Appreciative inquiry: accentuating the positive

Stephen P Fitzgerald, Kenneth L Murrell and Monty G Miller explain a novel approach to organisational change.

"You've got to accentuate the positive, Eliminate the negative and Latch on to the affirmative, but Don't mess with Mr In-between. No! Don't mess with Mr In-between!"

(Words and music Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer, 1944)

Little did Arlen and Mercer know that their hit song “Accentuate the Positive” would foreshadow the emergence of “appreciative inquiry” (AI), a novel approach to organisational change that is rapidly proving itself in a wide variety of business (for example, British Airways, GTE, Hunter Douglas) and non-profit organisations in many countries around the world. AI applications range from strategic planning, team building, human resource practices and diversity initiatives to the transformation of global corporate cultures and social change organisations.

Traditional approaches to change focus on identifying and solving core organisational problems and deficits. Gap analysis is an example of one common approach. In contrast, AI focuses and builds on what’s working when the organisation is at its best.

This affirmative focus distinguishes AI from other change strategies and processes. It influences every aspect of AI, from the design of topics and questions to explore to data analyses and feedback. AI supports participants in collectively generating the momentum needed for effective change. Positive energy has been shown repeatedly to be a natural by-product of the process. Most importantly, AI is an alternative philosophy that helps organisations shape their change efforts based on what they do well and on what they aspire to create more of in the future.

Given the breadth and diversity of AI applications, some may protest that AI is being hailed as a magic bullet that works in all situations. However, few would raise the same fuss about a traditional problem-solving orientation. In fact, the problem-identification-analysis-solution approach is so firmly grounded in our culture that it is seldom questioned as to the overall effect it has on the way we characterise the world as a problem to be solved. In a sense, AI is questioning the dominant problem-solving perspective.

AI's affirmative emphasis distinguishes it from other forms of action research. Sir Geoffrey Vickers' influential work on appreciation and systems thinking, published in the late 1950s and early 1960s, encouraged deep exploration of the meaning of the ideas or events that one is trying to assist in changing and a focus on what is right and not just what is lacking. AI fosters the development of a deep, collaborative appreciation of what is well and good in organisations and social systems.

Social constructionism is a fundamental underpinning of AI. It suggests that we have considerable influence over the nature of the realities that we perceive and experience and that to a great extent we actually create our realities through shared symbolic and mental processes. Social constructionism provides the foundation for three of the five principles central to AI:

The constructionist principle.
Human knowledge and organisational destiny are intricately interwoven. To be effective, leaders must be adept in
the art of understanding, reading and analysing organisations as living, human constructions. Knowing (organisations) stands at the centre of any and virtually every attempt at change. Thus, the way we know is vital.

The principle of simultaneity. Since organisations are living human constructions, inquiry and change cannot be separated – they occur simultaneously. The seeds of change – the things that we think and talk about, discover and learn together and that inform our dialogue and inspire our images of the future – are implicit in the questions we ask. Those questions set the stage for what we “find”.

The poetic principle. Human organisations are a lot more like a good book than, say, the workings of a machine. An organisation’s story is constantly being co-authored. Moreover, pasts, presents or futures are endless sources of learning, inspiration or interpretation – much like the endless interpretive possibilities in a piece of great poetry or literature.

Image in AI

The AI approach is based on the formidable power of creating images of the future to stimulate and direct organisational action – and research from diverse fields shows that positive imagery leads to positive action. For example, the well-known “placebo effect” results from people’s positive expectancy about the healing potential of medication that they are given, even when it contains only sugar. This positive expectancy effect has been demonstrated repeatedly in the workplace, in education, in sports and in medicine, and it provides the foundation for the two remaining basic AI principles:

The anticipatory principle. Anticipation is a potent, catalytic force. The image of the future guides what might be called the current behaviour of any organism or organisation. For example, consider two different settings: anticipating what we expect may be a confrontational meeting with a friend versus the anticipation of sharing a favourite activity with a friend. Each of these images creates different expectations and feelings in us that are likely to result in different behaviours, based solely on the very different assumptions with which we approach a situation.

The positive principle. Building and sustaining momentum for change requires large amounts of positive affect and social bonding – things like hope, excitement, caring, esprit de corps, sense of urgent purpose and sheer joy in creating something meaningful together. We have found in our work with organisations of all kinds that the more positive the questions we ask, and the longer we can retain the spirit of inquiry, the more long lasting and successful the organisational change efforts. The thing that makes the most difference is to carefully craft “unconditionally positive” questions. Leading with these questions means that changes that were never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilised.

The AI process

AI’s five underlying principles (constructionist, simultaneity, poetic, anticipatory and positive) come to life through the design of the basic AI process. These can be described in the following phases of action:

Defining the focus of the inquiry. Collaboratively defining the topic(s) for an appreciative inquiry is perhaps the most critical phase of the process.

Discovering people’s experiences of their group, organisation or community at its most vital and alive and clarifying what made those experiences possible.

Dreaming together to envision a future in which those exceptional experiences form the bases for organising in the future.

Designing appreciative systems and structures to support the manifestation of the co-created dreams.

Delivering implementation of those systems and structures by organisation members in an ever-
expanding positive-feedback loop of appreciative learning.

Whitney and Cooperrider of the Corporation for Positive Change give at least four reasons for choosing AI for large-scale applications: when high levels of participation and co-operation are required; the change process needs to be accelerated; the work requires innovation among diverse groups in a high-stakes environment; and/or multiple change initiatives need to be synthesised. Even when these conditions are met, however, AI may not be appropriate when sufficient resources are not available for adequate implementation and/or leadership does not support affirmative approaches or full-system participation.

AI and alliance building
Strategic alliances have become popular collaborative forms because they enable organisations to enter new markets (geographical or technical) with a significantly reduced ramp-up time. However, strategic alliances are notoriously difficult to implement successfully. The enormity of the challenges of building relationships, developing mutual understanding, trust, collaboration and successful implementation in such entities is well documented. AI proved to be highly effective in each of these areas when used to help form a strategic alliance in 1998 between Monsanto, the leading producer of transgenic plants using biotechnology, and MAHYCO (Maharashtra Hybrid Seeds Company), the leading producer of hybrid seed in India.

The alliance offered a strong complementary, value-added relationship for both partners but the cultural diversity of the partners posed a special challenge. While the development of trust, norms, goodwill and shared culture is a vital challenge in every strategic alliance, it is even more so in such a transcultural association. Developing these would be critical to its success.

An AI alliance-building session was conducted in India in December 1998 with a more or less equal number of R&D people from both partner organisations. The session’s participants reported significant increases in levels of relationship and collaboration, both immediately after the session and four months later; growth in their understanding of their partner’s business and their leadership’s expectations for the alliance; and strong follow-through in project development. Four months later, nearly 75 per cent indicated that they had made progress on their projects since the AI session.

Further, the alliance achieved a major milestone in March 2002 when the government of India approved registration for the alliance’s insect-protected hybrid cotton seed.

Although this is a case study and generalising from the findings is not easy, they are nevertheless significant, particularly given the dearth of research on building sustainable transcultural alliances. Confidence in the findings is strengthened by the consistency of the data across multiple sources. The findings support the efficacy of AI in building relational capital in a transcultural strategic alliance. AI has broad potential for helping such entities build relational capital to encourage sustainable transcultural collaboration so vital to success in the 21st century. So it seems that songwriters Arlen and Mercer knew something about successful collaboration after all: latch on to the affirmative, and don’t mess with Mr In-between.

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