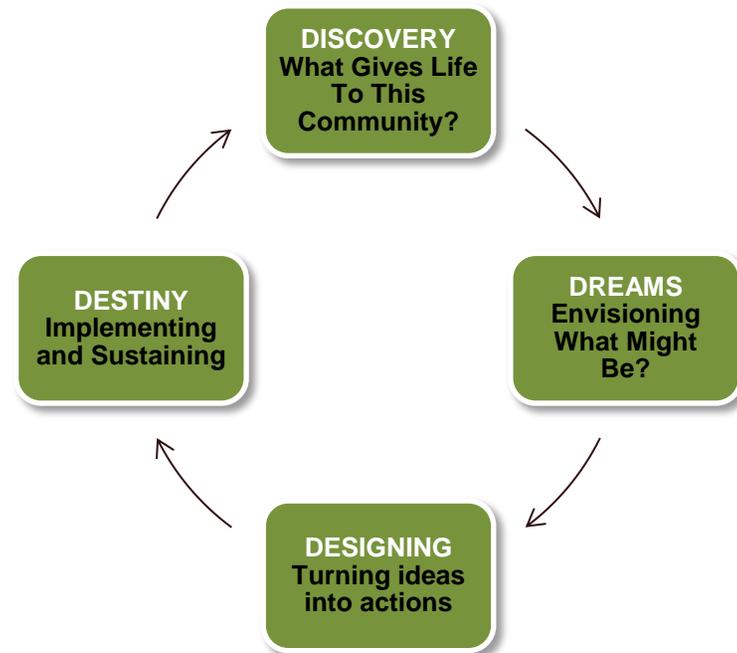
## How to Use Appreciative Inquiry

The process for applying AI in an organization or a community cycles through four stages: Discovery, Dreaming, Designing and Destiny

### DISCOVERY

The process for AI begins with a survey, but it's not the typical survey that uses multiple choice questions or yes/no responses. The survey is really an *interview* that collects stories from the people who work in the organization or live in the community. The participants are asked to share memorable accounts about a time when the organization or community was at its best; success stories from the past and present.

*Storytelling or story sharing has proven to be an effective tool for generating interest in local issues and for building social bonds between community members. It is also a great way to help communities get past the usual ways of doing things. From the stories you should be able to identify common goals and shared values.*



**What you study grows:** It's important to ask the right interview questions in the discovery phase. For example: A county in NC had a 10 percent failure rate of its septic systems. It spent significant time and money doing a study of the systems that were failing. It learned a lot about the problem, but had obtained no information on the 90 percent of systems that were working.

This is SO COMMON!! If the goal of the study was to reduce the septic tank failure rate, it needed to learn what factors were in place that supported 90 percent of the systems being properly maintained and working. (Thrive, 2013)

Be careful not to fall into this trap. We are so accustomed to focusing on the problems it takes some practice to redirect our focus in the direction we want to move. It's like riding a bike, if you are approaching a ditch and you only look at the ditch, you will ride into the ditch. But if you look for a path around or across the ditch, your bike will move in the direction you are focused.

**Good opportunity for a youth group:** *Conducting community interviews provides an excellent opportunity for a 4-H program, high school service-learning project or faith-based Youth Group to gain experience in civic engagement and to acquire a deeper appreciation for the community they will inherit. Another option is to contact the local community college to see if some of the faculty would be interested in working to promote this project with students. Students interested in journalism, politics, economics, human services, history, entrepreneurial business operations, and documentary studies (video and audio production) would gain valuable work experience, and expand their knowledge of the community and civic engagement.*

## **DREAMS**

*If you had three wishes, what would you wish for your community?*

This is a typical question that would be asked at the end of an AI interview. During the *dream phase*, participants are encouraged to *imagine* how they would like to see the community grow. The purpose is to look for broad themes and identify community values.

At the Omni Hotel, the dream was to provide convenient accommodations for the families and friends of clinic patients AND to rebuild a rundown hotel into a thriving business.

## DESIGN

In the design phase, participants are asked to review the ideas that were generated in the dream phase and select a few of those ideas that best support the groups shared vision of the future. Participants are then encouraged to think creatively, and begin to build the bridge from the best of “what is” (present) towards “what might be” (future).

## DESTINY

The final phase focuses on the practicalities of turning the ideas into a reality. Here the groups will start to drill down the types of systems, processes, and strategies that will enable the ideas developed in the design phase to be realized. However, *destiny* is not really an end to the process. The destiny phase leads naturally to new discoveries of community strengths, which lead to new opportunities and the AI process begins again.



The process for Appreciative Inquiry is often conducted at an AI Summit. A summit is a two or four day workshop where members of an organization or community come together to bring about positive change in their organization/community using the 4-D process. There are two key elements to remember when using this approach.

1. **Inclusive Collaboration:** In order to be successful, the process must involve the whole organization/community or a representative cross-section. In this way all voices can be heard and everyone’s contribution valued. The opportunity for support and sustainable development is much stronger when the foundation is built on inclusive collaboration.
2. **What you study grows.** Be careful when designing your interview questions. We are so accustomed to focusing on the problems it takes some practice to redirect our focus in the direction we want to move.

*The information provided in this factsheet was adapted from the Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: For Leaders of Change (2<sup>nd</sup> edition.) Cooperrider, D.L., Whitney, D., Stavros, J.M. (2008). Brunswick, Ohio: Crown Custom Publishing Inc. (<http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/>)*

*Appreciative Inquiry and Community Development (<http://www.iisd.org/ai/>)*