

AcademiWales



sowing seeds

Appreciative Inquiry

Sustainable improvement through
building on what works



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Introduction

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is an innovative approach that has been used by organisations of all sizes in Wales and beyond to implement forward sustainable service improvement. It is characterised by a process that is solution focused and involves the workforce and other key stakeholders in driving forward creative and positive change.

What is appreciative inquiry?

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a way of thinking and working that starts by identifying and building on what works, rather than focusing on problems and deficits. Within an organisational context it is a powerful and proven way to stimulate positive and sustainable change. At an individual level it meets people's intrinsic need to be valued, trusted and creative.

“We have a deficit approach to performance management in the NHS. At every level of the system, from front line teams to government ministers, we focus on the problems of the service; what we need to put right.

Suppose we start from a different perspective. One that appreciates and builds on achievements in the existing system. One that shifts our focus from

fixing deficits to a view of ourselves as doing good work much of the time and naturally wanting to replicate that experience to do more and better work in the future.”

(Helen Bevan, NHS Improving Quality, 2004)

AI was developed in the 1980s by David Cooperrider of Case Western Reserve University and Suresh Srivastava of The Taos Institute. It has been used successfully by organisations as diverse as the US Navy, Halfords and the NHS to engage people in making a positive and tangible difference to the organisations they work for. It is a methodology that Academi Wales uses to support change in the public service in Wales.

Public services have always faced a complex set of circumstances and pressures. Like other sectors, there is often an expectation that more will be provided with less and the ongoing economic environment has sharpened this focus to an even greater degree. One of the consistent messages from Welsh Government in terms of efficiency has been on collaborative working between services and engagement of the people who use them. David Macloed delivered a five year engagement project on behalf of the UK Government between 2009 and 2014 in order to demonstrate the value of this way of working.

However, it is still often the case that organisations do not maximise opportunities to engage with the people who have first-hand knowledge of the service, including front line staff and customers. The reasons for this are often understandable and include managers not wanting to openly explore problematic areas with a wider audience. Traditional self-evaluation processes are sometimes problem focused and can lead to blame and recrimination. This can have tangible impacts on the organisation such as low morale, absenteeism and high staff turnover, and there have been a number of high profile reports within Wales highlighting these issues inside organisations.

Traditional approaches

Organisations employ a range of strategies to improve their services and these inevitably include some form of self evaluation process (formal or informal). Within the public service this is increasingly formalised, data driven and structured.

Evaluative processes are typically based on a deficit model – while they do identify good practice, the focus is on the weaknesses on the basis that it is these that drive the action plan. These approaches broadly see

people as part of a larger machine that can be fixed through remedial strategies such as training, performance management and systems improvement.

This is not to say the identification of weaknesses and the cause of these is not necessary in some specific scenarios; only that from a systemic point of view the results of this type of activity can be counterproductive to the overall aim.

How is appreciative inquiry different?

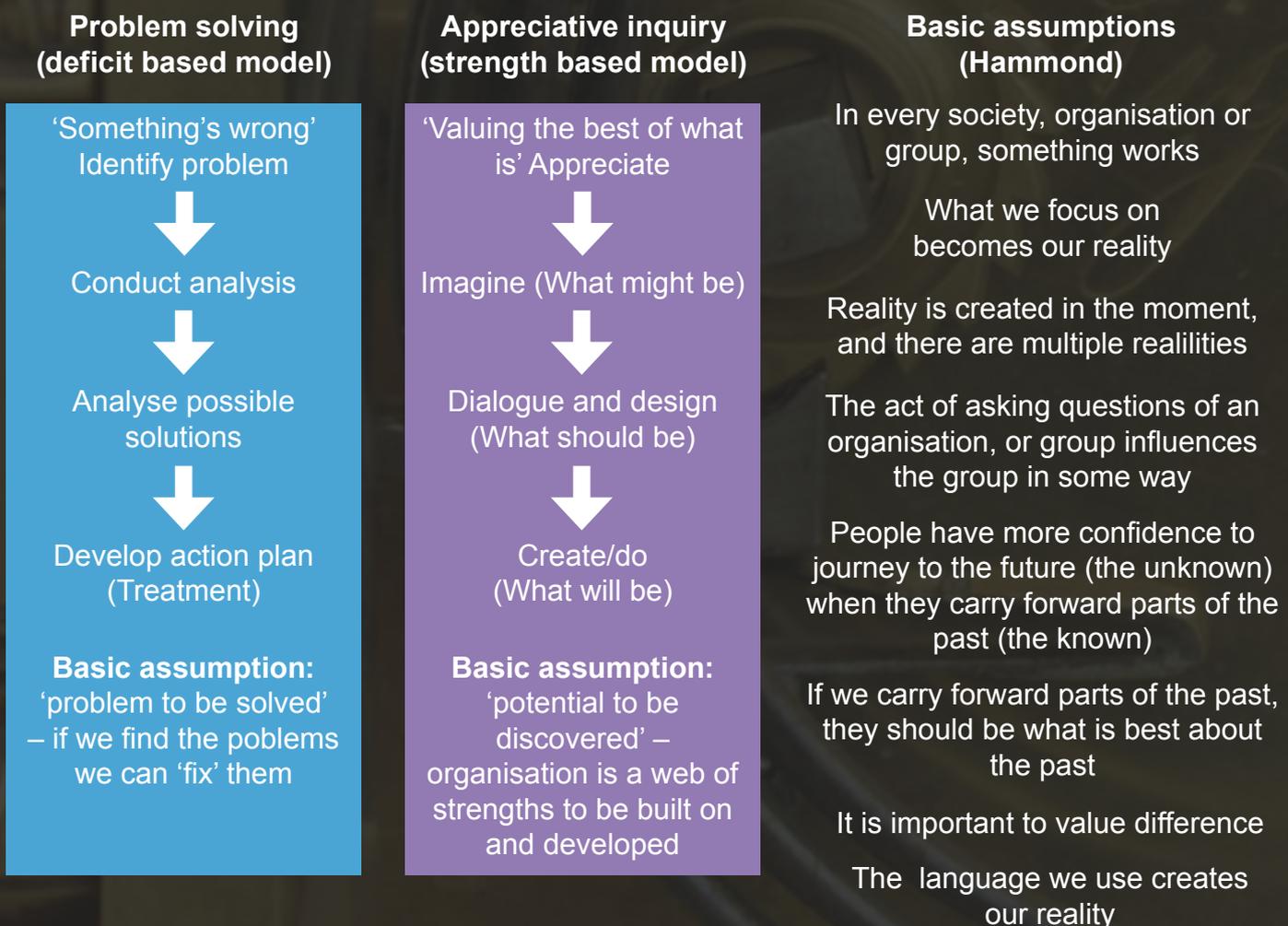
“The task of organisational leadership is to create an alignment of strengths in ways that make a system’s weaknesses irrelevant.”

(Peter Drucker, 2007)

AI centres on a number of assumptions
(see Diagram 1, Cooperrider, 2005).

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’ (Hammond, 2013). 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’.

Problem Solving V Appreciative Inquiry (Diagram 1)



AI recognises that for meaningful and sustainable change to occur key stakeholders need to be fully valued and engaged in the process. This includes taking consideration of 'depth' and 'width'. **Depth** promotes the importance of involving all levels of the organisation or service, from leadership through to front line workers. **Width** addresses the involvement of other stakeholders beyond the workforce wherever possible.

AI also responds to the critical challenge of 'start where people are at', it recognises

that every individual has their own perception and associated narrative of the organisation and that this will include positive and negative stories based on their own direct experiences. We must focus on changing people's experiences if we are to truly change their actions.

What AI asserts is that this perception should start with experiences of what *is* working, not what is *not* working. What is not working will be addressed, but within a solution focussed framework.

The theory

Everything is about going from A to B. Where are we now? Where do we want to get to? How are we going to get there? Taking people along throughout the whole process requires engagement from the beginning.

AI has a well researched theoretical base that is founded on positive psychology and social constructionism. The detail of the theory and principles is available in a range of publications, but Hammond (2013) simplified these as a number of assumptions that are outlined in Diagram 1. These include statements such as 'within every society, organisation or group something works' and 'whatever we focus on becomes our reality'.

Even if an organisation is going through very challenging times there will be (or will have been) examples of good practice. This is something that AI taps into right at the start of the process, based on direct personal experiences. However, not only do we explore what is working well,

we also discover the contributory factors to that good practice – the 'gold dust' of the AI process.

The second assumption is more complex, but it essentially proposes that if we start by focusing on problems we will end up seeing more problems, with all the associated dynamics that flow from this. It is also suggesting that the end result of this process will become our reality – if the narrative within the organisation is negative then this in itself will impact negatively on the performance of the organisation (the very thing we were trying to improve).

However, if our starting point is what is working, this produces a whole different dynamic and energy. This will result in a positive narrative that will be the catalyst for a range of creative ideas for improvement that people have real ownership of. This is how we start taking people with us on that journey from A to B.

The practice

People use AI in a range of ways, but the most familiar methodology is the '4D Cycle – Discover, Dream, Design and Deliver' (or 'Destiny'). In recent years this model has been expanded to include a fifth element at the beginning called 'Define' and this is now usually referred to as the '5D Cycle', (Watkins, Moher & Kelly, 2011).

Before the process even starts an initial introduction is required. People may not be familiar with AI and what it involves. As with any other organisational development tool, managers need to understand the concept, implications and benefits. This understanding and buy-in is important and should include the direct involvement of leaders and managers in the process.

This relates to the concept of organisational 'depth' that was referred to on the previous page.

Conversations at this introductory stage can be used to give people a 'taste' of the process. Questions such as 'what particular high points have you had within the organisation?' and 'what would be your vision for the future?' allow decision makers to understand the process at an experiential level rather than just a remote concept. Not only do these questions give people a taste of AI, they also feed into the define stage of the 5D Cycle. This is the point where the overarching purpose and focus of the exercise is agreed.

Case study

Chwarae Teg used appreciative inquiry to conduct an evaluation of learning in relation to their flagship multi-million pound Agile Nation project. The organisation involved every member of staff in a series of events and conversations about their learning from running the project; together with their aspirations for the future. All this feedback then fed into a large AI 'summit' at the 2015 annual staff conference in order to plan for the future. The outputs from the process were used to write a report to funders and to contribute to their business plan for the coming years.

Define

This stage brings the key 'players' together to identify the purpose, focus and methodology of the process; this includes agreeing topics for the discovery and dream stages. Based on a number of the assumptions of AI (see *Diagram 1*), these topics and resultant questions are both powerful and fateful! Decisions made at this stage are critical and set the direction and tone for the whole process ('the language we use creates our reality').

The topic choice is inevitably dominated early on by the views of management. These are the people who will have commissioned the process and have clear ideas about the issues that need to be addressed (the topics). Even though this is a process that takes its starting point from what is working, the catalyst is usually problems and issues that need addressing.

In order to ensure we are getting a broad organisational view about what the issues are, the 'three wishes' question is often used at the define stage. This asks the very simple question to everyone involved 'if you had three wishes for the future of this organisation what would they be?'.

Across all the responses we will start to see patterns emerging; common areas that arise across the feedback. These can then be 'seeded' into the questions for the subsequent discovery and dream stages. These questions stimulate conversations in relation to the chosen topics.

The discussion about process and methodology at the define stage ensures there is a coherent and shared plan of delivery in place. This then leads onto the first part of the main cycle – discovery.

Case study

Denbighshire County Council has worked over a number of years to carry out a range of service evaluations for the Youth Service. These used an appreciative inquiry methodology in order to engage stakeholders in exploring what was working well and people's aspirations for the future. These exercises resulted in new activity that everyone had ownership of, including 'customers' of the services.

Discovery

The discovery stage provides the foundation stones for later parts of the cycle. It involves participants, normally working in pairs, in identifying peak experiences centred on the agreed topics. Critically, people also explore the contributory factors to the experiences occurring – what was happening at the time, who was there, where were you, and so on.

As an example, if one of the topic choices was ‘effective partnership working’, a question such as ‘talk about a time when you worked in creative ways with others that resulted in tangible and positive outcomes for the people you support’ might be given. The word ‘creative’ might have been added because this was a theme in the responses to the three wishes question.

In groups, individuals would then share what they had each discovered and identify common themes across the group (these will always occur). These common themes then form the foundation stones of the rest of the process. In this example, issues like valuing people, trust and communication might arise.

The power of the process is based on the fact that these resultant themes are based on the real (and meaningful) experiences of participants. These themes contribute to what is often referred to as the ‘positive core’ of the organisation or group. It is the discovery stage of AI that most sets it apart from other organisational development processes. People are then ready for the next stage – dream.

Case study

InterLink RCT, Teach First and Tonypandy Community College trained a group of students, parents and professionals in AI. The process involved people in taking an aspirational look at the future of the school and how everyone could work in partnership in order to bring about better outcomes for young people. The Local Engagement Officer for Teach First said “There is no process more empowering than AI. Coming together in such a positive, asset-focussed environment not only let people feel empowered to implement change, but caused real change there and then to improve the learning in our school. I cannot think of a better way to bring people together as respected equals, all valued for their stories and experience”.

Dream

The dream stage of AI involves all stakeholders in visioning the future of the organisation, service or area of focus. This is the second part of the process that uses questions based around the topic choices agreed in the define stage. Again, how these questions are worded and how much people identify with them is critical. 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' or 'imagine we are 12 months in the future and this is the most creative organisation that you have ever worked for in terms of delivering excellent customer service. What would we see happening? How would it feel to work here?'

The dream stage is very much rooted in reality because it is carried out within the context of what is already occurring (from 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, while remaining rooted in what is working currently.

Using our partnership topic example, and resultant themes of communication and trust; these could prompt a statement like:

"We are highly effective communicators who really value what other people have to say. This results in our workforce and customers feeling really valued and a meaningful part of what we do."

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

This is an opportunity to encourage creative forms of expression in order to add to the impact of the exercise. In many cases people will draw images or convey their ideas in other forms. The imagery of this stage, regardless of how it is conveyed, is a powerful tool in creating energy within the process. This energy is something that particularly characterises AI.

"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"

(Hammond, 2013)

Design

The design stage of AI builds on the best of what is already happening in order to deliver on aspirations for the future. It is about agreeing actions that will build on and spread existing pockets of good practice, while also agreeing how aspirations can be delivered in a tangible way.

Sometimes pre-defined design elements are used. These are areas of the operation that the organisation specifically wants to consider in moving forward. This could include elements such as public relations, leadership, research, training and so on. In other circumstances there are no fixed design elements in order to allow as much 'space' for people as possible in terms of lateral thinking.

It is at the design 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 multiple actions emerge (as they always do).

Taking our partnership example above actions might include:

- individuals or teams committing to a change in behaviours – deepening of partnering relationships through shared outcome building and identification of common purpose, building of trust
- changes in processes and systems – joint arrangement may be strengthened to support delivery success, pooled budgets, joint posts
- changes in structures – accountability lines may be altered, teams formally merged, chairing/leadership roles redefined

Case study

Public Health Wales trained a number of their staff in AI in order that they could apply the approach to their work around improved health and wellbeing.

Delivery

The final stage focuses specifically on personal commitments, organisational commitments and paths forward for innovating 'what will be'. The result of the delivery stage is an array of changes and actions that are agreed at the design stage, these are now implemented and impact on how the organisation, team or individual delivers their work.

The opportunity also exists at this stage to build an AI mindset into the fabric of the organisational culture and to make the process sustainable for future use. This will, to an extent, occur naturally following

peoples involvement in the whole 5D Cycle, but will need to be reinforced through leadership behaviour.

Where AI starts to become a way of thinking for individuals, it can impact on many other aspects of the organisation's operations. 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 ongoing self evaluation, with teams taking responsibility for a learning cycle based on recognising and appreciating what people are doing well.

Case study

Prospects for Young People, an independent Children's Home provider in North East Wales, delivered training to all their staff in Person Centred Planning. Aspects of appreciative inquiry were used to add impact to the training. This work won a Care Council for Wales Accolade for 'Excellent Outcomes for Young People'.

Application and benefits

AI can be applied in many ways, this includes:

- organisational development
- self evaluation
- thematic reviews (for example, partnership working, customer service, IT systems)
- performance management/supervision processes
- recruitment and talent management
- continuing professional development (CPD)
- community engagement and development
- Person Centred Planning (PCP)

The benefits of the process are centred on the engagement of staff and other key stakeholders, including:

- engaging and motivating people from the very start
- providing a positive focus and building on current good practice
- solutions being sustainable because they are rooted in reality with participants taking ownership of actions
- identifying areas for development but avoiding a blame culture
- providing a platform to engage with key stakeholders in a meaningful way
- promoting the organisation to others

Case study

Cardiff University's Community Gateway Project used AI in 2015 to engage with the people who live, and have a stake in, the Grangetown area of Cardiff. The aim of the project was to involve people in taking an aspirational look at how their community could be developed and improved, building on the best of what was already there. The project also involved students from the university and culminated in a large community event to share ideas and agree actions that would positively benefit everyone.

What next

If you think AI might be an approach that is worth exploring further you may want to look at opportunities for training or just get help facilitating the process. If you have an appetite to learn more about the process a few options are listed below, these are a few of the many resources available within Wales and beyond.

Books

1. Appreciative Inquiry Handbook – Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros
2. The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry – Sue Annis Hammond
3. Zen and the Art of Appreciative Inquiry – Roger Rowett

Web sites

1. AI Commons website – the recognised international resource for AI – <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/>
2. Taith – a range of information about AI in Wales including training opportunities and information on some of the case studies listed – www.taith.co.uk
3. Appreciating People – a range of practical AI training resources – www.appreciatingpeople.co.uk/ai-essentials

Case study

National Museums of Wales trained a core group of staff in AI in order to explore new and creative ways to evaluate their exhibitions and projects. The Head of Policy and Planning said that “last year (2013) we employed the approach on the post-project appraisal of a major corporate project with success and insight”.

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