

From Problems to Possibilities

Learning and Experiences of Appreciative Inquiry in Work and Life

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“All the greatest and most important problems of life are fundamentally insoluble... They can never be solved, but only outgrown. This “outgrowing” proves on further investigation to require a new level of consciousness. It was not solved logically in its own terms but faded when confronted with a new and stronger life urge”.

— Carl Jung

One of us is a Medical Doctor by profession and the other a corporate HR Manager. As a Doctor and as a Manager, we were both used to seeing what is wrong with a person or an organization, conduct a diagnosis and suggest remedial actions, either in the form of “bitter pills” or as an “intervention” that meant restructuring, retrenching or retraining people to become better. The people and the organizations became “better” or at least we felt so, but definitely we experienced this process as drain on our energies as well as for the people who were involved.

This became a stark reality when we started working with one of the largest public hospitals in Mumbai. As usual, we went in to speak to doctors, administrators, nurses and so on to find out what ails the system... and the floodgates were opened! People poured out all that is wrong, bad and morbid about the place. Also they said that they are helpless and can't do anything about it because someone up there or the system was responsible. So we were stuck!

Amongst all these outpourings of misery, there were glimpses of statements about how proud they are about their professions, small stories leaked about how they did some good jobs despite all the odds, some appreciation of the good actions by others and so on... This was like the silver lining amongst the clouds.

These small instances helped in changing our belief about the hospital. We began to believe that something works here. We began to respect the staff who have shown tremendous commitment against all odds to help a patient live. We started to look for life here.... and we found it! Once we started seeking out stories of what made this work worthwhile, there was no stopping them! There were stories of joy, of the miracle of life, of wonder of the gift that this profession has given. They were moving and often there were many tears, but they were about why, despite what seemed like impossible conditions, people continued to excel. That was not all, once the staff had shared this, there was a new energy in the room, suddenly they could also see how much was right with the system as well, and not just what was wrong. It changed the entire perspective of how we had started viewing the “problem” in the beginning. Suddenly, it did not seem so insurmountable. There were stories where people had managed to overcome the

odds, stories of success poured forth.....these had never been talked about. Like all hospitals, what got noticed, talked about and acted upon was “failures”, when “things went wrong”. Even though what went right on a daily basis in a public hospital far outnumbered the wrongs, that was never highlighted. Stories of success never made it to the grapevine, only those of failure. Both the authorities and the people themselves had never focused on how much was being achieved. This changed on the day of the workshop, when they saw their work in a new perspective. It also allowed them to see problems as just that, problems, which can be resolved, and not something that was beyond their control. The reality had changed for them as well as for us.

We experienced for the first time the power of Appreciative Inquiry...and there was no stopping us any more.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) – an introduction

Appreciative Inquiry as a process is very simple and straightforward. The philosophy behind this process is also very simple, yet profound.

Life is a constantly emerging organic process that amazes us with its richness, colors, texture and simplicity as well. Life is a mystery to be unraveled rather than a problem to be solved. Naturally, all life forms, whether they are people, communities or organizations will gravitate towards the energies that are growth oriented and life giving. What is required is to trust that natural flow and not work against it.

The “mechanistic” and “analytical” paradigm views living systems as inanimate and approaches them as something that can be broken into parts, corrected and re-assembled. But people, communities and organizations are living organisms and require to be viewed through an “organic” and “holistic” view and paradigm. They are more than the sum of their parts! This is an important AI perspective.

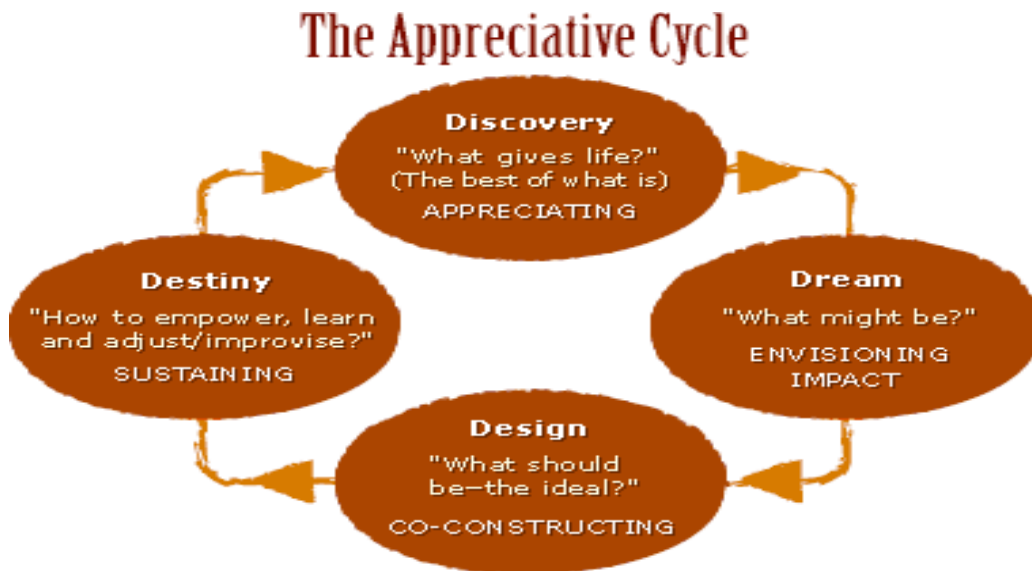
Another important aspect of AI philosophy is captured in the statement “what you believe is what you see”. Life is holistic – it is a myriad of all emotions and life states. If we chose to split this whole and look what works and what doesn’t, you will obviously see what you are looking for!

The Appreciative Approach

Appreciative inquiry is a strategy for purposeful change that identifies the best of “what is” to pursue dreams and possibilities of “what could be.” It is a co-operative search for the strengths, passions and life-giving forces that are found within every system—those factors that hold the potential for inspired, positive change.

The appreciative approach involves collaborative inquiry, based on dialogues, to collect and celebrate the good news stories of a community—those stories that enhance cultural identity, spirit and vision. Appreciative inquiry is a way of seeing that is selectively attentive to—and affirming of—the best and highest qualities in a system, a situation or another human being. It involves an appreciation for the mystery of being and a reverence for life. It is not a “feel good” approach, but a commitment to a way of life.

There are four steps to the appreciative approach.



For more understanding of AI, please visit www.aicommons.org.

More of our experiences...

The experience of the power of AI was life changing to us as well. Both of us have been so much focused on the problems of our personal lives and that is what we got more problems! When we changed the focus to the possibilities in our lives, many things that we were even afraid to think of, or thought it was too unlikely ...started happening. When we started looking at our lives differently, life changed!

We have experienced many transformations, both in our lives and in others when we start viewing ourselves with an appreciative eye. One such significant experience was that of a participant in one of our appreciative inquiry workshops. This person is a very senior executive with a well known and highly successful retail brand. He had heard and read much about this approach and come to experience it himself. He brought in his critical mind along with his free flowing creativity. In his own unassuming way, he helped to transform himself and the group through his persistent focus on what was possible. He experienced for himself the power of this method in the transformation of the group and the

individuals. He also saw possibilities of applying this in his work. He has since transformed a very poorly functioning store into one of the most profitable in the chain. He did this, merely by wanting to hear what gave life to the work that the staff were doing, what energized them, and how it matched with the company values. What had started as a few days project, went on for two weeks, as he had each employee personally, and was moved by what he heard. Stories of customer care and the value staff placed on it abounded. He then extended this to the executive staff of the store, and could see the different perspectives at the floor and executive level. This allowed them to work together, using this new found energy to help them through. There were unexpected benefits, of personal bonding and rapport with the store staff, and customers as well. The store has since had a record turnaround.

We could tell you many such stories of transformations at individual, organizational and community levels. But what we would really like, is to hear your stories, of times when you felt most alive, and what is that life giving force which drives you.

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