**Appreciative inquiry**

*Web version of the chapter included in the 5th edition*

Appreciative inquiry is a human process intervention that involves exploring the best of what is, or has been, and amplifying this best practice. It seeks to accentuate the positive rather than eliminate the negative; it focuses attention on what is good and working rather than what is wrong and not working.

This chapter examines appreciate inquiry from three perspectives; a philosophy of knowledge, an intervention theory, and a methodology for intervening in organizations to improve performance and the quality of life.

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**The social construction of reality**

Social constructionist thinking challenges the view that there is an objective universe ‘out there’ that is in some sense enduring and physically observable. It posits that reality is a social construction.

Everything we encounter and experience is open to multiple interpretations. Social constructionists assert that our perceptions of reality are the product of dialogue and negotiation. Dixon (1997), for example, argues that organizational members construct a shared mental model of the organization through a process of dialogue and interaction. She believes that in the process of articulating one’s own meanings and comprehending the meanings others have constructed, people alter the meanings they hold. There is no single objective reality**.**

The way we behave and the consequences of our behaviour are critically dependent on the way we construct reality – the way we see the world. And the way we see the world is determined by what we believe. Srivastva and Cooperrider (1990) argue that our beliefs govern what we look for, what we see, and how we interpret what we see. Our beliefs, therefore, can lead to self-fulfilling expectations. Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) argue that to the extent that action is predicated on beliefs, ideas and meanings, people are free to seek a transformation in conventional conduct by modifying their beliefs and idea systems.

A widely held belief is that organizational life is problematic. This belief promotes a deficiency perspective that focuses attention on the dysfunctional aspects of organizations and has led to many interventions being designed on the assumption that organizations are ‘problems to be solved’. Such interventions typically involve:

*  identifying key problems
*  analysing causes
*  exploring solutions
*  developing action plans to manage these problems more effectively.

Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) argue that this kind of organization development intervention is conservative, insofar as the formulation of a problem implies that somebody has knowledge of what ‘should be’ and therefore any remedial action is bounded by what is already known. Advocates of appreciative inquiry argue that this deficiency approach often only leads to single-loop learning – continuous improvement within the existing paradigm – and is relatively ineffective when it comes to facilitating organizational transformation.

An alternative belief about organizations, and one that underpins appreciative inquiry, is that rather than ‘problems to be solved’, they are ‘possibilities to be embraced’. Advocates of appreciative inquiry argue that not only are organizations social constructions open to revision, but that this process of revision can be facilitated by a collective inquiry. They also argue that this collective inquiry should attend to the life-giving forces of the organization rather than to a set of problems that have to be resolved. It involves appreciating the best of ‘what is’ and using this to ignite a vision of the possible. The process is generative; it takes nothing for granted and challenges the beliefs and assumptions that guide behaviour. The organization is viewed as an unfathomable mystery, offering many as yet unknown possibilities. The advocates of appreciative inquiry argue that this social constructionist perspective is more likely to produce double-loop learning, which will lead to the organization doing things differently or even doing different things, than a perspective that is more narrowly focused on organizational dysfunction.

**A theory of intervention**

Cooperrider (1990) refers to the ‘heliotropic hypothesis’ as the core of a powerful theory of change. The essence of this theory is that social systems have images of themselves that underpin self-organizing processes and have a natural tendency to evolve towards the most positive images held by their members. They are like plants, they evolve towards the ‘light’ that gives them life and energy. This leads to the proposition that interventions that promote a conscious evolution of positive imagery offer a viable option for changing social systems for the better.

It has already been noted that a widely held belief about organizations is that they are problematic. Elliot (1999) reports that when he asked a group of 45 managers to write down 20 adjectives that accurately caught the flavour of their organization:

*  72% of the words they used were critical, negative or hostile, for example chaotic, inefficient, inward-looking, lazy, poorly structured, overbureaucratic, slow, careless, unaware
*  13% were neutral, for example mainstream, average, contented, unambitious
*  only 15% were positive and approving, for example creative, exciting, thrilling, cutting edge, determined, satisfying, customer oriented, high-tech, achievement oriented.

While the members of many organizations focus attention on things that are not working well, some organizations (a minority?) have a very positive construction of themselves. Example 21.1 highlights one of these exceptions.

***Example* 21.1*Médecins Sans Frontières: a positive organization***

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has a culture that celebrates what is working and going well. Over a period of 40 years, MSF has grown from a small, radical organization into a highly respected, professional organization employing 26,000 people who work in over 70 countries. A survey of the staff found that they described their organization and the work they do in very positive terms:

*  we are a hands-on organization
*  we are nonpolitical, outspoken and neutral
*  we are financed independently
*  we are independent
*  we can be trusted
*  we have uncompromising commitment and focus
*  we are reluctant to admit defeat
*  we have passion for our work
*  we are optimistic
*  we are international
*  we provide emergency-based, hands-on healthcare
*  we help people neglected by everyone else
*  we save lives, and are not involved in longer term development
*  we help those in need irrespective of their situation or beliefs
*  we are neutral, impartial and independent
*  we do short-term emergency healthcare, and then hand over to the authorities or development agencies
*  we provide specialist emergency medical care.

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Appreciative inquiry is based on the assumption that we are free to choose which aspects of our experience we pay attention to. Elliot (1999, p. 12) suggests that one of the most important things that appreciative inquiry seeks to achieve is:

the transformation of a culture from one that sees itself in largely negative terms – and therefore *is inclined to become locked into its own negative construction of itself* – to one that sees itself as having within it the capacity to enrich and enhance the quality of life for all the stakeholders – *and therefore move toward this appreciative construction of itself*.

Elliot highlights the role of memory and imagination. Memory is important because every organization has a history, but this history is not an indisputable fact, it is an artefact of those who do the remembering. Organizational memory is based on how those who do the remembering interpret what happened, and one of the factors that influences their interpretations is where they are now and how they construct the present. Elliot (1999, p. 37) argues that it is this ‘plasticity’ of memory and our freedom to remake the history of our organizations that are essential for the appreciative approach:

For what is at stake is the capacity to construct a narrative of the organization that highlights the worthwhile and life-enriching themes without denying the darker or more sombre tones that are likely to be present. It is only when we can read the history from this perspective that we are likely to transcend the problematic present or the fearsome future.

The way organizational members construct and reconstruct the present and the past is a prelude to the way they imagine the future. Appreciative inquiry does not promote the imagination of unachievable fantasies. It promotes the imagination of a future based on an extrapolation of the best of what is or has been.

Cooperrider et al. (2003, p. 386) maintain that one of the greatest obstacles to the wellbeing of an ailing group is the affirmative projection that currently guides that group. They argue that to affirm means to ‘hold firm’ and it is ‘the strength of affirmation, the degree of belief or faith invested, that allows the imagery to carry out its heliotropic task’.

They go on to argue that when a group finds that its attempts to fix problems create more problems, or that the same problems never go away, the group’s current affirmative projection is inadequate. Like Elliot, Cooperrider et al. (2003, p. 386) contend that ‘every new affirmative projection of the future is a consequence of an appreciative understanding of the past or present’. We do not have to appreciate the present in terms that accentuate the negative. We can appreciate the present and build affirmative images of the future in terms that accentuate the positive. The heliotropic hypothesis posits that the future we imagine is the future we create. Strong affirmative images create a powerful ‘pull effect’ that can help the organization to evolve towards this more positive future.

Advocates of appreciative inquiry point to studies of the Pygmalion and placebo effects as sources of evidence that support the validity of the heliotropic hypothesis. The Pygmalion effect refers to the power of self-fulfilling prophesies. Many studies have shown that the performance of individuals and groups, such as soldiers (Eden and Shani, 1982), trainee welders (King, 1970) and students (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968), is shaped by the expectations of others. Rosenthal and Jacobsen, for example, argue that teachers convey messages of expected success and failure to their students and their students live up to these expectations. However, we not only behave in response to the mental attitudes of those around us, especially those in authority over us, but we also behave in response to our own mental attitudes and expectations of ourselves. In the field of medicine, studies of the placebo effect have shown that those who expect an improvement in their condition are more likely to improve than those who expect no improvement. Similarly, those who remain hopeful and determined in extreme life-threatening circumstances are the ones who are most likely to survive. In other words, nothing succeeds like the expectation of success and nothing fails like the expectation of failure.

While this provides the basis for an attractive theory of intervention, Golembiewski (1999) sounds two notes of caution. The first concerns the outcome of appreciative inquiries. As predicted by the heliotropic hypothesis, social forms gravitate towards an imagined future that amplifies ‘peak experiences’ because people are motivated to move in that direction. People are less likely to resist this kind of change because, according to the old proverb: ‘You can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar.’ However, the search for social forms faces a far larger issue than whether or not people are motivated to change. Golembiewski raises the question ‘motivation for what purpose?’ and notes that there are many examples where people have been motivated to lower human systems to the bestial (see, for example, Chang’s 1997 account of the rape of Nanking) as well as raise them up to pursue some noble purpose. This said, the evidence seems to indicate that appreciative inquiry not only engages the attention of organizational members but facilitates a process of organizational learning that moves the organization in a direction that yields benefits for all stakeholders.

His second note of caution relates to appreciative inquiry’s apparent aversion to ‘negative’ stories. He suspects that this could encourage an incautious optimism about facts or beliefs. Elliot (1999), however, is less concerned. He argues that non-blaming, nonjudgemental appreciative conversations enable people to acknowledge that the best is not the norm. For example, someone might describe an example of the best of what is and then go on to elaborate: ‘But it isn’t usually like this. Usually we spend too much time arguing or hating the other department, distrusting them, seeing what is bad about them.’ While this kind of comment acknowledges deficiencies, it can facilitate positive thinking. Elliot (1999, p. 76) suggests that a skilled interviewer might achieve this by asking questions along the lines:

*  ‘What is special about the good times?’
*  ‘What do you think you and your colleagues need to do or to be in order to maximize the chances that the good times will become the norm?’

**A methodology for intervening in organizations**

The essence of appreciative inquiry is the generation of a shared image of a better future through a collective process of inquiry into the best of what is. It is this imagined future that provides the powerful pull effect that guides the development of the group or organization.

The critical part of the intervention is the inquiry. The mere act of asking questions begins the process of change. Based on the assumption that the things we choose to focus on and the questions we ask determine what we find, it follows that the more positive the questions, the more positive the data. And the more positive the data, the more positive the beliefs that people are likely to develop about what contributes to peak experiences. And the more positive these beliefs, the more positive the vision of the organization at its best, and finally, the more positive this image is, the more energy it generates for change.

Bushe (1999) describes the process of appreciative inquiry as consisting of three parts:

**1** *Discovering the best of* … involves discovering the best examples of organizing and organization within the experience of organizational members.

**2** *Understanding what creates the best of …* involves seeking insights into the forces that lead to superior performance and what it is about the people, the organization and the context that creates peak experiences at work.

**3** *Amplifying the people or processes that exemplify the best of* … involves reinforcing and amplifying those elements of the situation that contribute to superior performance.

A widely accepted methodology for discovering, understanding and amplifying the best of what is involves five steps, shown in Figure 21.1, and discussed in detail below.

<Insert Figure 21.1>

*Figure* **21.1***The five steps of an appreciative inquiry*

**Defining the focus of the inquiry**

In the early 1990s, appreciative inquiry was often viewed as a macro-organizational intervention that studied the organization as a whole. More recently, however, the scope of appreciative inquiries has been extended to include more focused inquiries into issues such as retention, team building, leadership, customer service, conflict management, cross-gender relationships and culture change.

Defining the precise field of inquiry is often undertaken by some kind of steering group, possibly one that represents the different categories of organizational members who might be involved in the inquiry. The inquiry needs to be defined in a way that focuses attention on the positive rather than negative aspects of people’s experience. For example, if an organization has an issue with high labour turnover, rather than focusing attention on why people leave, the inquiry might focus attention on why people choose to stay. Similarly, if there is an issue related to sexual harassment, rather than focusing on the problems associated with cross-gender interactions, the inquiry might focus on the conditions and factors that promote good cross-gender working relationships.

**Discovering examples of excellence and achievement**

Appreciative inquiry involves getting people to tell stories about the best of what is. It can involve pairs of people interviewing each other or a group of interviewers, each having appreciative conversations with 10 or 20 other people and then reporting their findings back to a core group. Whatever the format of the inquiry, interviewers need to be good listeners, able to attend to what others are saying and understand their thoughts and feelings from their perspective. They also need to be good at getting others to tell their stories of excellence and achievement. Key to this is the questions they ask. Whitney et al. (2002) have produced an *Encyclopedia of Positive Questions* that some practitioners might find helpful. Change tool 19.1 at the end of this chapter also provides some guidance on appreciative interviewing.

There is considerable evidence that people enjoy being interviewed appreciatively. It creates a feel-good experience but, as Bushe (1999) observes, care must be taken to ensure that talking about peak experiences does not degenerate into social banter. The successful appreciative interview is one that provides at least one insight into the root causes of success. The interview needs to go beyond identifying what it is that works well and explore why it works well and how this success can be reinforced, amplified and extended to other parts of the organization.

A final step in this discovery phase involves sharing the stories that have been collected and identifying themes about the strengths of the organization. This can be done in a number of ways. Interviewers can verbally report their stories in an open meeting to all who have been involved in the inquiry process or they can share their stories with a core group that has been tasked to interpret the data and identify important themes. All those present can then be involved in a discussion of the stories to identify and reach a consensus about what the key themes are.

Bushe (1999) suggests that when there are lots of stories to review, organizing the data according to an ‘inquiry matrix’ can help to focus attention on themes relating to the purpose of the inquiry. He suggests that prior to data collection, the steering group might highlight the elements of the organization they want to attend to and amplify the best of, for example cross-gender working relationships, teamwork or customer service, and identify an organizational model they feel captures the major categories of organizing, for example structure, technology, culture, leadership, job design, rewards and so on. This information can be used to construct a matrix that can in turn be used to categorize emerging themes from the stories. The matrix might be relatively simple and include, for example, cells for teamwork and structure, teamwork and technology, and teamwork and rewards, or it might be more complex and include a similar set of cells for other elements that may have been part of the inquiry, such as customer service.

An alternative but less structured approach, similar to one reported by Elliot (1999), involves each member of the core group of interviewers reviewing a sample of written reports of the appreciative conversations in their own time and then coming together to agree key themes. In the case reported by Elliot, a core group of ten had conducted 100 interviews. In order to manage the workload, three members of the group read all 100 reports and the other seven read and analysed 10 reports plus the 10 reports of the interviews they had conducted. To aid their analysis, the facilitator, who had been closely involved with every stage of the inquiry, distributed a list of issues he thought might emerge as key themes. This kind of list provides a category set that group members can use to help them to identify key themes, but it is important they do not feel they must restrict themselves to simply testing the validity of this suggested list. If the inquiry is to be an inclusive and collaborative process, everybody must feel free to identify other clusters of statements that might suggest alternative themes. Members bring their impressions of the content of the reports to a meeting and share and discuss their findings until they are able to agree a list of key themes that reflect the positive present and past.

**Dreaming about what might be**

Drawing on these themes to inspire a vision of a more positive future is the essence of the dreaming phase. Organizational members are encouraged to envision what the future might be like if the best of what is or has been became the new norm.

Elliot (1999, p. 137) provides the following guidance to those who are involved with analysing the stories of excellence and achievement:

You are looking for repeated themes which, together, point to a possibility that currently lies just outside the grasp of the company. You are *not* looking for a majority view nor a way-out odd-ball, but for a gathering set of ideas that, pulled together, given coherence and shape, will command an ‘Ah, yes …’ from a large majority of stakeholders who will recognise it as building on the best of the past but unlocking a new future.

Elliot suggests that despite all the emphasis in the literature on visioning, relatively few organizational members believe that their imagination is a significant resource they can bring to the workplace. Consequently, many employees do not do much of it as part of their everyday work activity. He goes on to argue that imagination is like many of our faculties, from memory to muscles – if they are not used, they wither. It is possible, therefore, that some organizational members may need to be helped and encouraged in order to use their imagination to envision a more positive future. Elliot suggests some ‘warm-up’ exercises that might help people gain the confidence to envision new possibilities. These include asking people if they have ever visited another organization and seen things they would like to introduce here, or asking them, if one of their grandchildren were eventually to work here, what they would hope it might be like for them.

When organizational members have arrived at a consensus about their preferred future, the process moves on to the design phase.

**Designing: co-constructing the future to deliver the dream**

In order to facilitate the achievement of the vision, it has to be translated into a set of statements of intent. These are ‘provocative propositions’ that will stretch organizational members and show them the way to an achievable preferred future.

Designing the statements of intent typically generates considerable energy and involvement and it is through the dialogue associated with testing, redrafting and refining them that the possibilities for amplifying the best of the present and past are realized.

If the provocative propositions have been developed by a subgroup, it is essential that they are presented to and validated by other organizational members, thus widening the net of those involved in the dialogue. Bushe (1999) suggests that when many people need to be involved, it is possible to test the propositions using an organizational survey. Alongside each proposition there might be questions such as: ‘To what extent do you believe this proposition is an important component of the topic under study?’ and ‘To what extent do you believe the organization exemplifies the proposition?’ He argues that simply filling out the questionnaire can generate energy and do a lot towards spreading the ideas across the organization. People are encouraged to reflect on future possibilities and debate them with others. Communicating the results of the survey and informing everybody about the strength of feeling regarding each proposition can also stimulate action, licensing organizational members to begin implementing the propositions in their everyday work.

These provocative propositions are design principles that can be used to identify the structures, processes and practices that will move the organization towards the ‘dream’. Finegold et al. (2002) describe them as filters that can be used to evaluate any proposed changes.

**Delivering the dream**

Guided by the design principles embedded in the provocative propositions, the system (group or organization) is propelled to fulfill its destiny. Sometimes, those leading the inquiry help organizational members to write implementation strategies and action plans and develop scorecards or other procedures for monitoring progress. However, amplifying the best of what is and moving the organization towards a more positive future do not necessarily require those leading the appreciative inquiry to get involved with the details of implementation. While there are some who see this as important, most practitioners restrict their involvement to the point where organizational members develop and validate their vision. If the vision and its associated provocative propositions are sufficiently compelling, they not only generate the energy for change but also provide the guiding focus for individual and group initiatives and action taking across the organization.

Joep de Jong, a Dutch consultant interviewed by Elliot (1999), offers a slightly different perspective. He observes that once organizational members move back into their normal day-to-day roles, they may not find it easy to use the provocative propositions to steer their every action, but may frequently use them as an encouragement to get back into the appreciative way of thinking. While it can be difficult to constantly pursue the realization of the provocative propositions, the process of developing them changes their way of conceiving of themselves, their colleagues and their organization. This, according to de Jong, changes their day-to-day work in a manner that makes it more probable that the essence of the provocative proposition will become reality.

Dick (2004) draws attention to a number of publications that practitioners might find useful when designing appreciative inquiries. Cooperrider et al.’s (2003) *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook* provides a practical guide and rich collection of resources, and Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) have produced what Dick describes as a practical and informative introduction to appreciative inquiry ‘suitable for novices’.

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| ***Managing change in practice* 21.1*John Hayes: Appreciative inquiry***<Insert UNFig3>John Hayes (the author) provides an overview of appreciative inquiry in a short video he made for Aarhus School of Business. You can watch this at **www.palgrave.com/companion/hayes-change-management4.**  |

**Applications**

Appreciative inquiry has been used in a wide range of different situations. Sorensen et al. (2003), after reviewing 350 papers on appreciative inquiry, report that there is considerable evidence pointing to its successful application in many settings. Projects vary in terms of scale, organizational context and focus. Elliot (1999) presents a detailed account of an appreciative inquiry with a private healthcare provider in the UK and several accounts of the use of appreciative inquiry to develop communities in developing countries. The interventions he describes extend over relatively long periods and involve a considerable investment of time on the part of members of the core work group. This contrasts with de Jong’s much shorter (two-day) interventions with three secondary schools that had to merge and with two fast-growing computer dealers who were also involved in a merger (see Elliot, 1999).

An appreciative inquiry at Nutrimental Foods in Brazil led to three new business initiatives and a massive increase in sales, as shown in Example 21.2.

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| ***Example* 21.2*Using appreciative inquiry at Nutrimental Foods***Nutrimental Foods is a Brazilian manufacturer that specialized in the production of dehydrated foods that it supplied to federal institutions such as the army, hospitals and schools. After enjoying this privileged position for 26 years, a new government changed its procurement policy and decentralized the purchase of foods. This had a devastating impact on Nutrimental. It had to refocus on supplying the consumer market and downsize from 2,000 to 650 employees to avoid being driven out of business. The CEO, Rodrigo Loures, quickly recognized that something had to be done to revitalize the demoralized workforce and gain a competitive edge in the consumer market. Appreciative inquiry was identified as a possible way forward. After a successful pilot project, Cooperrider and Barros were invited to lead an appreciative inquiry summit. In preparation for this event, 180 people attended a one-day meeting where they were introduced to appreciative inquiry and given the opportunity to practise appreciative interviewing. The summit involved 700 people, staff and external stakeholders such as suppliers, customers and bankers, coming together in a big empty warehouse to talk about Nutrimental’s past, present and future and to share their stories about best practice, peak experiences and company strengths. An observer reported that the opportunity to participate in the creation of a desired future generated enormous energy.After the summit, 150 of those involved in the main event used the data generated at the summit to develop a new corporate vision. Several teams were formed to implement action plans. Following the intervention the company achieved a 66% increase in sales, a 300% increase in profitability and a 42% improvement in productivity. Senior managers attributed this to the new more collaborative and appreciative culture that this intervention had helped to create. |

In Chicago, a project involved 4,000 school children conducting one million ‘peak experience’ interviews with older city residents to vision what the city could be like if the norm became Chicago at its best. Avon had a problem with male–female relationships and used appreciative inquiry to address the issue. Following a request on the company’s email system for male–female pairs who believed they exemplified high-quality communication in the workplace, 15 pairs were selected to interview 300 other exemplary pairs. Their stories were used to generate 30 principles for positive cross-gender working relationships.

Finegold et al. (2002) describe an appreciative inquiry in a US university. It started with 400 members of the administrative and finance division being asked, in pairs, to reflect on their whole span of employment at the university and tell each other a story about a peak experience, a time when they felt most energized, alive and valued. They were then invited to tell each other what they valued about themselves, their work and the university and to think about the way they wanted the university to be. For many, it was the first time they had been invited to give voice to their hopes and visions. They were able to present propositions for staff training and development and for better communication between departments and senior management. The intervention was so successful that it became the methodology for annual strategic planning in the division and eventually developed into a university-wide process where the focus was: ‘Discovering the power of partnership: Building a university-wide community to advance to the next tier of nationally recognized excellence.’

MSF used appreciative inquiry to develop the organization (Example 21.3).

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| ***Example* 21.3*Using appreciative inquiry for organization development at Médecins Sans Frontières***Médecins Sans Frontières’ secretary general launched an organization-wide programme to ‘unlock potential’. Eight cross-functional working groups were set up to look at how the organization functions and identify what MSF is best at doing in order to consolidate successes as a basis for levering further development.The discovery phase involved the eight working groups collecting information, through interviews and surveys, and cascading this approach down the organization in order to ensure that everybody had the chance to contribute to defining best practice and developing ideas (‘dreaming’) about how to evolve new practices and procedures that will enable MSF to respond to new challenges.MSF adopted this approach because it wanted to maintain its passion, maverick character and ability to go against the grain and help where others won’t or can’t. Appreciative inquiry was seen as a way of protecting these assets, and not stifling or suffocating them by pursuing a top-down, problem-centred approach. Senior managers recognize the need to further professionalize, but not at the expense of its culture and principles.<Insert UNFig4>© Florian Lems/MSF |

Bushe (1998) describes the use of appreciative inquiry in the context of team development. His basic approach involves asking team members to recall their best team experience. Each member, in turn, describes their best team experience and other members are encouraged to question the focal person about what it was about the person, situation and task that contributed to the peak experience. When everybody has told their stories, the group reviews the stories and tries to reach a consensus on the attributes of highly effective teams. His final step involves members mapping these attributes onto their experience with their current team, acknowledging anything they have seen in others that has helped the group to be like any of the listed attributes and identifying possibilities for amplifying these attributes. This approach can be applied to new teams as well as existing teams, because even though members of a new team may not have much, if any, shared experience, everybody will be able to talk about some examples of best team experiences in other contexts. Bushe (1998) actually recommends that members of ongoing teams do not use examples of best team experiences drawn from their experience with the current group because it is likely that members may recall the same experience and, after it has been talked about a few times, the process may lose steam.

Appreciative inquiry was used to clarify values across an organization, as shown in Example 21.4.

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| ***Example* 21.4*Using appreciative inquiry to clarify values at Hammersmith Hospital NHS trust***The chief executive of the trust wanted to create a vision for the future and develop a clear strategy based on the values of the organization. The problem was that nobody knew what the values were. It is not unusual in this kind of situation for the top team to get together and come up with a list of values they think should be part of the organization’s culture, but adopting this approach provides no guarantee that the values will be owned by employees across the organization. The new head of organization development persuaded the chief executive to conduct a study to find out what members of the organization actually valued. They did this using appreciative inquiry.A steering group was established to design the inquiry. It was agreed that exploring what happens when the organization works at its best would provide useful insights into what members valued, and it was decided to do this by inviting people from across the organization to participate in a series of workshops. Thirty ‘project champions’ were asked to use their personal networks to encourage people to take part. There were some reservations that people might view the inquiry as a bit ‘happy-clappy’ and that it would not be well received by staff who value a scientific approach to their work, but this was not a problem – 560 people attended 40 workshops.Members of the trust were trained as internal facilitators to lead the 40 one-hour ‘discovery’ workshops. Between 12 and 14 people attended each workshop along with two facilitators. Each workshop started with tea and biscuits to create a relaxed atmosphere while the facilitators explained the purpose of the inquiry and what would happen over the next hour. Everybody was invited to introduce themselves (name and department) but not status. Hospitals can be hierarchical organizations and those leading the inquiry did not want this to get in the way.Participants were invited to turn to interview the person sitting next to them for 10–15 minutes. A interviewed B and then switched roles. Change tool 21.1 below provides details of the interview schedule used in this example. Participants were then asked to make a note of keywords and a brief account of each story, and in the last part of the workshop, they were invited to go round the table and share what they had talked about.After the workshops, the keywords and stories were typed up and the facilitators were invited to a meeting to review the stories and tease out the main themes. These were recorded on flip charts. Later, Ruth Dunlop, head of leadership and development, and a colleague reviewed the flip charts and distilled out four values and associated behaviours. The four values were the centrality of patients, the importance of team working in delivering high-quality healthcare, an energized atmosphere, and an emphasis on innovation. These were communicated back to members of the organization at normal team meetings to check that these four values did indeed reflect what staff felt was important. Finally, the values were reported to the top team for endorsement and were then communicated across the whole organization via leaflets, posters and a DVD about the four values for team discussion. |

Those who participate in appreciative inquiries sometimes find it hard to design and conduct appreciative interviews. The questions the interviewer asks frame the way people look at an issue. Consider, for example, alternative ways of framing questions designed to discover the factors that contribute to good cross-gender working relationships. Even apparently neutral questions such as‘Tell me about male–female relationships here’ may elicit stories about problems rather than about the best of what is. An alternative approach is to frame questions along the following lines:

*  ‘You have been identified as someone who has a good cross-gender relationship. Can you tell me about it, starting with how it began?’
*  This kind of opening question might be followed with questions such as:
*  ‘Reflect on your experience of this relationship. What have been the high points when you felt that the relationship was working well and you were making a real contribution to what the organization is trying to achieve?’
*  ‘Select an example of one of these high points and describe the circumstances: what were you doing, who was involved, what were they doing, what was the result, why did it feel good?’
*  ‘Tell me about another example.’

***Change tool* 21.1*****A specimen appreciative interview schedule***

When designing an appreciative interview schedule, it can be helpful if, alongside each question, interviewers are provided with guidelines to help keep them focused on the positives and prompts to prevent the interview becoming mere social banter about the good times.

The questions, guidelines and prompts given to the interviewers who participated in the Hammersmith Hospital appreciative inquiry were as follows:

**1** ‘Reflecting back over your time with the trust, please tell us a story about when you felt most alive, excited or committed about being part of a team or the trust as a whole.’

Interviewers were advised to listen carefully to:

*  what made the story an exciting experience
*  what factors contributed to making it a significant experience
*  what was the interviewee’s contribution?

**2** ‘Without being too humble or modest (feel free to boast), what do you value most about yourself as a person and your work at the trust?’

Interviewers were advised to help the interviewee to stay positive and encourage them to focus on strengths and values, not their weaknesses. Ruth Dunlop, who led the inquiry, found that people often said ‘I am good at this but I need to improve that’, probably because this is the kind of response that most appraisal processes encourage.

**3** ‘Based on your answers to the last question, could you give examples of how these values are demonstrated in the way you and others behave in the trust?’

Interviewers were advised to focus on concrete behaviours. For example, ‘I value honesty in myself. This means that in practice I am open with my team and patients when breaking bad news.’

These first three questions were clearly focused on ‘discovery’. The final question invited participants to engage in some ‘dreaming’.

**4** ‘If you had just one wish that would improve how we deliver care for patients, what would it be?’

It will be evident from the examples of applications presented above that appreciative inquiry can be adapted to provide a methodology for intervening in many different settings and for addressing a range of different issues.

**Summary**

This chapter has examined appreciate inquiry from three perspectives.

**1** A philosophy of knowledge linked to social constructionist theory:

*  reality is a social construction
*  everything we experience and encounter is open to multiple interpretations
*  perceptions of reality are the product of dialogue and interaction
*  the way we behave is influenced by how we see the world (construct reality).

Many people perceive organizational life as problematic and focus their attention on ‘problems to be solved’. This belief promotes a deficiency perspective. An alternative belief is that organizations are ‘possibilities to be embraced’. Beliefs (social constructions) about organizations are open to revision and this revision can be facilitated by a process of collective inquiry.

**2** An intervention theory:

*  the ‘heliotropic hypothesis’ – organizations, like plants, evolve towards the light that gives them energy (this can be the most positive images held by members)
*  interventions that promote a conscious evolution of positive imagery offer a basis for changing organizations for the better
*  appreciative inquiry is based on the assumption that we are free to choose which aspects of reality we pay attention to
*  appreciative inquiry seeks to achieve:

The transformation of a culture from one that sees itself in largely negative terms – and therefore *is inclined to be locked into its own negative construction of itself* – to one that sees itself as having within it the capacity to enrich and enhance the quality of life for all stakeholders – *and therefore move towards an appreciative construction of itself*. (Elliot, 1999, p. 12)

**3** A methodology for intervening in organizations

Appreciative inquiry is a process that involves exploring the best of what is and amplifying this best practice. The essence of appreciative inquiry is the generation of a shared image of a better future: ‘What would the future be like if the best of what is became the norm?’ Whereas action research promotes learning through attending to dysfunctional aspects of organizational functioning, appreciative inquiry seeks to accentuate the positive rather than eliminate the negative. Attention is given to:

*  discovering the best of …
*  understanding what creates the best of …
*  amplifying the people or processes that create the best of … .

The chapter ended with a number of examples of how appreciative inquiry has been used in a variety of settings. In terms of the typology presented in Figure 19.3, appreciative inquiry is a human process intervention.

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