

sowing seeds 

# APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Using Appreciative Inquiry to make change happen



Public Service Management Wales  
Rheoli yng Ngwasanaeth Cyhoeddus Cymru



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[www.wales.gov.uk/psmw](http://www.wales.gov.uk/psmw)



## introduction

**Making change happen is an essential component of successful leadership. This requires not only the skills to envision improvement and plan for change but also the capacity to secure full engagement from those who need to make change happen. Building a commitment to change is the most challenging but significant step in developing a culture of high performance inside organisations.**

**Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an innovative approach to organisational change that can be used as a model for delivering service improvement. In contrast to other forms of organisational development, it builds upon the strengths and successes of organisations to drive the change agenda. At the core of AI is a model of engagement that focuses upon our capacity as managers and leaders to observe, listen and inquire.**

## what is AI?

AI is a model for change and improvement that identifies and builds on what works well within organisations. Unlike more conventional approaches to organisational development that try to identify problems and deficits, AI is more concerned with identifying the core strength of an organisation to underpin the change process. Within the organisational context, it is a powerful and proven way to stimulate positive and sustainable change through people because it taps into the basic human need to be valued, creative, and to make a difference.

The process was developed by David Cooperrider of Case Western Reserve University and Suresh Srivastava in the 1980s (1). It has been used successfully by organisations as diverse as Nokia, Halfords and the NHS to drive forward sustainable improvement and deliver organisational transformation.

## *The eternal challenge*

Public services have always faced a complex set of circumstances and pressures that frustrate and distract from the goal of delivering ongoing improvement. In the current environment, there is a continual expectation that more will be provided with less to ensure maximum benefit from investment. Within Wales, the focus upon building collaborative solutions and

developing new models of co-production have brought their own set of different challenges as organisations search for new and innovative forms of engagement and partnership. Success in these circumstances is often dependent on building relationships and communicating effectively with others as the first stage in building a commitment to change.

## *Traditional approaches*

Organisations employ a range of strategies to improve, inevitably beginning with an evaluative process (formal or informal) to establish a picture, baseline or a truth about the current situation. Within the public sector this is increasingly formalised, data driven and structured to provide an evidence base for taking action.

While there can be merit in this approach, more traditional evaluative processes are typically based on a deficit model – i.e. they result in a list of strengths and shortcomings with the weaknesses driving an action plan. The tendency to reduce the ills of an organisation to a simple reality can be overwhelming and distort the approach

or action needed to secure meaningful change. In this context, people are seen as part of a larger machine that can be fixed through remedial strategies such as training, performance management, and systems improvement.

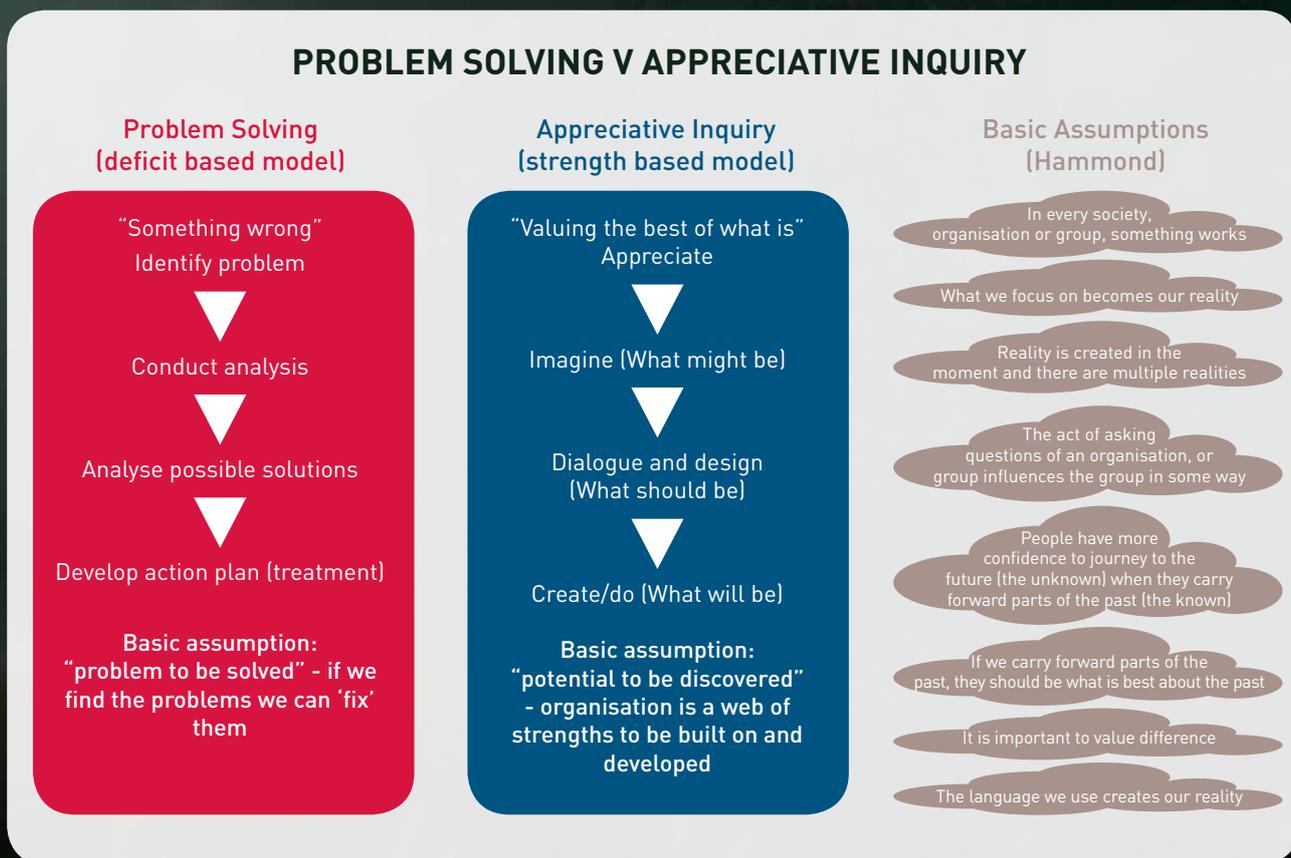
What often occurs when weaknesses are identified is that blame is attributed, explicitly or implicitly. This is developed into an organisational narrative that is often directed at other people or systems. This focus can have a ‘corrosive’ impact on the very thing that needs to drive change – positive relationships built on trust and confidence.

# What underpins the AI approach

'The task of organisational leadership is to create an alignment of strengths in ways that make a system's weaknesses irrelevant' - Peter Drucker

AI centres on a number of assumptions (see diagram). These assumptions, based on David Cooperrider's original work, have been summarised in many ways but

perhaps most succinctly in 'The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry' (2). They include the view that 'an organisation moves towards what it studies' and that 'the very act of asking questions starts to influence an organisation'. This latter assumption should strike a note of recognition with anyone who is familiar with action research.



'AI recognises that for meaningful and sustainable change to occur individuals need to be fully valued and engaged. Most

importantly, it responds to that critical challenge that trainers often fail to address: start where people are 'at'.

## *AI in practice*

AI can be used in a number of different ways, but the most familiar methodology is the '4D approach'. This involves conducting four stages of development described as Discovery, Dreaming, Designing and Delivery (or Destiny). In recent years this model has been expanded to include a fifth element at the beginning called Define.

Before beginning the 4D approach to AI, an initial introduction is required to familiarise those involved in the process. As with any other organisational development strategy, managers need to understand the concept, implications and benefits to make sense of the model and convey its value to others.

Conversations at this introductory stage can be used to give individuals a 'taste' of the process. Questions such as 'What particular high points have you had within the organisation?' 'How do you recognise success?' and 'What would be your vision for the future?' allow decision makers to understand the process at an experiential level. Not only do these questions give managers and leaders a taste of AI, they also feed into the Define stage. This is the point where the overarching purpose and focus of the exercise is agreed.

### *Define*

This stage brings the key 'players' together to identify the purpose, focus and methodology of the process; this includes agreeing topics or themes for the Discovery stage. Based on a number of assumptions of AI (see previous page), these topics and resultant questions are both powerful and fateful! Decisions made at this stage of the process are critical and set the direction and 'tone' for the remainder of the exercise.

This early discussion about the process and methodology ensures there is a coherent and shared plan of delivery in place. This helps to generate future focus and concentrate efforts on building outcomes. It can also help to secure 'buy-in' and support from all parties. This then leads onto the first part of the main 4D cycle - Discovery

## Discovery

The Discovery stage provides the foundation stones for later parts of the cycle. It invites participants, normally working in pairs, to identify peak experiences centred on the agreed topics. The purpose of this is to uncover or expose the strengths and successes of an organisation. As part of this process, individuals also explore the contributory factors that led to success, such as what was happening at the time, why was it successful, who was there and did what. Inevitably, the individuals engaged in the reflection are connected to the success and can identify their own roles and contribution to the process.

As an example, if one of the topic choices was 'effective partnership working', a question such as 'talk about a time when partnership work resulted in tangible positive outcomes for the people you support' would help to generate a positive dynamic helping those engaged in the discussion to uncover the qualities and attributes that lead to success. This in turn becomes a platform for later stages of the process. Having shared individual stories and insights, participants are then encouraged within larger groups to draw

out key themes and observations. In the context of effective partnership working, issues such as 'trust' and 'effective communication' are likely to surface, helping to create a template for future success.

To enrich the process and encourage a diversity of thinking, other stakeholders can be invited to be involved throughout the 4D cycle. This can include other departments, external partners, or customers / service users. This can add significant impact to the outcome.

The 'power' of the process lies in positive insight and awareness which is generated through inquiry and discussion and based on the real (and hence meaningful) experiences of participants. These themes contribute to what is often referred to as the 'positive core' of the organisation or group.

The next stage builds on this positive core in order to look into the future. This 'Dream' stage explores an individual's views about where they see the future of the organisation.

## Dream

The Dream stage involves participants in an aspirational look at the future of the organisation or service. This can be an opportunity to encourage creative forms of expression in order to add to the impact of the exercise. Due to its title, this stage can receive a cautious responses from managers who are concerned the process might become nebulous and unmanageable. However, as a process, it has many similarities with the 'visioning work' that many organisations within the corporate world engage in to provide clarity of purpose and refresh goals.

Discussions can be prompted by questions such as, 'Imagine the organisation has just won an award for the best partnership working in Wales, what sorts of things would they be saying?'

The Dream stage is rooted in real experiences because it is carried out within the context of what is already occurring and had been identified at the Discovery stage. It builds on the 'positive core' of the organisation but then encourages participants to extend their thinking and describe an aspirational future. Out of this exercise, participants agree on a set of 'Provocative Propositions'. These are a set of affirmative statements written in the current tense that stretch and challenge,

whilst remaining rooted in what is working currently.

Taking our partnership topic, and resultant themes of communication and trust; these could prompt statements like:

- o We communicate effectively with partner organisations
- o We value what other people have to say and trust their views
- o We follow through on our commitments at all times

In some cases, the aspirational stage builds on and spreads what is already working well. In other cases, it is the first time that a 'gap analysis' starts to occur leading to a recognition that more significant movement is required.

'Because we have derived the future from reality, we know it can happen. We can see it, we know what it feels like, and we move to a collective, collaborative view of where we are going' - Sue Annis Hammond

This stage of the process is similar in many ways to the idea of 'back-casting'. In other words, developing a clear view of where the organisation wants to be in the future and then identifying the steps that will help to deliver the change.

## Design

To help translate words into action, the Design stage engages participants in agreeing how their aspirations will be put into practice. This is an opportunity to involve a wider stakeholder group in the cycle of change if this has not already occurred. To achieve this, participants may choose to meet with identified individuals (e.g. customers / service users) to talk through the Discovery and Dream stage of the process. The responses are then fed into the Design stage to enrich and enhance plans for action.

It is at this stage that participants work together to agree tangible responses to the 'Provocative Propositions'. These will have emerged organically from the group and may include some form of prioritisation when numerous actions emerge.

Taking our examples above, typical actions could include:

- o Individuals or teams committing to a change in behaviours and developing a series of actions to acquire new skills or build new approaches
- o Instituting changes in processes and systems to build better connectivity and generate new creative forms of governance
- o Developing new structures to reflect changing priorities

## Delivery

The final Delivery stage (also referred to as Destiny) is where action becomes translated into outcome and the organisation builds an AI mindset into the fabric of its culture in order that the process becomes sustainable. This occurs naturally due to peoples' involvement in the 4D cycle, and also arises out of commitments made during the Design stage. The fact that AI is enshrined in the communication processes used by individuals everyday in the course of their work means that it can quickly become an established form of engagement between all parties.

As AI becomes a more accepted and commonly used way of thinking for

individuals, it can impact on many other aspects of the organisation's operation. For example, it can start to be applied to supervision and performance management processes with the result that individuals feel appreciated and motivated. It can also be applied to self and group evaluation, with teams taking responsibility for an ongoing learning cycle based on recognising and appreciating what people are doing well.

The success of this process lies in the ability to cultivate a culture of inquiry inside the workplace that focuses upon the goal of continuous improvement and is inclusive of all.

# The application and benefits of AI

AI can be applied to many parts of the organisation where there is potential for development and change, this includes:

- o Overarching organisational development
- o Self-evaluation
- o Thematic reviews (e.g. partnership working and customer service)
- o Efficiency drives
- o Performance management / supervision processes
- o Continuing professional development

The benefits of the process are centred in the engagement and motivation of staff, these include:

- o Engaging and motivating people from the start, providing a positive focus and building on current good practice
- o Solutions working because they are rooted in reality and participants taking ownership
- o Identifying areas for development whilst avoiding a blame culture
- o Providing a platform to engage with key stakeholders in a meaningful way
- o Promoting the organisation to others
- o Ensuring outcomes are sustainable

# How to take AI forward inside your organisation

## Finding human potential

One of the key strengths of AI is the early focus on discovering what works best within an organisation. Identifying individuals within your organisation who have a natural inclination towards positive thinking and

could act as early adopters can help significantly to energise the process. This support can then be harnessed within a proven framework in order to move the organisation forwards.

## Building knowledge and understanding about the process

This article may have provided you with sufficient information to begin to take action within your organisation. However, if you want to find out more about AI try one of the books listed at the end of this article.

In addition, the AI Commons website (3) is the recognised source of online information and the AI European Network is a centre for information exchange and courses within the UK and Europe (4).

## *Training trainers*

There are a number of training courses available in AI within the UK. These are usually listed on the European website (4). Sending one or two key facilitators / trainers can act as the initial catalyst to further development and help to build knowledge and awareness within an organisation.





**References:**

- (1) Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros – Appreciative Inquiry Handbook**
- (2) Sue Annis Hammond – The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry**
- (3) AI Commons website – [www.appreciativeinquiry.case.edu](http://www.appreciativeinquiry.case.edu)**
- (4) European website - [www.networkplace.eu](http://www.networkplace.eu)**

Appreciative Inquiry was written by Roger Rowett, Director of Taith Ltd and Dr Neil Wooding and is one of the series of Sowing Seeds topic papers published by Public Service Management Wales.