

Appreciative Inquiry and Evaluation – Getting to What Works

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Abstract: *Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is described as the cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. This article describes how AI has been applied to evaluation in ways that build upon strengths and generate support for improvements. An initial criticism of AI can be that it focuses only on positivity and fosters an unrealistic view of human experience. Contributing to tension with the AI process is a mistaken belief that negative phenomena must be ignored. However, evaluators using AI have found that its appreciative questions, reframing, and generative features set the stage for sound assessment of worth as well as offer potential for powerful solutions.*

Keywords: *Appreciative Inquiry, deficits, generativity, positivity, reframing, social constructionism*

Résumé : *L'approche de l'enquête appréciative (AEA) connue en anglais sous l'appellation "Appreciative Inquiry" se définit comme étant la recherche collective de ce qu'il y a de meilleur chez les gens, dans leurs organisations et dans les milieux dans lesquels ils évoluent. Le présent article vise à démontrer comment l'AEA a été utilisée dans des exercices d'évaluation pour mettre en relief les forces déjà en place et créer des conditions propices à l'amélioration. On reproche souvent à l'AEA de ne miser que sur les éléments positifs d'une situation et ainsi de promouvoir une perspective idéalisée et irréaliste de la dynamique humaine. Cette critique reflète la croyance erronée voulant que l'AEA passe sous silence tous les éléments négatifs d'une situation, croyance qui a pour effet de susciter encore plus de méfiance envers l'approche. Toutefois, il a été démontré par des évaluateurs que les façons de recadrer le thème et de formuler des questions telles que proposées par l'AEA contribuent à effectuer des évaluations solides et fiables tout en permettant de générer des solutions pertinentes et efficaces.*

Mots clés : *l'approche de l'enquête appréciative, déficits, générativité, positivité, recadrage, constructivisme social*

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Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a process of search and discovery designed to find the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. As an organization development intervention, it is a collaborative, participative approach that involves asking questions to strengthen a system's capacity to heighten positive potential, generating new ideas and actions. In the AI process, questioning moves from determining what is valued and appreciated to combining strengths and activating people's creative energy to ignite change (Cooperrider & Serkerka, 2003).

This article discusses what Appreciative Inquiry is, how it has been used in various domains, and how it has been applied to evaluation. It draws upon the conceptual literature including empirical reports of application, results, and the author's practical experience. It is intended to be of value to evaluators who might consider using AI or some of its components in their work.

This article contains four major parts. The first part provides a brief history of Appreciative Inquiry, its applications, and an overview of the process. The second part describes a difficult AI evaluation case application and several tools and strategies that were used to make it work. It also includes several brief case examples to illustrate the use of tools in the evaluation approach. The third part offers some thoughts on making the AI process work, based on the author's experience. The fourth part discusses when the AI approach to evaluation may be appropriate, followed by some conclusions.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Initially, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was constructed as a research method and an organization development intervention. David Cooperrider is credited with the origination of Appreciative Inquiry in the 1980s while he was a doctoral student at Case Western Reserve University (Cooperrider, 1986; Bushe, 2012). His study of physician leadership at the Cleveland Clinic focused on data while the organization was most effective and truly at its best. He has continued to provide thought leadership, though he is quick to dispute his role as "founder," sharing credit with many others for refining AI as an organization change technique.

Social constructionism, which argues for human science as social construction (Gergen, 1982), had a profound impact on Cooperrider's thinking and is embedded in AI philosophy. Social constructionism actually distinguishes AI from what is popularly called *positive thinking* in that it maintains reality is constructed in the social interactions of people and not in the mind of an individual. AI is a highly relational approach to systemic and structural change that is about asking questions and engaging people in learning about and co-constructing the change they want (Watkins & Mohr, 2001).

In 1993, the Taos Institute was founded by scholars and practitioners, including Gergen and Cooperrider, as a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to the development of social constructionist theory and training for organizations, consultants, family therapists, educators, and others.

In 1998, a newsletter, *AI Practitioner: The International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry*, evolved into a widely read monthly journal for sharing ideas and experiences (Bushe, 2012). Case Western Reserve University has continued to be a focal point for teaching, research, and information sharing about AI. Through the Appreciative Inquiry Commons, practitioners and researchers share tools and academic resources focused on the discipline of positive change (<http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu>).

During the 1990s, books, papers, and training courses describing the principles, methods, and applications of AI began to appear (e.g., Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000; Elliott, 1999; Hammond, 1996; Mohr, Smith, & Watkins, 2000). In addition, many large-scale processes such as Imagine Chicago, the Global Excellence in Management Initiative (GEM), and the United Religions Initiative brought AI to the forefront of organization development and transformation (Watkins & Mohr, 2001).

The literature on Appreciative Inquiry continues to grow, with emphasis on practice advances and the various organization development applications of the approach. In addition, the growing literature on Positive Organizational Scholarship (Cameron, 2013), Positive Psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), Positivity (Fredrickson, 2009), and projects focused on learning from success such as those reported by Sykes, Rosenfeld, and Weiss (2007) contributes to the work of appreciative inquiry practitioners in all areas of application.

Appreciative Inquiry Applications

Appreciative Inquiry has been applied in a wide variety of contexts and settings in the private and public sectors. The choice to use the AI approach has often resulted from limitations encountered in using problem-focused or deficit approaches. The problem-focused approach was generally very effective in solving existing problems and “fixing” them, but often less effective in identifying what is going “right” and taking it to the next level.

AI has been applied extensively in change management (Anderson & McKenna, 2006; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000; Preskill & Catsambas, 2006), strategic planning (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2007), organization design and development (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), team building (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, Cheney, & Fry, 2004), performance review (Shaked, 2010), leadership development (Bushe, 2001), quality assurance (Catsambas, Kelley, Legros, Massoud, & Bouchet, 2002), coaching (Orem, Binkert, & Clancy, 2007), and research (Reed, 2007).

The AI Summit, a methodology for whole system positive change, has been used to engage large groups of people, most often in the hundreds or even thousands in medical centres, universities, manufacturing, transportation, high-technology companies, service organizations, and the United Nations (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003; Cooperrider, Zandee, Godwin, Avital, & Boland, 2013). However, most AI engagements are more modest, involving appreciative interviews, group work, and surveys with smaller numbers of people including boards of directors, management teams, and staff of organizations.

Appreciative Inquiry and Evaluation

The AI approach is also used in evaluation, though there was a limited amount written about it until the late 1990s and early 2000s. Early applications of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to evaluation were described in Elliott (1999), Mohr et al. (2000), Odell (2002), and Jacobsgaard (2003). Slightly later, more focused attention on the rationale for using AI in evaluations and application examples are described by Preskill and Coghlan (2003), Webb, Preskill, and Coghlan (2005), Preskill and Catsambas (2006), and Skov Dinesen (2009). Webb et al. were guest editors of the February 2005 edition of *Appreciative Inquiry Practitioner* that focused on the application of AI in evaluation. Preskill, who served as president of the American Evaluation Association in 2007, has made extensive contributions as teacher, innovator, and thought leader to evaluation practice in general and to the use of AI in evaluation specifically.

A powerful example of choosing the AI evaluation process rather than a deficit approach is described by Mohr et al. (2000) in their work with a transnational pharmaceutical company that wanted an evaluation of their process management training program for 400 research managers. The consultants explained that one option would be a traditional review to determine whether the program had an impact and then focus on bridging any gaps or deficits. They also explained that another option would use an appreciative approach. This would involve searching for and understanding examples of times when participants successfully applied the intended learning. Then they would find ways to recreate, enhance, and expand those conditions. The company chose the latter and successfully enhanced the training program.

Another example of choosing the AI process for an evaluation is found in a book chapter by Catsambas and Webb (2003) that describes the rationale for using the appreciative approach in the evaluation of the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) Africa Program. The IWMF senior staff person recognized the need for participation, dialogue, and discovery of best practices. In particular, the AI interview process, based on story-telling as a means for learning the perceptions of participants and stakeholders, was seen as an ideal fit for the African culture with its oral history traditions. The evaluation provided an opportunity for identifying controversial issues, taking action on concerns, increasing commitment, and clarifying roles and responsibilities. The IWMF concluded two years later that the evaluation process and results had been effective in addressing leadership issues, strengthening the roles and responsibilities of the African advisory committee, and teaching staff how to learn and grow from successes.

AI is certainly not the only collaborative and participatory approach to evaluation. In her article in this issue, Stame discusses the differences between AI and several other approaches that can support positive thinking and action, including Most Significant Change, the Success Case Method, Positive Deviance, and Developmental Evaluation. The value of participatory, stakeholder, and learning-oriented approaches (Cousins & Earl, 1995) has been an important theme in evaluation for many years. The similarities of Appreciative Inquiry and participatory

approaches to evaluation have also been noted by others (Preskill & Coghlan, 2003). However, AI is not evaluation per se, though it offers an approach, a perspective, and a set of tools for conducting a full evaluation or various phases of an evaluation. Preskill and Catsambas (2006) describe the use of AI in focusing an evaluation, conducting appreciative interviews, developing evaluation systems, and building evaluation capacity. They also point out that AI is not a panacea for the challenges of evaluation.

The Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle

As a process, AI is commonly identified with the 4-D cycle (i.e., four Ds: Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003) that provides a guide to identify data about the “best of what is” (Figure 1). The process employs the four steps to guide participants in exploring appreciative questions at various points in time. Initially, the guiding questions focus on the discovery of the “what gives life?” now and then to dream “what might be?” in the ideal future. This is followed by designing or co-creating “what should be?” The final step initiates actions on destiny, or “what will be?” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). In evaluation initiatives,

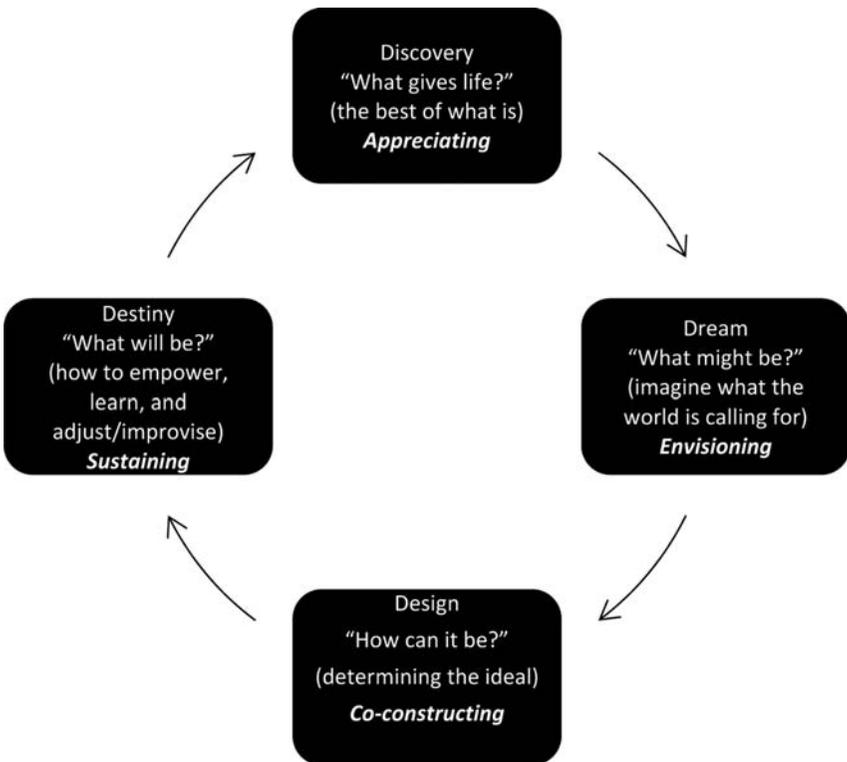


Figure 1. AI 4-D Model (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003)

the EnCompass Model of AI (Preskill & Catsambas 2006), the 4-I process with slightly different terms (Inquire, Imagine, Innovate, and Implement), are often used.

Tensions: It Is Not Only About the Positive

Although AI is intended to elicit generative conversation that moves toward the highest aspirations and potential in human systems (Johnson, 2013), it can lead to tension for those learning to apply the approach as well as participants when they are introduced to AI. A frequent concern is the possibility that a focus on positive stories and experiences during the initial dialogue or discovery phase will invalidate the negative organizational experiences of participants and may repress potentially important and meaningful conversations that need to take place (Bushe, 2007; Egan & Lancaster, 2005; Miller, Fitzgerald, Murrell, Preston, & Ambekar, 2005; Pratt, 2002).

Clearly, an alternative perspective that “bad is stronger than good” (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001) is worth considering as we plan evaluation strategy. A common reaction seems to be “If it’s bad, it could harm (or kill) us; if it’s good, that’s nice but so what, there’s no threat.” This leaves many clinging to the view that the only important or worthwhile phenomena to look at in their program are those that are dysfunctional and threatening. Nevertheless, there are also many who are keen to understand why some things work well, “what gives life to systems,” and what can be learned from success. This is where the “inquiry” part of AI is so vital. Creative, appreciative questioning can take the inquiry to many dynamic destinations (Adams, Schiller, & Cooperrider, 2004; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003).

AN UNEASY EARFUL ABOUT POSITIVITY: EVALUATION OF THE TENANT PARTICIPATION SYSTEM

It is difficult for practitioners to maintain a completely deficit-free process when problem-identification and problem-solving have been the predominant processes for virtually everyone in organizational life (Johnson, 2013). Some participants in an AI evaluation of a program, or some other application such as strategic planning, may be fearful that an AI process would not allow them to mention anything that is not positive. They may be frustrated because they cannot ignore facts, thoughts, and feelings that involve failure, errors, pain, and various forms of suffering that they may feel are off-limits in the process. If they speak of deficit situations, facilitators could see them as resisters that have to be managed. Working through this is a significant challenge for practitioners of AI, and avoiding the challenge can be a missed opportunity (Bushe, 2007).

Below is an example of an evaluation team struggling with the assumption of a participant who believed she and her colleagues were forbidden to speak about deficits in the evaluation process.

My colleague and I were engaged to conduct an evaluation of the Tenant Participation System (TPS) in a large, urban social housing corporation (McGuire,

2006). After preliminary preparation work, we provided an introduction to AI and led an opening exercise with a group of 50 or so tenants to focus and plan the evaluation. Many of these tenants, an equal number of men and women, had been elected Tenant Representatives who asked questions for clarification about AI and voiced support for the approach.

After about 45 minutes, a woman from the group pulled us aside. She was obviously enraged and literally spitting. She loudly yelled that this AI method focusing on the positive would not get to the truth of their situation. To get the full story, she said, “You have to look at all the problems: bedbugs, filth, unfair elections of representatives, extreme heat in the summer, extreme cold in the winter, theft, violence, mental illness, crack houses, broken appliances, and unreliable elevators. No one will find anything positive to talk about!” She described the TPS as a sham that could do nothing to address the real problems she had outlined. She added that she didn’t believe we were there to listen to the tenants and were under the control of insensitive bureaucrats in the corporation.

We were shocked and a bit frightened at the depth of her anger. We explained that we were engaged to look at the role and scope of the TPS, but not specifically at all the problems of the tenants living in social housing. Acknowledging the distressing situation and her anger, I added that we would engage as many tenants as possible, start with what is working well in the TPS, and listen for what people really wanted in the future. We pointed out that, even as we would focus initially on what was working well, problems would be identified in the conversations and hopefully the process would help to generate useful ideas for making the overall system better. This defence of the AI approach and explanation of what we would do further infuriated her. In our haste to explain the approach, we had failed her test miserably. We had mistakenly left her with the impression that any negative talk was still forbidden!

A few minutes later, she started again in a high-pitched, rapid-fire voice, “This evaluation won’t lead to any changes. You won’t even know what needs to change! Nothing works in the TPS. They do nothing to make things better, and you aren’t even going to let us talk about it. What a waste of time!” With that she stormed off out of the room, leaving other participants and our team perplexed. How could we take into account her input and not let it be the focus of the engagement?

We were puzzled because the critic had been part of the introduction to the approach and initial briefings. She had been quiet then reacted strongly, emotionally, and with conviction against the idea of evaluating what might be “working” in the system that she had determined was hopeless and horrible. Still, we realized she may have spoken for many of her peers, even if it was based on misunderstanding the purpose, the process, and the possibilities. To her, the focus of the evaluation had to be on “bad,” and no “good” could be acknowledged. We were seen as stifling open dialogue and leaving no room for debate about the extent of “badness” and what needed to be corrected. In her view, our approach was a sell-out to the housing authority and all that didn’t work. Upon reflection, we recognized that we were fearful of the “shadow” and needed to learn how to manage it.

Despite being extreme, the passion of her opposition made us stop, think, and regroup. It was common knowledge that, despite all efforts, some of the housing conditions were terrible and life in this situation was intolerable for tenants and staff. We knew that, despite some hope, there was a lot of dissatisfaction with the TPS and many were resigned to continuation of what didn't work. However, it was our task to evaluate this system in a way that engaged a significant number of people affected by it. It wasn't just that we didn't have the right words or selling proposition to convince her. Even our best persuasion skills and reframing strategies were not going to have any impact with this critic. She had likely given up on the possibility of change long before our encounter. We had not specifically disallowed talk about problems, but she couldn't see any merit in trying to identify value by looking at what works or what was positive. Further, she believed our motives were suspect. We agreed that we would have to address her issues in some way to make the evaluation process useful.

With the best intentions, some practitioners have presented the AI process as having no room for negativity. A common concern has been that delving into negativity tends to lead to more negativity and hopelessness. Some practitioners have erroneously led participants to believe that deficit issues are undiscussable in AI initiatives. However, push-back on a positive-only focus in Appreciative Inquiry has been an area of tension that practitioner-scholars have described as a struggle with the dark side or "shadow" (Bushe, 2010, 2012; Fitzgerald & Oliver, 2006; Fitzgerald, Oliver, & Hoxsey, 2010; Hoxsey, 2012; Johnson, 2013; Kolodziejcki, 2004).

Cooperrider (2012) suggests that it is necessary to recognize and reverse a common 80/20 deficit bias that pervades our culture and most organizations. The AI strategy is to ensure that deficits do not monopolize the process and therefore to reverse the bias to 80/20 positivity. Taking this into account in the TPS evaluation, AI was used to engage hundreds of stakeholders, focus the evaluation, develop key questions, reframe issues, generate potential solutions, and put the evaluation plan together. Interviews, surveys, and public meetings were conducted using appreciative questions. And yes, deficit areas, problems, and obstacles of the past and present were identified leading to co-created future vision and design of what they believed needed to change in the TPS.

The consulting team realized that careful introduction of the AI process is vital to help those who may be unsure of the appropriateness of the approach. It was also necessary to reinforce the commitment of those who thought AI made sense for them. Tenants wanted the evaluation to bring about change and, from this encounter, it was clear that some could even be offended by the notion that strengths or positives could be used to bring about change. It was necessary to find ways to assure them that their complaints and problems would not be ignored while focusing on "what we want more of" (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). It was critical to develop appreciative questions and use them to conduct positive interviews and an AI-oriented survey. With these data it was possible to work with subgroups to tell stories and generate new ideas and solutions. In addition, it was necessary to

accept talk about deficits and help participants to reframe them toward what they desired in the TPS. To further assist, time was invested in individually coaching TPS representatives and staff of the housing corporation on how to best use the appreciative approach and tools.

Reflecting further on this experience, though our AI critic did not remain involved, the consulting team was able to help other participants who benefited from learning how to reframe and who saw merit in the approach. (Key AI tools such as generativity, appreciative questions, and reframing are described and discussed in the section below.)

In the end, we, with the help of tenants, were able to make recommendations that were valuable to the housing authority and, most importantly, to tenant representatives. A few examples of recommendations were providing equipment and access to the Internet for tenant representatives; the provision of training to help representatives and housing staff to carry out their roles; agreement to mediation processes to address conflict between staff and tenants; and establishing a monitoring system to regularly measure progress toward the objectives of the TPS. Like most evaluations, it did not always go smoothly, though it provided more useful recommendations and outcomes than previous reviews. It demanded a thoughtful combination of evaluation discipline and application of AI processes that tested our team considerably. In many circumstances negatives did seem stronger than positives, and there is still more to be learned about combining evaluation discipline and Appreciative Inquiry to manage this effectively. Notwithstanding his commitment to an extreme strength-based approach, Cooperrider's (2012) advice to AI practitioners to use the 80/20 positivity ratio was helpful in engaging those who cannot ignore negative phenomena in their experience.

The Generativity of Appreciative Inquiry

One of the major benefits of appreciative inquiry when used in an evaluation process (as well as in other applications) is its capacity to generate new understandings of problems and even new approaches to instigating enhanced system performance (Bushe, 2007, 2013). For many new to the approach, techniques such as the 4-D model (Watkins & Mohr, 2001) described above or the 4-I cycle (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006) are often mistakenly thought of as Appreciative Inquiry. However, it is the collaborative inquiry into the "life-giving forces" or strengths of a system combined with imagining a desired future and co-creating solutions to get there that is closest to the essence of AI.

Two process tools or strategies that contribute to the generative nature of AI and that may be particularly pertinent when used as part of an evaluation approach are appreciative questioning and reframing, which are described below with examples.

Appreciative Questions

After defining the focus of an inquiry, the starting point of AI is asking—in interviews, surveys, and group work—powerful, positive questions that seek to

define the “positive core” of a system. Then, rather than identifying and solving problems, AI concentrates, through co-construction, on imagining and designing the future (Avital, Boland, & Cooperrider, 2008; Bright & Cameron, 2009; Cooperrider & Avital, 2004; Thatchenkery, Cooperrider, & Avital, 2010). As both a highly participatory, inquiry-based process and a philosophy (Martinetz, 2002), AI is grounded in the belief that the intervention into any human system will move the system in the direction of the first questions that are asked. Thus, in an evaluation using an appreciative framework, the first questions asked would often focus on stories of best practices, positive moments, greatest learnings, successful processes, and generative partnerships. This enables the system to look for its successes and create images of a future built on those positive experiences from the past (Watkins & Mohr, 2001).

Several principles for preparing interview questions that are used in AI applications including evaluation were developed by Cooperrider et al. (2003). AI questions are crafted to evoke positive images that lead to positive actions. Questions begin with a positive preface and plant the seed of what is to be studied, whether in a change management process, strategic planning, evaluation, or any of the other AI applications. There are two parts to each question:

- The first part must be designed to evoke a real personal experience and narrative story that helps participants to identify and draw on their best learning from the past. For example, “What was the high point of your experience in the program?”
- The second part goes beyond the past to envision the best possibility of the future. For example, “Thinking about your past experiences, what would you want to take forward to the future?”

AI practitioners talk about using questions in the search for or inquiry into “life-giving forces,” the individual and collective strengths that are evident when a system is performing at its most creative, productive, and effective (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). This search involves co-inquiry with stakeholders involved in the evaluation asking questions about their peak experiences, what works, what people value, and what they want. In this context, organizations have been described as “mysteries to be embraced” rather than “problems to be solved” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000). Indeed, proponents declare that you get more of what you ask about; hence a focus on assets brings more assets to the inquiry (Watkins & Mohr, 2001).

Below is a sample of questions used in an evaluation assignment with Dusk Dances, a not-for-profit, multilocation, modern dance program presented on summer evenings in community parks. Previous evaluations, focused on deficits of the program, had led to little or no change to the program. The AI questions were crafted after a process of identifying the affirmative topic for the evaluation (i.e., enhancing the best community dance program in Ontario) and were then used in a paired interview format with stakeholders.

1. “In your experience with Dusk Dances, what has been the high point for you personally? Share a story of this in detail. What, from this high-point experience, would you like to bring forward to the future of the organization?”

After working with these questions, stakeholders identified exciting events that took place in their productions and began to share approaches for marketing, audience building, and management coordination that worked well for them and could be shared with other local Dusk Dances companies. This built energy in the process and set the stage for identifying what they wanted to carry forward for future years.

2. “Let’s talk for a moment about some things you value deeply; specifically, the things you value about yourself, about the nature of your work, and about this organization:
 - a. When are you feeling best about your work? What about the task itself do you value?
 - b. What do you value most about this organization?
 - c. What is the most important thing this organization has contributed to your life? To the community?”

Participants shared views on the strengths (and deficits) of the culture of their production groups and what they personally contributed to make it work. They sought to describe the core strengths that defined their Dusk Dances groups. They specified the shared values that were needed to help them be successful and the extent to which they were embedded. This became common ground for the various programs and set the stage for greater sharing in years to come.

3. “What “three wishes” would you make to heighten the vitality and health of this organization?”

As participants identified their “wishes,” they could see what they wanted or needed to change to make their productions and the overall organization more effective. Some of the wishes were to address deficits in their programs such as improving weak marketing initiatives, inadequate accounting practices, poor contingency planning for inclement weather, and insufficient youth programming. As dialogue and storytelling progressed, those programs that had positive experiences in these areas were able to share their approaches to success. The combination of “high point” stories, “things they valued deeply,” and “wishes” became the main ingredients in the design of plans for developing and implementing change.

Overall, the Dusk Dances managing director and the festival director considered the AI evaluation process a powerful experience that provided information and motivation for stakeholders to make changes that set the stage for the next five years of the program. Interesting new ideas were generated, including approaches

to fundraising, providing central support services to programs, and a concept for licensing that would be made available to interested communities.

Appreciative Inquiry Reframing

Reframing is a process of looking at things another way, changing the meaning of something, or changing one's perspective (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). It is used in various therapeutic interventions such as neurolinguistic programming (NLP) and is a core strategy in coaching processes.

Although traditional problem solving is not a core part of an Appreciative Inquiry, deficits or problems do come up quite naturally in dialogue. As people engage in dialogue about hopes, their description of wishes for the future are very often the flip-side of what doesn't work and, as such, problems are voiced. Put another way, the deficits people find in a program or organization represent an absence of something they hold in their minds as an ideal image they may want to achieve (Cooperrider et al., 2003). From experience this has emerged as an accurate description in the AI process.

Reframing is frequently used in Appreciative Inquiry in response to deficits that are voiced (e.g., "We have big problems in this program") to shift to a solution- or asset-focused perspective. That is, the approach is to reframe these statements or questions so they are appreciative in nature (e.g., "Despite problems, under what conditions has this program been most successful?"). In his article in this issue, Perrin refers to the importance of positivity for supporting learning and developing a positive frame. The rationale is that, with a positive frame, people can open their minds to seeing new connections between ideas, people, and situations, often resulting in a flash of insight that is generative (Thatchenkery & Metzker, 2006).

One memorable flash of insight that I witnessed came from a very skeptical psychiatrist who eventually proclaimed aloud in the third day of an AI summit designed to evaluate and rethink a stagnant eating disorders program, "Wow, this AI stuff has really opened our minds to some great ideas!" The group of 50 physicians, nurses, nutritionists, social workers, and psychologists were able to reframe and rebuild the program from initial questions about failure to powerful solutions. They were able to shift from wallowing in negativity to talking about what their program would be if it was truly working in its optimal state. This shift was possible because they shared stories about high points in their experience and imagined what it would take to get the system to these high points as a standard way of doing business. Two years later, it was reported that they had used their findings to redesign the program with shorter wait-lists, more program capacity, expanded services, and improved results for patients.

Reframing Questions

The example in [Table 1](#) describes, in simplified form, the reframing questions initially used in the evaluation of the Tenant Participation System (TPS) to help shift thinking from deficit definitions of the situation to positive or asset-focused

Table 1. Reframing Deficits to Assets

Problem or deficit-focused issue	Solution or asset-focused
Tenant Participation System is terrible at representing tenant concerns.	What are the best examples of where the TPS has effectively represented tenants?
The TPS is not democratic and its activities are not transparent?	What are the most effective aspects of the TPS? What is needed to support effective practices across the system?
The TPS has failed to perform in these areas....	What possibilities exist that we have not yet considered in the Tenant Participation System?

definitions. It was important to help tenants and staff develop reframing skills to generate thinking and proposals for change beyond hopelessness and pessimism. The deficit issue reframed as a question is usually the starting point for creative thinking and generation of solutions.

The reframing, with many additional questions, gave participants a new perspective on what they wanted to gain from this evaluation of the TPS. They did not forget about the deficits, but looked for positive descriptions of what they wanted for the future of the system. Many commented that they had complained in vain about the problems in the past and reframing gave them greater confidence that they could describe the desired end point clearly and focus their efforts.

A Homelessness Program Evaluation: Reframing Applied

In an evaluation of a multiagency homelessness program, a slightly different reframing approach was needed to help a large group of stakeholders overcome a deficit bias (McGuire, 2005). Stakeholders started by describing what they believed to be the real causes of their failure as a community support system. They talked about having earlier done a SWOT analysis (an analytical tool for assessing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats).

Our team learned from appreciative interviews that they had experienced some successes. We urged them to describe the real causes of their successful experiences with the system. We noted that in their dialogue they seemed overly focused on weaknesses and threats. We reframed this by proposing a SOAR analysis (strengths, opportunities, aspirations, results desired) created by Stavros and Hinrichs (2007). When this was tried, a very different and more productive conversation took place.

For example, as they spoke of terrible communications among community partners, we urged them to reframe this by identifying periods when communications were compelling and effective. Again, a very different and productive conversation resulted. A key outcome of the evaluation was that stakeholders identified ways in which they now could all work together, including the need to save resources by closing a program of one agency. Prior to the evaluation

this had been strongly resisted, but the surprising action was proposed by the leadership of the agency that would have one of its programs closed. In the reframing process they concluded that limited resources were spread too thinly and the system would be better served by augmenting the resources of another agency. Over time this decision led to better system coordination to the benefit of homeless clients.

Some people, like our social housing critic in the Tenant Participation System evaluation, have a genuine need to describe only problems and the hopelessness of their situation. AI does not ignore negative situations and terrible realities of organizations or programs. As we saw in the earlier example of the critic, any sense of ignoring the “bad” may lead to anger, frustration, and unwillingness to engage. It is frequently necessary to hear out the critics while offering different possibilities for consideration. As mentioned previously, asking people to identify their wishes for their organization or program doesn’t always bring out a positive response. The wish is frequently for the end to a problem that is part of their experience. For example, it is not uncommon to hear participants say “I wish we had leaders who would listen to our ideas.” This comment about the failure of leaders to listen can be instructive for a program and an organization.

A key principle is that Appreciative Inquiry practitioners do not use deficits as the basis of analysis or action (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). They ask people what they want more of as they go forward to the future. Still, they must be sensitive to the situation and the experiences of people. Reframed descriptions should not deny deficits or deter people from working on challenging problems. Reframing can offer an opportunity to let the vision of the future guide thinking as a means of addressing or minimizing the problem. Describing a vision of what is desired in the future often enables groups to think about what steps they need to take to get there and can include obstacles or challenges they have to overcome. This was the starting point for the homelessness evaluation described above. As they articulated what they wanted, more of their vision became clearer. In addition, they cogenerated ideas about how to overcome obstacles and build on their assets.

MAKING THE AI APPROACH TO EVALUATION WORK

Below are several observations about what works in using the AI approach in evaluation. These are not ironclad by any means, but function as guidelines that have worked for many practitioners.

Teach Team Members and Participants the AI Approach

Based on my experience, it is important to ensure that all members of the evaluation team who are new to AI are well grounded in the approach. The common human tendency to revert to a “deficit” thinking under pressure is strong (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). As pointed out above, it is also important to be aware that many participants will have a deficit focus and will need to learn the basics of the

approach. This will likely feel awkward to them. It was important to continuously remind participants and members of our team about the foundations as well as the subtleties of AI to effectively facilitate the process.

Emphasize Facilitation Skills

As in most evaluation work, the importance of facilitation skills cannot be overestimated (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). The AI cycle (4-D or 4-I) requires careful design and creative facilitation with stakeholders. Careful design means that there is a relevant, realistic agenda; basic skills are taught; and guidelines are easily understood by all participants. Effective facilitation ensures that you bring every voice to the process and enable stakeholders to generate their best efforts. Facilitation of priority setting, conflict mediation strategies, action planning, and consensus building are regularly needed.

Not all engagements involved applying the AI cycle in the same way or had an emphasis on large meetings or summits. (For a description of the AI Summit see Ludema, Whitney, Mohr, & Griffin, 2003.) In some cases, appreciative interviews were conducted by a team of consultants; in others, stakeholders themselves were trained in the AI process to conduct interviews. In many others, paired interviews with stakeholders lasting a few hours were used to start the cycle (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). Appreciative surveys were used in some projects (Catsambas & Webb, 2003; Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). Findings from various sources were then considered by large or small groups of stakeholders to “make meaning” of the data.

We were frequently surprised at how group process led to discoveries on the part of stakeholders that we had not imagined. In the homelessness case described above, we facilitated a large group of stakeholders representing more than a dozen homelessness organizations using inquire, imagine, and innovate phases to overcome longstanding unsolvable challenges involving turf and ownership. As they worked in small groups and then in the whole group of 40 people, we listened as they described what worked, came up with new insights, reframed old assumptions, and charted new solutions (McGuire, 2005). This would not likely have happened had there not been thorough preparatory work done through interviews and surveys to plan the evaluation. Furthermore, if we had intervened too quickly during small group phases when there appeared to be lulls, we might have lost the rich dialogue that eventually led to co-creation of new ways of doing business (Weisbord & Janoff, 2007).

Prepare Stakeholders to Lead

Recruiting and training stakeholders to lead the AI evaluation process has significant potential (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). In ArtReach Toronto, a youth arts program, it was essential to prepare a core evaluation team that could undertake various leadership roles in the process. Several young people led interview teams using the appreciative process, others did the write-ups of group dialogue, and still others actually facilitated the Appreciative Inquiry 4-I process.

One session for about 50 young people, described as a “Learning Circle,” was held in a youth-managed art gallery. It was a high-energy meeting of people who rarely met, with a noise level that made it unlikely that appreciative questions could be used with the group. However, the young man and young woman who had been given training and coaching in AI took charge as I watched with some trepidation. Within minutes they had this noisy, excited audience working in paired interviews, recording themes and priorities, and later working in small groups to “make meaning” of the dialogue (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). In concluding the evaluation, the core evaluation team of youth was committed, creative, and indefatigable. Over time, many others took on facilitation, interview, and data-analysis roles and were able to engage a much wider group of stakeholders. The ArtReach Toronto evaluation satisfied the monitoring needs of the various funders from federal, provincial, and municipal governments and foundations. More importantly the results took the program to new levels of performance. It also developed the evaluation and leadership skills of the young people who were part of the evaluation team.

Ensure Adequate Time for the AI Process

The AI process requires time for interviews, dialogue, and small group interaction aimed at working with the data. Sometimes stakeholders will want to rush into the process with little knowledge of the time required. The basics of AI can be introduced in 45 minutes. However, the process can take several days or weeks, depending on the scope of the undertaking. It is vital to have adequate time to help people understand and use it effectively (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). Usually this can be accomplished on a gradual basis. I have seen insufficient time virtually derail an evaluation. An example of this is described below.

There was a strong stated interest in using an AI approach in an evaluation of Withdrawal Management Centres. A plan that would involve all managers from across the province in a one-day AI Summit at their annual conference was agreed to. Initial data gathering was undertaken well in advance, using an appreciative survey, program statistics, and interviews of a sample of managers and staff. However, the evaluation team was given a rather rude surprise on the first day of the conference when our full-day summit was reduced to a 60-minute meeting. Despite very careful contracting with system leadership, there were likely many reasons why this happened that were left unexplained. In the end, the key outcome was a diluted process that weakened the needed AI engagement and dialogue with key stakeholders. Our team concluded that the engagement was partially appreciative and only moderately successful. The lack of time for a one-day summit ensured that we could not obtain the creative ideas and commitment to innovation that was aimed for in this evaluation.

This was an important learning experience that has led to more careful assessment of the readiness of an organization and its leadership to use an AI approach. In some cases it has meant that a thorough training session for all leaders was needed before a final decision was made to use the approach (Watkins & Mohr,

2001). Ideally, this can involve sharing articles on AI and facilitating an introductory session of up to three hours to ensure awareness of what is involved, including time requirements. It is an important investment for evaluators and participants.

WHEN AN AI APPROACH MAY BE MOST SUITABLE FOR USE IN EVALUATION

Yet incorporating AI into evaluation practice pushes the boundaries of traditional evaluation in ways that may not be met with approval by all professional evaluators. At the same time, Organizational Development practitioners may wonder if adapting Appreciative Inquiry to evaluation where the entire AI process may not be used invalidates AI's purpose or impact. (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006, p. 140)

Rogers and Fraser (2003) point out that one of AI's major strengths is its fundamental recognition that an evaluation is an intervention that causes ripples in the life of an institution. With this in mind, it is important to align the situation and needs of the users of the evaluation with the approach to be used. When the situation permits and encourages ongoing contact with managers and staff throughout the evaluation, the AI approach can be very effective. Where that contact with stakeholders is resisted or the nature of the evaluation does not provide for this, AI is not recommended.

Preskill and Catsambas (2006) describe AI as another means for framing and conducting complete evaluations. They stress that it is crucial to embed the guiding principles of evaluation with respect to logic and data rigour. In that light, my colleagues and I have used AI processes to focus an evaluation, design surveys, craft interview questions, facilitate paired interviews, and design an evaluation system. It has also been used in a complementary fashion with more quantitatively focused engagements (e.g., evaluation of Positive Leadership training at a large teaching hospital). Frequently, we have thought of AI as the "Intel Inside" the evaluation process, as there were often other tools needed to ensure a quality evaluation. Metaphorically, AI was the intelligent "chip" inside that guided the process.

Appreciative Inquiry is most suitable where evaluation data are needed to enhance or design the future of a program (Coghlan, Preskill, & Catsambas, 2003; Skov Dinesen, 2009). AI has potential to contribute to evaluation practice in contexts where previous evaluation has failed, there is fear or skepticism about evaluation, there is a sense of hopelessness, the environments are hostile or volatile, change needs to be accelerated, there is a need to build evaluation capacity, dialogue is needed, or there is a need for a participatory, collaborative approach to increase support for evaluation and the program being evaluated. Practitioners agree that the AI process can be useful when there is interest in learning and improvement, and a key objective of the evaluation is to support and use the findings (Preskill & Coghlan, 2003).

My colleagues and I have found that an evaluation with the primary aim of measuring what is taking place to satisfy an external requirement will not

really benefit from the AI evaluation approach. Although that primary aim can be appropriate, we have found that the AI process and the time requirements can frustrate the users (e.g., the Withdrawal Management Centres Evaluation described above). However, in evaluations that aim for use, the success of an AI approach in influencing future directions (e.g., Dusk Dances, ArtReach Toronto) depends upon the ability to influence leaders and stakeholders at all levels in an organization to buy in and support using the approach. Without genuine acceptance or true buy-in from leaders for using AI, it will prove difficult to produce useful outcomes.

We have also found that organizations or systems in which parties are at serious odds with each other can benefit from the AI evaluation approach (e.g., the homelessness evaluation). A traditional approach that focuses on problems tends to lead to blame, stalemate, or a worsening of these situations. Frequently, as suggested by [Preskill and Coghlan \(2003\)](#), those who have had less than satisfactory experiences with previous evaluations and are open to trying something new can benefit from the AI approach. Our challenge with the Tenant Participation System was that past reviews created significant divisions and conflict. An AI approach had greater potential to build consensus, reframe deficits, and find creative solutions for the future.

As a general observation, the AI approach to evaluation aims at supporting change in practice versus just measuring what is taking place; it supports quality versus just measuring how much quality there is ([Skov Dinesen, 2009](#)). As such, it has a utilization-focused characteristic. Dusk Dances' leaders were keen to know how much "quality" their program had, but also to expand that "quality knowledge" to all locations of their program. Similarly, the Eating Disorders program leaders wanted to understand what worked, but also to consider significant changes to how their program would function in years to come.

In every evaluation engagement in which my colleagues and I have used the AI process, several features were evident. The first questions used were crucial for focusing and setting the tone. Questions that focused on high points of performance, what worked well, and strengths were powerful as opposed to those focusing on failure, problems, and weaknesses. In every phase, new questions emerged as stakeholders learned to reframe issues ([Watkins & Mohr, 2001](#)). Frequently, they were able to flip negative concerns into the positive phenomena they desired. As concerns about program deficits, conflicts, and problems emerged, they were addressed through reframing dialogue. As we focused at least 80% of the group's attention on what was working, solutions emerged that previously had not been considered or had been deemed impossible ([Cooperrider, 2012](#)). Stakeholders' commitment to change was accelerated and genuine as they crafted solutions that were fair and effective.

CONCLUSIONS

At its most basic level, to evaluate means to make judgements about worth ([Webb et al., 2005](#)). To achieve this, a planned systematic process is used to collect data

about a program or organization that will expand knowledge and enable decision-making about the program, process, or organization (e.g., [Patton, 2003](#); [Preskill & Torres, 1999](#); [Scriven, 1991](#)). Appreciative Inquiry as a philosophy and process with powerful questioning, innovative methods of reframing, and high engagement can contribute significantly to evaluation.

As documented by [Preskill and Catsambas \(2006\)](#), the AI approach has been applied in a wide range of evaluation initiatives and contexts (e.g., intranet, staff education, conflict resolution, a holistic health centre, a coalition of sexual assault programs, a Girl Scouts' program, youth programs, seniors programs, healthcare, and development aid programs). [Reed and Turner \(2005\)](#) describe an evaluation of development strategies in cancer services. My colleagues and I have used an AI approach with social housing, homelessness, the arts, healthcare, arts programs, leadership development initiatives, and in several recruiting, selection, learning, and staff development programs within various United Nations agencies.

Not limited to social programs in the public and not-for-profit sectors, AI has been applied even more extensively in the private sector. The early evaluation study of Glaxo, Smith, Klein in the UK by [Mohr, Smith, and Watkins \(2000\)](#) was the first private-sector introduction to the AI application in evaluation. Since then, for example, I have used the approach with a Canadian insurance company as well as a logistics and transportation company as part of a process to evaluate the impact of their strategic plans. Naturally, there were those who wanted to focus on deficits and failures and others who were tired of the deficit focus and wanted something useful going forward. In the end, however, they derived value for their companies from the appreciative approach through a better understanding of what worked, reframing deficits and generating innovative actions for the future. In his articles on knowledge management and evaluating innovation, [Perrin \(2002, 2006\)](#) provides many clues to how an appreciative approach could be used to identify good practices in an evaluation process.

There have been and will continue to be criticisms of Appreciative Inquiry ([Golembiewski, 1998](#); [Grant & Humphries, 2006](#); [van der Haar & Hosking 2004](#)) that will no doubt strengthen its practice. Many practitioners brought up on traditional organization development processes such as SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats; [Chapman, 2007](#)) and root cause analysis ([Hirsch & Wallace, 2001](#)) are well steeped in deficit approaches and can be initially skeptical about the AI approach, feeling that the apparent focus on "the positive" represents a distorted view of reality. Some have argued that AI glosses over and stifles the pain of people by establishing the veneer of positivity. Bushe, writing extensively (2001, 2004, 2007, 2011, 2012) on Appreciative Inquiry applications as well as its strengths and weaknesses, has carefully examined the views of critics. He has been able to point out the misinterpretations, misunderstandings, and valuable insights of critics as well as areas for further research. He describes Cooperrider's important comments about deficit theories of change shared in personal correspondence between them: "We are still in our infancy in understanding non-deficit, strength-based, or life-centric approaches to change," says Cooperrider, and "I

don't think we really understand the possibilities in that kind of change yet and we aren't going to understand them until we take this to the extremes" (Bushe, 2011, p. 19).

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