

What is Appreciative Inquiry? *By Bliss Browne, Imagine Chicago*

Appreciative inquiry is an approach to organizational and community development that has been used successfully worldwide to cultivate hope, build capacity, unleash collective appreciation and imagination, and bring about positive change. It is based on the simple idea that human beings move in the direction of what we ask about. When groups query human problems and conflicts, they often inadvertently magnify the very problems they had hoped to resolve. Conversely, when groups study exalted human values and achievements, like peak experiences, best practices, and worthy accomplishments, these phenomena tend to flourish. AI deliberately asks *positive questions* around affirmative topics to ignite constructive dialogue and inspired action within organizations and communities. Change research shows that community innovation methods that evoke stories, and affirm and compel groups of people to envision positive images of the future grounded in the best of the past, have the greatest potential to produce deep and sustaining change and inspire collective action.

Appreciative Inquiry differs fundamentally from traditional problem-solving approaches. The basic assumption of problem-solving methodologies is that people and organizations are “broken” and need to be fixed. The process usually involves: (1) identifying the key problems; (2) analyzing the root causes; (3) searching for possible solutions; and (4) developing an action plan. Deficit-based analysis, while powerful in diagnosis, tends to undermine human organizing and motivation, because it creates a sense of threat, separation, defensiveness and deference to expert hierarchies. Problem solving as a means of inspiring and sustaining human systems change is therefore limited.

In contrast, the underlying assumption of appreciative inquiry is that people and organizations are full of assets, capabilities, resources, and strengths that can be located, affirmed, leveraged and encouraged. There are a variety of AI models that guide how Appreciative Inquiry is practiced but all of them are based on:

1. Choosing the positive as the focus of inquiry
2. Inquiring into stories of life-giving forces
3. Locating themes that appear in the stories and selecting topics for further inquiry
4. Creating shared images of a preferred future
5. Finding innovative ways to create that future.

Through constructive dialogue, trusted experience is shared, new possibilities imagined and new partnerships created to bring the desired future into being. The classic AI 4-D cycle includes: (1) **discovery** (valuing); (2) **dream** (envisioning); (3) **design** through dialogue; and (4) **destiny** (co-constructing the future.)

For resources on Appreciative Inquiry, see the AI Commons: appreciativeinquiry.case.edu

Strengthening (Our) Questions

Every question has a direction. Where it leads depends on its often hidden assumptions. Few questions are neutral; most carry a generative or destructive energy. What questions build a bridge or turn on a light? Which offer a path into shared understanding? What questions invite new ways of seeing and connecting to a community or country's future as one that citizens have the choice to create working together?

Our choice of questions has a moral impact. "Why can't you ever do anything right?" presumes and creates an identity of incompetence. "What crime will 'you people' commit next?" enflames violence. "Who made such a stupid decision?" looks to assign blame. "How can we get even?" rallies support for retaliation. "Why bother to invest in a 'lost generation'?" reinforces despair about the future.

Conversely, questions can inspire, intrigue, delight, clarify, invite and build community. They can create pathways to positive experiences and affections, stimulate reflection on issues of importance, and help people notice what is of value. "How did you learn to do such a good job?" honors an individual's skill and generates useful information about creating a path to work for others. "How can we support and learn from your community?" assumes there is much to be learned and invites relationship and trust. "How can we get this done now and how can I help?" infers confidence in an idea and a readiness to act on it, building solidarity and momentum to move forward. A positive connection is reinforced by asking "What makes you glad to live in this country?" instead of "What are the biggest problems here?" Shifting ownership of the future to citizens is activated by "What can you do to make a difference?"

Appreciative Inquiry organizes sequences of positive questions around constructive topics. The difference can be seen by citing the example of a conversation I had with a high school class who wished to learn about their community. Four of the teams had originally chosen "crime" as their area of study before I arrived and designed questions accordingly to ask the local police chief. I asked them why they wanted to investigate crime. They said it was because they felt unsafe. "What is it that you want?" I inquired. After struggling with the question, they finally responded, "I guess we want to feel safe." "How do you think you're likely to feel after you ask the police chief about crime in your neighborhood?" A girl responded that they would likely feel more scared, because they would find out about more bad things that might happen to them. "What if you asked him instead about community safety, important practices that support it, what the police are proud of having accomplished, what actions students might take to protect yourselves and make the neighborhood safer?" They acknowledged that such an interview would likely increase their respect for the police and their awareness of security strategies they could use. "What do you think would be the effect of writing a letter to the police commander thanking him for the interview and the ways he is helping make the community safer?" They said such a letter would probably remind him of why he wanted to be a policeman, and establish a relationship with him that they could draw on in the future. "Plus," they added "I bet he never got a letter like that!"

Words create worlds.

(By Bliss Browne, *Imagine Chicago*, 2008)

Crafting Appreciative Questions: A How To Guide

“Human systems grow toward what they persistently ask questions about.”

-David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney

Appreciative Inquiry questions focus on what has life, meaning and value. When groups use Appreciative Inquiry, they share in a way that stretches collective vision because they are sharing stories of what has been possible and worthwhile. Bringing valued experiences into consciousness encourages action aligned with those values. People learn to see themselves as subjects of a system they can actively transform rather than as objects of a system that limits their imagination or determines their action.

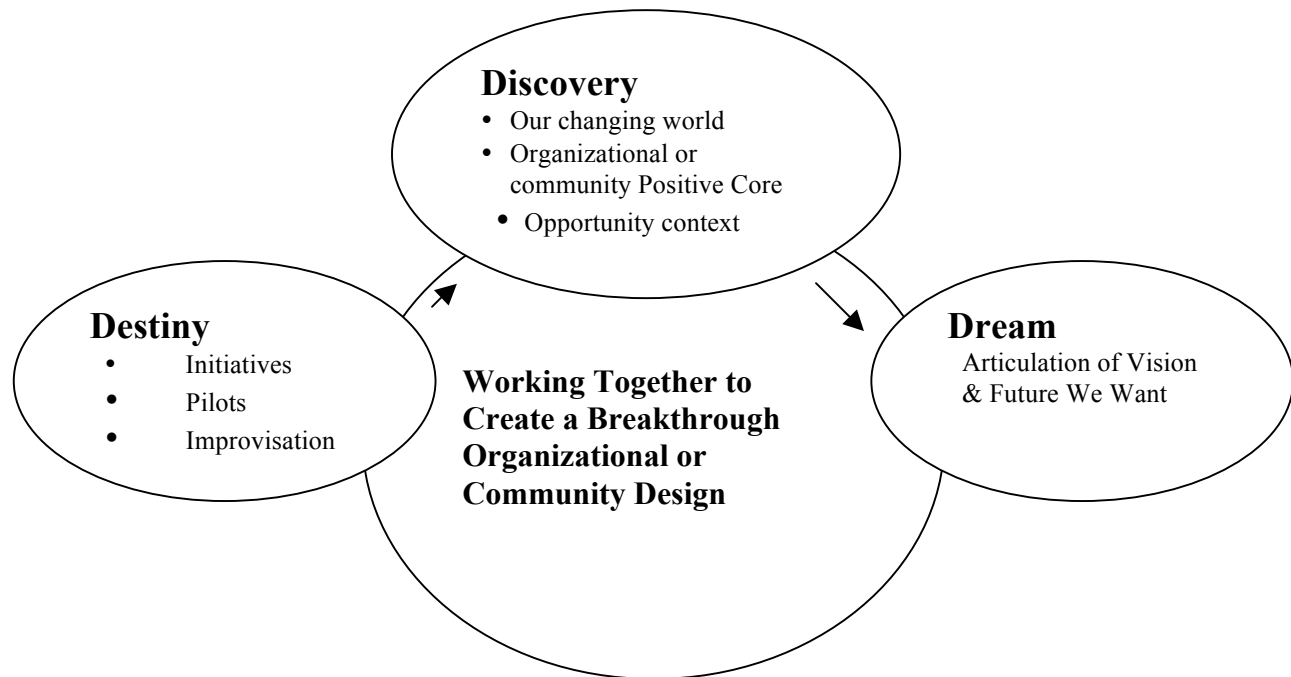
Think Positively! The power of the right question – points to remember

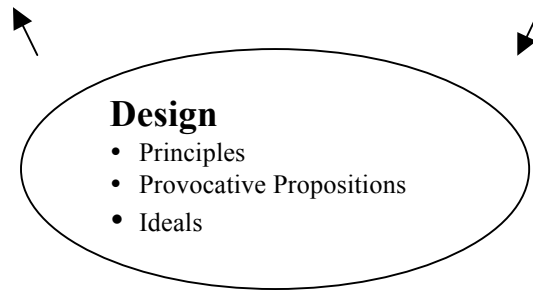
- + The person who sets the question sets the direction and has the power of a change agent.
- + Images of the future are powerful. We can only move in the direction of what we can imagine.
- + Human systems want to move in a positive direction (like plants seeking the sun). Positive questions and feedback create energy — like the sun, they literally make it more possible to live and to grow.
- + It is important to name and claim what’s working as well as what needs work. This is a trustworthy foundation on which to build.
- + Negative images and conversations weaken us mentally and physically; positive images strengthen us and what we can accomplish.
- + Positive communication is essential to mental and community health and requires practice. We are surrounded by negative vocabulary. We can choose to replace it with affirmative communication and community affirmation.
- + Example: Positive images of youth are essential to creating a social culture in which young people are encouraged to make a contribution. Because some people now see young people as problems to be solved or criminals to be feared, we need to showcase positive stories and images of what young people value and can accomplish and contribute.

To design good appreciative inquiry questions, remember to:

1. Ask about ultimate concerns (e.g. What do you value most?)
2. Use positive questions that build on positive assumptions; (e.g. What about this neighborhood makes you especially glad you live here?)
3. Give a thought-provoking, appealing definition of topics; (e.g., “Constructive experiences of difference inspire new ways of thinking.”)
4. Present questions as an invitation using expansive, positive, feeling, experiential words. (What has inspired you to get engaged? What do you most hope to contribute?)
5. Enhance the possibilities of storytelling by asking questions about trusted personal experience. (Thinking back on your year, please share a high point when...)
6. Phrase questions in a conversational, friendly tone (and listen eagerly as to a friend.)
7. Ask open questions to which you do not know the answer, and expect to learn something interesting and important. (Open ended questions cannot be answered “yes” or “no”)
8. Good questions invite thinking—they stretch the imagination and inspire new thoughts without evoking defensiveness or hostility. Reach for the “um”!

Appreciative Inquiry “4-D” Cycle





--based on work by **David Cooperrider**,
Case Western Reserve University

Sample AI questions for Community Engagement and Leadership:

Discovery:

- A. What do you love most about this community? What first drew you here and what has most encouraged you to stay?
- B. What do you consider some of the most significant trends, events, and developments shaping the future of this community?
- C. What has inspired you to get engaged as a civic leader? What do you most hope you can contribute?
- D. As an engaged citizen, there are inevitably high points and low points, successes and frustrations. What stands out for you as a high point when you were part of an outstanding community effort here?
 - + Please describe what happened and who was involved.
 - + What difference were you able to make working together?
 - + Which of your strengths and talents were called upon?
 - + What contributed most to the success of the effort?
 - + What did you learn about community change?

Dream:

Imagine a time in the future when people look to our community as an exceptional example of a thriving, attractive community where citizens of all ages engage as leaders and see themselves as owners of the community's future.

- In this exciting future, how are citizens engaged in community life?
- What is true of community leaders? What is sustaining their dedication?
- What kinds of systems and structures are most encouraging citizen engagement?
- What are you most proud of having helped the community accomplish?

Design:

- A. What are the areas where you feel more citizen engagement could have the most impact on improving the quality of public life in our community?
- B. As you reflect on successful ways citizens are currently engaged in improving the community, what initiatives stand out as being exceptionally promising in expanding local citizen leadership and why?

Destiny:

- A. What small changes could we make right now that would really encourage more families to get engaged with improving our community?
- B. How would you personally like to be involved in expanding citizen leadership here?
(*designed by Bliss Browne, Imagine Chicago*)

Sample Appreciative Inquiry into Building University Capacity

Discovery:

- What has been a high point of your involvement with North Park university?
- Why was it a high point?
- What do you especially value
 - a. About this university as a learning community?
 - b. About this university as a community capacity building institution?
 - c. About yourself as a contributor to this community?
 - d. About Chicago as a context for learning?
- What do you consider the core factor that makes for excellence in education here?

Dream:

Imagine that by 2020 North Park has established its reputation as a premier community development program in this region.

- What has contributed most to making that distinction possible?
- How is it making a difference to the future of this city to have a premier community development program at the university?
- What bold decisions were made and by whom that set this leadership direction?

Design:

- What do you feel are the most promising areas in which to expand the collaboration between the university and the community?
- Who might be interested partners in enhancing the university's community development excellence and why do you think they would be interested?
- What do you consider the best reason the university should invest in building community development capacity? To whom is this case most productively made?
- What communication structures would need to be put in place to draw attention to this investment?

Destiny:

- Who will provide leadership to this effort?
- What specific ways would you like to contribute to realizing this dream?
- What's the first thing that's needed to make it happen?

(designed by Bliss Browne, Imagine Chicago)

Sample AI Questions : Job Hiring Interview**Discovery**

1. How did you learn about our organization?
2. What most interested you about the available position? Why did it seem a good fit for your skills and interests?
3. Please share the story of what you consider your most outstanding, significant professional achievement. What about you made this achievement important? Possible?
4. Please tell me about a time when you were part of a group who collaborated to achieve amazing results in the face of many challenges. What enabled you to work together so well?
5. What do you value most deeply? How are those values reflected in your work?

Dream

6. What do you hope to accomplish at this organization? What will success look like? Why is that important to you?
7. If you could create any work environment, that would bring out your very best contribution, what would it look like? What would you ideally be doing? With what kind of people would you be working?

Design

8. What motivates you to do the work you are doing now?
9. What do you consider indicators that you are doing an excellent job?
10. How will you decide if this organization is a good fit for you?
11. When are you available to start work?

Destiny

12. What have you learned about this company so far that suggests you could make a great contribution to our collective work? What would you most look forward to contributing?
13. What additional questions do you have?

(source-Bliss Browne, Imagine Chicago)

Appreciative Inquiry into *Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth*

At the heart of *Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth* is the belief that young people and adults invested together in the future can turn visions into reality, that we can build on our experience of healthy communities to imagine even more vital communities and inspire each other to create the changes we imagine. This interview is an opportunity to reflect on your experience and understanding of healthy community building and to imagine how the Healthy Communities movement might develop in the future into an even stronger force for positive change.

DISCOVER

There have likely been many times when you have been engaged in creating a healthier community. Choose a time that is a personal high point-- when you felt especially alive, engaged, excited to be part of making an important difference.

(Interviewer: Please record your interview notes on this form as you go!!)

- *What is your high point story of helping create a healthier community?*
- *What difference were you able to make?*
- *Why did it matter to you?*
- *What did you learn about your strengths and gifts?*
- *Who else was involved and what did they contribute?*
- *What community assets were resources in making the change happen?*

DREAM

Now I want to ask about your vision of the future:

Imagine that, like Rip Van Winkle, you fall asleep and wake up in five years. You read in a magazine powerful stories of how *Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth* has grown in strength over the years. Community changes have been significant, and you're thrilled to be part of a movement that is making such an important difference.

- *What do you imagine the three most significant articles are about?*
- *What part do you play in these stories?*

DESIGN

- *What current trends give you most hope that such a movement can and will grow stronger?*
- *What is contributing most to your own willingness to make a difference in your community now?*
- *What are the most important factors likely to sustain your involvement?*

DESTINY

- *What next steps do you plan to take this year to recruit your friends and colleagues into getting involved?*
- *What recommendations do you have for how to strengthen the Healthy Communities Healthy Youth network?*

(designed by Bliss Browne, Imagine Chicago)

An Appreciative Performance Appraisal Conversation

DISCOVER: Your Job Performance This Past Year

ACHIEVEMENTS AND WHAT CONTRIBUTED TO THEM

1. Considering all of your objectives, what are you proudest of having accomplished?
2. Which objectives do you feel you have succeeded in meeting?
3. What did you do especially well that enabled those successes?
4. What else contributed in an important way to enabling you to do your best work here? (e.g. ... management, co-workers, professional development opportunities, corporate strategy, clients, other context and structures)
5. In your work as a member of the greater community, what achievements, accomplishments, or activities have you especially valued this year?

LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT/CAPACITY BUILDING

6. How have you grown this year in your professional competencies or personal effectiveness and what demonstrates that expanded competence?
7. What most helped you improve?
8. How have you been able to share what you learned with others?

DREAM: Becoming ever more effective.

9. What would represent a “breakthrough achievement” next year that you would love to help make possible?
10. Imagine your team/division working at its very best together this coming year. What is happening that builds on this year’s successes? What has changed that has improved the group’s effectiveness?

DESIGN

11. What specific new objectives do you want to set to inspire your best contribution over the coming year?
12. What additional skills or support do you need to enable you to meet these objectives?

DESTINY

13. Please enumerate exactly what you commit to accomplishing over the coming year and how it will support the organization’s mission and key strategic objectives.
14. What support and resources do you need to enable you to accomplish this and to make your very best contribution?

(designed by Bliss Browne, Imagine Chicago)

An Appreciative Inquiry designed by Imagine Chicago to Get Community Input into the Design of a New Environmental Education Center in Pierce County, WA

In every community there is work to be done.

In every heart there is the power to do it.

People will support what they help to create.

The Chambers Creek Foundation and Pierce County are dedicated to the realization of a future that honors the living connections between the natural world and human beings. We are partnering to design and create a pioneering environmental reclamation, education and stewardship center on a beautiful public site. We want to do so in a way which inspires local leadership and community-building and expands the imagination, dynamism and sense of place in Pierce County. This interview is an opportunity for you to reflect on your living connections here and share your thoughts about what will make the new Environmental Education Center (EEC) a great community asset.

DISCOVER: Living Connections

What stands out for you as a time when you felt alive and powerfully connected to the natural environment...an inspiring time when you sensed yourself as part of a living, dynamic whole?

- Where were you? Who was with you?
- What contributed to making it such a powerful experience?
- What were the greatest lessons or gifts from this experience?
- What values of yours did this experience bring into focus?

Vital signs

An environmental footprint is one way of measuring our impact. The new EEC can help everyone understand better their connection to the environment and to each other.

- What has most contributed to your understanding of “how nature works” and of your place in it?
- What are some of the practices in your daily life that best reflect your good stewardship of the environment?
- What do you consider signs of a healthier environment?

DREAM : Transforming Place

Imagine it is the year 2020 and the EEC at Chambers Creek is being featured in a national documentary entitled “Learning at the Edge of Wonder: A Living Laboratory”. It features Pierce County as a national leader in igniting a movement toward community sustainability and bringing living connections alive in a way which shows how much place matters. Stand in that future...imagine watching this documentary film and that you are living in 2020 as part of this transformed future...

- What does environmental education in Pierce County, look like now?
- How are Pierce County residents thinking about “place” differently in 2020?
- What has most strengthened a sense of community?

- What has generated inspiring intergenerational communication about the environment?
- How has the EEC best contributed to fostering a sense of Pierce County as ‘home’?
- What were some of the most important ways the community engaged actively in creating something truly exceptional? How were schools involved?

DESIGN: Empowering Intergenerational Learning and Commitment

Young people visibly represent the promise of the future. Sharing stories and images of creative community change across generations can raise accountability to work on behalf of that promise over multiple generations.

- What environmental topics would you love to learn more about?
- What local ecological connections would you like to understand better?
- What sort of learning opportunities at the Center would make you keen to go there and bring others (of multiple generations) with you?
- Why does working together across generations on raising environmental awareness make sense?
- What sorts of activities at the Center could strengthen community and communication across generations and make the EEC the preferred education and recreation destination in Pierce County for all age groups?

DESTINY: Co-Creating A Movement

Chambers Creek Foundation and Pierce County have the potential to not only provide outstanding environmental education but to help catalyze a local social movement...of deepening vision and ecologically sound practices that value and protect local natural and cultural resources.

Name three things that the EEC could bring into focus that might inspire you toward greater sustainability in your own ecological practice...

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What is one step you know you can take now to demonstrate your commitment?

How would you like to be involved in the design and planning of the new EEC?

Whom else would you recommend that we speak with about this and why?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR THOUGHTS AND TIME!

(SOURCE: Bliss Browne, Imagine Chicago)