# STRATEGIES FOR APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY (AI)

*AI is a holistic model based on the belief that human systems are made and imagined by those who live and work within them, AI leads systems and individuals to the life-giving and creative images in their most positive core.*

*Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*
Macgruder and Mohr

AI is a philosophy and process for creating evolutionary change – either on a personal basis or large scale within organizations. It is a very flexible process for engaging people using positive feelings and thoughts about what has given joy and what they want to experience next. **Using AI is very collaborative and meets the core need for positive, intense connection**. It allows for a sharing of the best information between people. The basic process of AI is the use of *fateful* questions, resulting in interviews, conversations and stories that create positive future outcomes. AI is consistent with the latest research in the new sciences, including quantum physics, chaos theory, complexity theory, simultaneity, and constructivism.

*Appreciative:*    a favorable assessment, admiration, approval or gratitude
*Intentional:*    involving *momentous* consequences or shifts
*Inquiry:*    a request for information, asking questions

## Appreciative Inquiry

Seeking information and asking questions that are *appreciative* in nature, so as to intentionally **cause** *momentous* (and more positive) consequences or outcomes. Rather than accessing problem-oriented files, AI allows you to access certain appreciative files in the mind instead.

| Traditional Problem Solving | Appreciative Inquiry |
|---|---|
| **Identify problems** (i.e.: "I have to find a job to pay my bills") | **Appreciate *what is*. Past & Present "What's working?"** (i.e.: "I once ran for mayor & won – I'm influential!") |
| **Conduct root cause analysis** (i.e.: "How did I get myself into this bind; I can avoid this.") | **Imagine *What might be*. "What do we want?"** (i.e.: "I imagine feeling secure and paying all my bills.") |
| **Brainstorm solutions and analyze possible actions** (i.e.: "I'll go read want ads, call a recruiter, do temp work") | **Determine *What could be*. "Paint the picture of everything at its best."** (i.e.: "I see a vacation with lots of $$") |
| **Develop action plans** (i.e.: "I'll get a paper, set 2 interviews") | **Create *What will be*. What do we want to create?** (i.e.: I want a 30 hr work week for $80K per year, selling") |
| **Metaphor:** (i.e.: "This is a problem to be fixed.") | **Metaphor:** (i.e.: "This is a great opportunity for me") |

## Assumptions about Appreciative Inquiry

1. In every organization and situation, something works.
2. Looking for what works well is more motivating and effective than looking for what does not work.
3. What we focus on becomes our reality.
4. Conversation and dialogue create images and images create reality.
5. The act of asking questions begins the change.
6. Organizations move toward what they ask about or focus on.
7. We have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future when we bring forward parts of the past.
8. If we bring parts of the past forward, they should be what is best.
9. The words we use to anticipate and describe reality, create it.

# Participation in an AI Interview

**(Probe relentlessly)** "Tell me more." "What was your contribution?" "How did that affect you?" "What were you feeling?" "What were others feeling?" "What were others in the organization doing that helped you?" "What do you think really made this work?" "What was important to you about that?" "How were you feeling when that happened?" "How did you or others benefit from that?"

# Practical Applications of AI
- AI is used large scale in a formal process or small individual scale.
- AI helps focus people during a meeting when they are working on an issue, vision or project so that they become clear about what they want to feel and see happen.
- AI focuses on what are strengths in people and events, what is generative and life-giving in a relationship or situation and building upon this.
- AI helps people focus on what is referred to as *fateful* or *intentional* questions. This means what you ask internally or to others creates the dialogue, which in turn creates the images, which creates our "perception" which then becomes "our" version of reality. As humans, we are really that subjective.

In other words, words are powerful because **what we talk about** creates the images of what we then perceive to be the "truth". If I asked you "how are you today?" a person might typically answer "fine" or "ok". If I asked you "what was the best thing about your day today?", I would "fatefully" guide you into that part of their thinking that stores all the "good things that happened this day". That creates specific collective images (subconsciously you may have an ah ha - 'my day had lots of good things to remember!'), higher vibrations, etc.

AI is a powerful tool, especially in a large setting (like corporations or schools) in which conversation has been typically negative and of low vibration. Our culture as a whole has been trained and typically focuses on the old model of problem solving (i.e. focus on problems) beginning in kindergarten or earlier. Students don't get papers back with right answers marked. They get them back with the mistakes marked. The question becomes: Do we believe doing it the reverse is possible or powerful? That's a very interesting thing to question about our collective approaches or what we consider to be "common sense" culturally. A positive approach may be more helpful.

Basically, here's one example of what AI looks like in a larger organization. The following is what a leader might provide as an announcement at a school or as an ice-breaker in a corporate staff meeting on a Monday morning:

*"Please partner up with someone. Here are your appreciative questions for the day:*
*Share one thing you accomplished or did for someone this weekend for which you feel proud about.*
*Tell your partner the story about this. What did you do? Say? What were others doing? Saying?*
*How did you come up with this idea or how did this come about? How did you feel?"*

While AI questions around specific problems can be used, using AI is much more proactive and positive than to solve problems alone. Imagine that after this directive from leader, each time I see my partner, I think of their accomplishment or good deed. He/she will think the same of me. He/she may share it with others and they may pass it along. This may provide lots of people with new ideas of things to do and ways to help. I may smile more when I think about this and when I see this person.

This is very different from connecting through complaints and negative gossip even though there is a time for expressing and releasing pain constructively. AI is about doing things the easy way. Here's a great story to illustrate.

# Bowling story
There were 2 bowling teams and they were both videotaped. The first team's video was edited it so that it only showed all their bad, weak bowling moves. The other team's video was edited so that it only showed all their strong, correct bowling moves. Both teams watched the videos for the purpose of improving their game. At the end of the week: The team that watched the mistakes collectively improved by 30% (not bad huh?!) The team that watched their strengths collectively improved by 100% (and probably enjoyed their video more). Both ways produced results, it's just that the appreciative way is easier, more graceful and efficient (people don't need to go into **protection** using AI).

# AI in an Effective Meeting

Manager or Leader:

When you are holding a meeting and a question or issue surfaces, ask the person who initiates:

- "What would this situation look like if you imagined the best possible outcome?"
- "What do you most want concerning this?"
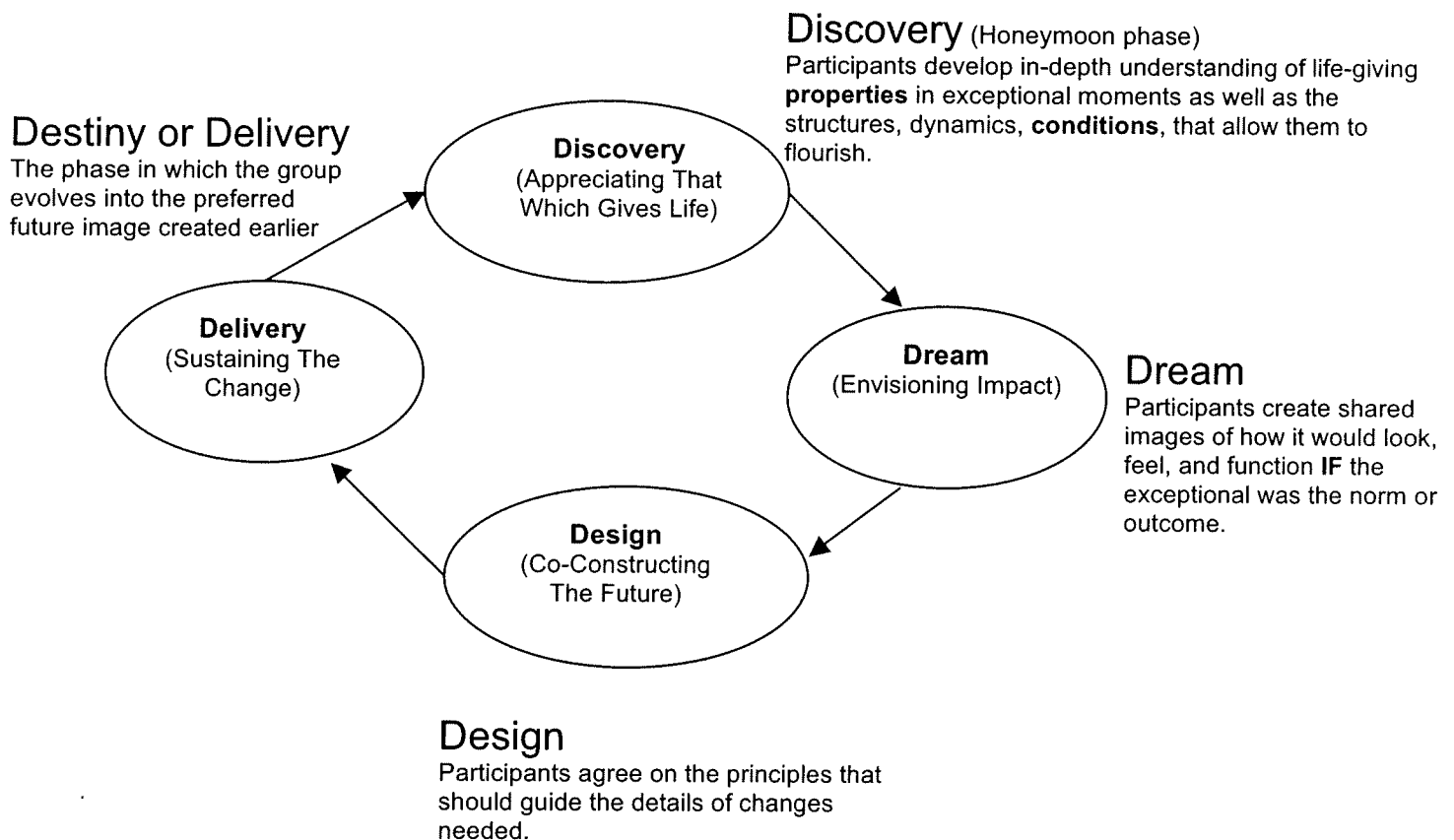- "When did you encounter a similar situation and create a great result?"

No matter what the initial positive inquiry, make sure you probe into it with additional questions that expand the thoughts and images in the direction of success, strength. As members of the team go around the circle to brainstorm solutions, and if it seems they get off track, focus them by saying, "How will your solution meet the outcomes this person wants?" This keeps meeting agenda items from being a means to complain or polarize and helps the participants to move into a solution-orientation.

**Note**: Remember that your over-arching goal is for people to be *self-directed,* to come up with their own solutions whenever possible so that this process strengthens their inductive reasoning in a pleasurable and positive manner.

Why use AI?
- AI is strength-based and personally responsible
- AI has a methodology, structure, models and processes
- Threads of AI can be applied to groups and individuals
- AI searches for what gives life to human systems when they are most alive and healthy
- In AI, the shift moves from traditional **problem** analysis (what's wrong, deficient, broken, who's to blame) to **solution** analysis (valuing what's right) impacting **protection** and **learning** states of people

# The AI Process

Discovery (Honeymoon phase)
Participants develop in-depth understanding of life-giving **properties** in exceptional moments as well as the structures, dynamics, **conditions**, that allow them to flourish.

Destiny or Delivery
The phase in which the group evolves into the preferred future image created earlier

Dream
Participants create shared images of how it would look, feel, and function **IF** the exceptional was the norm or outcome.

Design
Participants agree on the principles that should guide the details of changes needed.



Diagram labels:
- Discovery (Appreciating That Which Gives Life)
- Dream (Envisioning Impact)
- Design (Co-Constructing The Future)
- Delivery (Sustaining The Change)

# A Mini AI Interview

## Appreciative Inquiry Interview #1

1. Can you tell me a story when you accomplished something in your life, or workplace or with a another person in which you were really proud?
   ★ What made it happen?
   ★ What was happening at that time in your life?
   ★ What type of support did you seek out or experience?
   ★ What part did you play?
2. Boldly, without being humble, tell me what you like the most about yourself.
3. If you could imagine your company/department as the best it could be, what would it look like?
   ★ What is occurring?
   ★ What role are you playing?
   ★ How are you feeling as a result of this outcome?
   ★ What are others contributing?
   ★ How are others behaving?
   ★ What other factors in the environment or situation are contributing to the outcome?
   ★ What would you be happiest about accomplishing?


## Appreciative Inquiry Interview #2

In each of our lives there are special times when we just know that we have made the right career choice – moments when we feel really good about the work we are doing and what we are contributing to others. As you think back over your time at your company (or as an _____), can you *tell me a story* about one of those special moments when you felt that your work was really alive and meaningful for your staff or peers – a time when you felt particularly excited about your involvement in your field, when you were affirmed in your commitment to being part of your specific work?

   ★ What made it a peak experience?  What was happening at that time in your life?
   ★ What were your boss, peers and direct reports doing?
   ★ How were you interacting with them?
   ★ What was it about the workplace climate and task that sparked their engagement?

1. Boldly tell me what you value deeply about yourself as an individual?  As an _____?

2. One of the things that enable great work and learning is when people "feel connected", when they feel "part of a family or caring community".  Thinking back over the last years, can you *tell me a story* about a time when you felt a sense of connectedness, that sense of family here?

   ★ What role did you play?
   ★ What did others contribute?
   ★ What other factors in the situation, in environment, contributed to the connectedness?

3. With the hectic pace of today's world and the need to juggle lots of different balls at once, feeling valued and supported by the people around you can make a big difference. Would you *tell me a story* about a specific time, an experience when as a professional, *you* felt genuinely supported and or valued by your staff?  By your peers?  By the boss?

4. In your view, what are the community and societal expectations on your organization for the future?

5. What is the *core factor* that gives vitality and life to your organization - the one thing that is important to retain, to bring forward into the future?

6. What three wishes do you have for your organization - things that would enable it to become even more lively; the sort of place in which great learning and accomplishment take place on a daily basis?

# Tips on How to Conduct an Appreciative Interview

Appreciative Interviewing may seem awkward because both people may still be caught up in looking at the environment or situation as a problem to be solved. Appreciative interviews strongly meet our needs for connection and allow this to occur on a very deep and meaningful level. As each person learns to conduct and participate in interviews, they are learning very helpful and valuable communication skills that focus mostly on "what to do" and "what works" rather than "what not to do."

- **Explain that the interview will:**
  - Be appreciative
  - Describe times and things that are working *best*
  - Avoid all questions about things that are not working
  - Affirm even the smallest successes so the other person will hold a positive image of themselves
  - Encourage creative thinking and open up possibilities
  - Put them in touch with positive images and feelings individually and collectively

Ask them if they have questions

- **Start with specific stories because:**
  - AI seeks the "whole" of an image or idea rather than an opinion or analysis
  - Stories should describe all details and feelings in depth
  - Stories should be specific and personal
  - Interviewers are asked to probe deeply and intently, like an interested friend, *hanging on every detail*
  - AI asks lots of questions to better understand and draw out what they *did, said, thought* and *felt*

- **Generalize about Life-Giving Forces**
  - After you've heard the story, try to get the interviewee to generalize
  - Ask, "what is it about this place, group, situation, procedures, policies, staff, leaders, or strategy that creates conditions under which (i.e. cooperation) can flourish?
  - As a metaphor, think of your topic (i.e. cooperation) as a plant. You are trying to find out what nourishes it.
  - Give examples to clarify what you mean by conditions, factors or forces. "Is this place designed to....?" "How does this organization/division/group foster....?"
  - Get them to think abstractly about what is present in the organization that allowed the peak experiences

- **What to do with Negatives:**
  - People should not feel that they do not have permission to talk about things that need fixing.

  - *Postpone*: Ask to make a note of something and come back to it later. When you get to the question about wishes for the future, then is the time to discuss this "negative" data.

  - *Listen:* If a person feels intense about something, and it is a major focus of their energy, let them express it *for the purpose of them releasing it.* **Note:** Don't take it in and lose your capacity to be appreciative. Keep a caring and affirmative spirit and shift to the appreciative as possible.

  - *Refocus*: If they are willing to stop being negative or if you've listened sufficiently to understand, find a way to guide the person back to the positive. Help them to reflect back by paraphrasing a few of their comments, then say, "now I would like to guide us back to looking at what is happening when things are working at their best. Can you think of a time, even the smallest moment, when you saw innovation (for example) at its best?" If the person can't think of one in this context, ask them to share an experience of something working well in *any* event, place or other personal context.

o **Use Negative Data to Reframe**: Everything wrong represents an absence of something they hold in their minds as ideal. If for example the interviewee says something like, "the food at this place is terrible," say, "when you say that the food is terrible, it means you have some image in your mind about what good food would look like. Can you describe *that* for me?" If the person can't reframe it themselves, reframe negative information yourself into a wish or vision statement and then confirm that statement with the interviewee.

o **Watch Your Time**: Be mindful of the time. If you decide to go over the allotted amount of time, check it out first with the other person.

o **Be Yourself and Have Fun**: Approach the person as if he/she is a very special person. Be humble. Let your interviewee be your teacher. Relax. Be yourself. Don't try to be perfect. The questions are a guide, not a questionnaire. *This is a conversation to be enjoyed.* Almost everyone likes to share knowledge and wisdom with people that genuinely want to learn. If you have an affirmative spirit going in, mistakes in wording will not stop you from getting great information. Jot down a note or two as reminders. It is not necessary to get every detail. It's more important to note key phrases and ideas.

o **A Word about Anonymity**: Tell the interviewees you will keep the information they provide and the conversation anonymous. You may use the information but if so, it will be combined with other interview information and no names will be connected with the overall suggestions. Stories and quotes may be used but without a name associated with them.

# Interviewer Training:

The AI Interview is easy because of its storytelling format and the positive nature of the questions. It leads to good rapport between the interview and the interviewee. Clarity about the goal of the interview, the role of the interviewer and a few interview tips are all that is needed in most cases, especially when interviews are done back and forth in large groups.

### General guidelines for Interviewing
- Choose someone whom you do not know or would like to know better.
- Use the interview guide as your script, to interview each other for a specific, equal period of time.
- Choose a location where you both feel comfortable.
- Introduce and ask questions as they are written.
- Capture key words/phrases in your notes.
- If necessary, use additional questions to encourage the interviewee.
- Let the interviewee tell his or her story. Wait – do not give yours. You will be next.
- Listen attentively. Be very curious about their experience, their feelings, and their thoughts.
- Allow for silence. If your partner does not want or cannot answer a question, it's okay.
- Have fun.
- At the end of the two interviews, take some time to talk to your partner about what the interview was like for each of you. If you do this as a group, ask the group. **Note**: You will likely notice more joy, energy and positive body language during group interviewing.

Sometimes, it will be meaningful to send the entire group out to conduct interviews with clients, members in the other areas of the business as an assignment. In the event this occurs, it is important to spend time going over the following information, prepared and distributed as a handout.

# Key Characteristics of an Appreciative Interview

- The interview is based on an assumption of health and vitality. We are seeking incidents and examples of things at their best.

- The connection between the interviewer and the person being interviewed is through empathy. Questions are answered in a way that evokes *feelings* in the listener.

- Personal excitement, commitment, and care are qualities that are present when the interviewer and the person being interviewed are sharing stories of their personal peak experiences.

- Intense focus by the person listening to the stories leads to the experience of being fully heard and understood – a desirable effect from the close sharing that takes place.

- Generative questioning, cueing, and guiding make up the role of the interviewer. The skill is to encourage and question without interrupting the storyteller.

- Belief, rather than doubt, is the proper stance. This is not a time for skepticism or for questions that imply a need for "proof." The trust that develops from *simply listening with interest and acceptance is a major positive effect* of this process.

- Remember that these are stories being shared, not a reporting of facts. Detail is always useful, as is allowing for the person's unique individual expression of his or her world.


**Note:** When a small group conducts multiple interviews per interviewer, it is very helpful to build in an early meeting for the interviewer group. This purpose of this meeting is to discuss "what we are learning about how to conduct great interviews." Of course, a mini Appreciative Inquiry interview is the basis for this meeting. (We get to model what we want from them in the process.) For example, if you were planning to send out a group of people to do multiple interviews, it may be helpful to meet and discuss the intention and guidelines with the group to clear up any confusion and to provide opportunities to practice for comfort and competency.