Instigating change through Appreciative Inquiry: A Case Study

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Purpose

  This paper illustrates the usefulness of an appreciative inquiry (AI) approach and design in bringing about change. It reports on a case study of a review of a school within a higher education context using AI to engage staff, assess the need for change and make recommendations on this basis. AI is a qualitative approach focusing on potential strengths, and is an important approach in the current economic climate of austerity.

Design

  The paper is organized as a case study. It provides contextual background, argues for and outlines an AI approach, and reviews the literature which makes a strong case for AI in engaging staff with change, and promoting positive aspects like reflective team working. The actual review process is then described and how the AIapproach was applied. What follows is a discussion of issues which arose in applying the approach. It concludes that there are clearly very positive benefits to using AI. There may also be a need to modify how it is applied in order to maximize staff potential for trusting the process, and to enable the airing of alternative, more complex views, whilst still maintaining a positive focus.

Practical/social implications and originality/value

  The paper illustrates how an AI approach can be used in effective change management in the current climate of austerity and change in the public sector in the UK. AI can offer a way of restoring staff participation in change, and a way of enhancing communication and trust. The material in this paper is original and has not been published elsewhere.

Keywords
appreciative inquiry; change management

Introduction

  The Appreciative Inquiry (AI) model is based on the assumption that the questions we ask will tend to focus our attention in a particular direction. Unlike AI, other methods of assessing and evaluating a situation and then proposing solutions are based on a *deficiency* model. Such models ask questions such as "What are the problems?", "What's wrong?" or "What needs to be fixed?" The problem with these sorts of approaches is that there may be some inherent advantages of an existing situation which may then be ignored, and so a full or complex picture is not gained. Instead of asking about 'the problem', some other methods raise questions in terms of challenges, which proponents of AI (Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros 2008) argue also maintains a basis of deficiency, thereby assuming that there is something

wrong, or that something needs to be fixed or solved. In this paper we report on a review of a school within a university which was based on AI, but also suggest that the method could prove useful in reviewing the need for healthcare organizational changes.

The purpose of this article is to outline the application of basic principles of Appreciative Inquiry to engage with staff in a School within the higher education context, assessing the need for change and making recommendations for future organisational structure and practice. We felt that it would be beneficial to use AI for several reasons. Overall, given the current need for austerity, it is easy to take a negative orientation to reviews, assuming that underlying motivations are primarily about cost-cutting, and searching for inadequate or inefficient practices which will automatically be discontinued. We felt that AI might provide some balance, so that positive contributions could provide a context for whatever cost-cutting strategies might be envisaged. In fact, many authors in healthcare suggest that the positive focus of AI is a real bonus in current climates which can be seen to devalue the personal input of staff (eg. Traikovski et al, 2013; Richer et al, 2013). Also, given that the School was relatively new to the Faculty with mainly healthcare disciplines it seemed important to adopt an approach which would recognise the value of a discipline which for most of its history had belonged within faculties with different (non-health) disciplinary backgrounds. Given also the rapidly changing nature of policies for this discipline, an AI approach potentially provided a basis from which to value the longer standing practices, rather than be too subsumed by current shorter term imperatives in the wider policy context.

Given the type and speed of changes taking place, we felt that the use of AI was an approach which might be relevant for many other reviews taking place in the healthcare setting or higher education in the current political and economic context.

We begin with a brief background to the review and an overview of AI and its usage. We then describe the process we undertook, the findings, and our reflections and observations on the process.

Background to the review

As we alluded to above, the School was new to the Faculty and the reasoning behind the move was that the Faculty would provide a very relevant professional basis, with the appreciation of professional practice and all that this entails in terms of teaching imperatives, research orientation, practice learning, workplace-based education, and professional partnerships. We have deliberately withheld the name of the school, in order to preserve confidentiality but suffice to say, it was not health-related. A review of this nature therefore carried inter-disciplinary challenges. Clearly the review team was concerned to evaluate the school in its own disciplinary terms, but also to identify points of similarity which need to be capitalised upon, and distinctive aspects which needed to be preserved and supported. In addition, there were radical and rapid policy changes being undertaken in the way education and training this school offered was being funded and provided in the UK, most primarily with a move to more partnership led and driven provision with and by external organisations. Circumstances therefore seemed to indicate a need to re-assess the direction and management of the school.

Appreciative inquiry

AI has been used widely within the business community; only recently has AI begun to emerge as an effective strategy within higher education and healthcare (Dematteo& Reeves, 2011) Change theories and organization development strategies have long followed the problem-solving approach of looking at organizations, identifying the weaknesses and introducing interventions to do things better (Cooperrider 1990).

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a model for analysis, decision-making and the creation of strategic change, particularly within companies and other organizations (Barrett and Fry 2005).What makes AI so powerful is the strengths-based approach it takes to change in human systems. In most organizations, focusing on what's wrong and how to fix it has become a habit as ongoing evaluation of processes and practices are undertaken. An important component of any AI initiative is making the "mental shift" from focusing on problems to focusing on strengths. Bushe (2007) however points out that AI is not only about the positive but that the transformative element is to be promoted.

As reaffirmed by Bushe (2013) Appreciative Inquiry aids individuals in:

- Appreciating, valuing the best of what is
- Envisioning what might be
- Engaging in dialogue about what should be
- Innovating, what will be

The 'appreciating' component of the inquiry involves creating and keeping a positive mind-set of valuing, affirming, and building on strengths throughout an organization. The 'inquiring' component involves asking questions to explore and study, discover and build on new possibilities. Keefe and Pesut (2004) argue that in times of accelerated change accompanied by leadership transitions, appreciative inquiry and sense-making skills are necessary. Sense-making involves sizing up a situation to create a framework for decision-making, creating a context for communication, linking with others, and focusing on what is and what could be (Cooperrider and Shivastva (1987). For them, sense-making could be facilitated by applying appreciative leadership techniques.

A review of literature demonstrates that AI has been used successfully in a number of contexts. Clossey, Mehnert and Silva (2013) reports on its use to facilitate implementation of the recovery model in mental health agencies. The article explores how AI could be helpful in shifting an organization's culture to render it compatible with recovery through descriptions of two mental health centres' use of the tool. The experiences described indicate that AI, if used consistently, empowers staff. The article concludes with consideration of the implications of this empowerment for recovery model implementation and directions for future research.

Hughes (2012) also considered the approach for researching social work practice. The paper considers its potential as a research tool, therapeutic intervention and an educative tool within social work practice and education due to its congruence with professional social work values. Participants were recognised as the expert of their own experience and power is shared through participatory and appreciative approaches. The aim was for participants to benefit

directly from the research process as they are supported to express, analyse and reflect on their experience and to make changes that could improve their lives. Hughes argues that insight gained from the presentation of research findings can provide a catalyst from which others can reflect, analyse and evaluate their own practice.

Allen and Innes' (2013) paper reports on a study that investigated the process and outcomes of using AI in an Australian initial teacher education (ITE) program review. The aim of the study, which drew on a sample of teaching staff involved in a Master of Teaching program, was to gain an understanding of the extent to which the application of the AI framework can be used effectively in the review of ITE programs. AI promotes collegial reflective practice and the generation of positive resolutions and thus aligned with the purposes of the review that were to foster collaboration, strengthen staff morale and, subsequently, build a stronger program for students. As an outcome of the study they concluded with five recommendations for facilitators considering AI as an approach to higher education organisational analysis and learning: 1. Scope, sequence and timing are paramount. 2. Beware of making assumptions. 3. Power imbalances change everything for some. 4. Barriers are resilient. 5. Working as facilitators with peers in the AI environment requires a high level of confidence. Finally, those who facilitated the retreat acknowledged that, in an effort to make the shift to a forward-looking and positive approach to the appraisal of the MTeach, they perhaps imbued themselves with an overly optimistic sense of how they should conceptualise and implement the review.

Likewise, to achieve transformational change in nursing, Harmon et al (2012) argued that a transformational approach is needed. At the University of Virginia-School of Nursing, an AI Summit was designed to bring all staff, faculty, student representatives, and members of the community together to rewrite the school's strategic plan. New connections within the school, the university, and the community were made when 135 participants engaged in the 4-step AI process of discovering, dreaming, designing, and creating the school's future. During the summit, 7 strategic teams formed to move the school toward the best possible future while building on the existing positive core.

Van Vuurenand Crous (2005) write that the management of ethics within organisations typically occurs within a problem-solving frame of reference. This often results in a reactive, problem-based and externally induced approach to managing ethics. The aim of their paper was to present AI as an alternative approach for developing a shared meaning of ethics within an organisation, creating a foundation for the development of an ethical culture over time. A descriptive case study based on an application of AI was used to illustrate the utility of AI as a way of thinking and doing to precede and complement problem-based ethics management systems and interventions.

While AI has its origins in organizational development, Kung et al's (2013) article considers the application of AI within a course evaluation in higher education. An AI process was deemed appropriate given its concern for peak performance or life-centric experiences. So, former students of a particular course, along with current students, engaged in the discovery and dream stages of the 4D process, after which the researchers engaged in the identification of perceived causes of success and emergent themes that led to the co-construction of a set of

aspirational statements and an action plan for future teaching staff within the course. The process and outcomes affirmed the application and power of this strengths-based approach to uncover experiential and interpretive data pertinent to the ongoing development and sustainability of an academic course.

In a business school context Grandy and Holton (2010) considered how to mobilise change. The purpose of their paper was to explore how AI as a pedagogical tool could be generative in nature creating opportunities for change and development in a business school. Using a qualitative approach their research involved data collection and analysis in three stages of AI with a group of undergraduate students enrolled in strategic management and organizational change courses. Findings indicated that the experiential nature of the AI process was a success in promoting dialogue and inquiry, encouraging collaboration and team building, and empowering individuals toward a collective vision. Through an iterative process, four possibility statements were developed including: meaningful relationships with professors and peers; leadership opportunities; experiential learning; and creativity and flexibility in program design. These statements would serve as a starting point for future planning to the business school under study. Practical implications were that the process offered a number of insights for both faculty and students regarding the symbiotic relationships between learning and change.

Trajkovski et al (2012) examined and critiqued how the phases of the 4D cycle (Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny) of appreciative inquiry are implemented in a healthcare context. Nine qualitative studies met the inclusion criteria. Results highlighted that appreciative inquiry application is unique and varied between studies. The 4D phases were not rigid steps and were adapted to the setting and participants. Overall, they found that participant enthusiasm and commitment were highlighted suggesting appreciative inquiry was mostly positively perceived by participants. Appreciative inquiry provided a positive way forward shifting from problems to solutions offering a new way of practising in health care and health research

By contrast with most of the literature cited above, Dematteo& Reeves (2011), while noting many of the positive points listed above, were also critical of the AI approach. Basing their conclusions on 50 interviews with participants who had been involved in using AI to bring about change within interprofessional education settings, they argued that AI lacked the ability to focus on structural issues. It is interesting that the bulk of the literature emphasises the positives, and that noting of the problematic aspects of AI is minimal. Our own discussion will address these issues in more detail.

In summary, the review of the literature therefore indicates several major points:
- AI is contrasted with problem-solving approaches and is thought advantageous because of its ability to create more sustainable and shared cultures
- AI has been used successfully in most of the professions: health, nursing and mental health; social work; teacher education; higher education; organisational studies and business.
- The uses have ranged from assisting to implement a new model; research; organisational review; and in facilitating change.

- The literature has emphasised the positive aspects of AI which include the empowerment of participants; the ability to promote the integration of research and review/evaluation; the ability to be used as a pedagogical tool; the promotion of collegiality and a strengthening of morale; a catalyst for further reflection and analysis; its usage in developing partnerships with external organisations; and its ability to complement other methods.

The downsides of AI include: the potential for being overly optimistic in approach; an inability to address the structural aspects of organisational change (and perhaps the implied power imbalances inherent in this).

Review of the School

The School reviewed was regarded as an already successful operation with evidence of consistently achieving good outcomes to a range of external quality measurements. However there have been many external changes recently as well as the transition to a new Faculty, policy and budget changes necessitating a fresh look at the school in this context.

The approach to the review took account of what the School needed now and in the future, who does what, programme delivery and best practice. It planned to identify opportunities for enhancement of quality of current provision and future diversification opportunities. It was envisaged the review would inform decisions about organisational change and development to be implemented.

The review had initial scoping exercises through Appreciative Inquiry to establish what works well, what is not working well, what could change in the light of external drivers, internal changes, processes adopted. The aim of the review is to enable transformational change, focusing on good practice, effectiveness, efficiencies and the different elements of management and leadership within the School for optimal functioning. The objectives included:

- Provide opportunities for all school members (academic and professional support staff) to have input through a positive (appreciative inquiry) lens
- Find out broadly how people would like to see the school and what might need to be done to achieve this
- Establish how individuals/the school respond to the changing external/political conditions as a whole school and what is needed to be able to do this.
- Find out what experiences and processes were effective, their own contribution in the school, what they valued most and what can be done to promote improvements

Methodology – applying the AI approach

David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney's 2005 bookoutlining the five principles of Appreciative Inquiry, has become the standard model used by practitioners and researchers.

Implementation of AI required recognition of the need for structured conversations. These are opportunities for people to tell stories about past high point experiences at work and their dreams for the organization's future. They serve the 'appreciating' function because sharing stories builds positive connections between people. They serve the 'inquiring' function because they invite exploration of what's working well in the organization and individual's hopes for the future. Also important was that AI can be used flexibly (Whitney and Trosten-

Bloom (2010) but a consistent principle is that the more stakeholders that participate, the better, thus ensuring a broad array of input and good buy-in to the outcomes of the review.

In preparation for the review a strategic lead was identified (the authors led the review) and a steering group with key staff within the School convened to ensure control was retained by the school and to maintain confidence in the process. Large group briefings were held, followed by briefings and updates in writing that included the purpose, scope and features of the review, as well as the practicalities of how they can contribute. We wanted them to view this as a genuine opportunity to engage in dialogue about their shared ideas for the school.

The review team acknowledged that the usual approach to organisational change is to pay attention to problems, therefore with a tendency to make staff defensive in the process – the very people that need to be engaged in the change. Therefore approaches used in AI were appropriate for this review as it works with whole staff groups and begins with looking for the positives and connects this to produce a vision for change. The aim was to identify what works well for whom and what could be done differently in order to achieve agreed outcomes.

The information gathering methods used were, focus groups with School staff, meetings with external stakeholders, analysis of data and current portfolio. It focused on individuals' experiences working in the school, good practice, processes, efficiencies and value for money.

The following activities were included during the 'Discovery' and 'Dream' Phases

- Steering group meetings and division of key tasks and timelines
- Identify specific topics for the inquiry
- Identify all individuals to be included in the inquiry and agree minimal/acceptable numbers
- Clarify purpose of the inquiry and determine key questions to be asked
- Opportunities for involvement – Focus Group discussions, one to one discussion and individual responses via e mail.

Examples of discovery phase questions for specific topics of the inquiry are as follows:

In the "Discovery" stage:

- Used interviews/conversations to learn …:the very best of what it is like to work in the School - eg. outline experiences and processes that are/were effective, own contribution within School, what was most valuable, what could be done to promote improvements
- Created opportunities for people to share stories about their "peak experiences" in organizations.
- People were encouraged to talk about their organizations when they function at their very best, and about their own individual strengths and resources.
- The interview/discussion lead introduced each topic with a positive prologue and then may use a phrase like: "Tell me a story about ...." Seeks stories of personal experiences of those interviewed.
- Analyses of the unique factors that contributed to the positive experiences

In focus groups and individual discussions:

- When did you join the school and what attracted you to it?

- What keeps you here and what makes the difference for you?
- What are your areas of responsibility?
- Everyone experience 'ups and downs' in their day to day work. Tell me about a time in your work when you felt energised/passionate /most effective… (describe in detail the situation, who was involved, what made it a high point etc)
- What do you value most about your work here and the School in general? What is most interesting and meaningful?
- What are the qualities/strengths you believe you bring to the School?

Data sources and staff contributions

Initial briefings were held to provide staff with an overview of the review process and this was followed by an information sheet prior to holding the focus group discussions. It was decided to hold discipline-specific, administrative or programme team meetings separately, followed by mixed group meetings to discuss emerging themes from the data.

A range of the different areas/disciplines from which information were gathered, number of focus group discussions held and the numbers of staff that participated were fed back to participants over the period of the review. The aim was to achieve a minimum of 80% staff group contribution to the review and this target was exceeded. Sixteen of the 46 staff had been in employment more than ten years, 26 between 3 and 9 years and only four less than 2 years. Time working in the School ranged from two months to twenty five years.

In addition to focus group discussions, one to one meetings were held for particular individuals eg. Head of School, programme leads to obtain more detail about issues raised in the focus groups. Follow up focus groups with academic and administrative staff from different teams were held for further exploration of themes derived from previous data collection. This was achieved over a period of six months.

Discussion

Overall the process appeared highly successful, simply in terms of the willingness to participate (more than 80% participation rate) and to contribute to the process. Some people participated multiple times (in that they belonged to several different groupings and took the opportunities this afforded to participate with each group). Many remarked that they found the process interesting, and learnt many details about their colleagues which they had not known before (such as how long they had been in the school, the circumstances which had brought them and motivated them to stay). These were experienced as positive aspects of the process. Participants on the whole left each session in an upbeat mood, and often said that they felt valued by the process.

Below we have used Bushe's (2013) four aspects of how AI is helpful to frame our discussion:

Appreciating and valuing the best of what is

As noted above, many participants felt they gained better knowledge of colleagues, especially about their motivation in coming to work in the school, and in staying on. It was helpful to reaffirm what people found engaging and sustaining about the school, its mission

and its culture. One aspect of this was the very strong reputation of the school with its external organisations, and the conscientious job done by staff in sustaining supportive relationships with partner organisations. Openly noting aspects like these was also very useful in informing all staff in the school of positive activities being undertaken by others, which they were not always aware of. This appreciation could serve to develop a better "whole school" vision.

A clear theme emerged about valuing the work environment, the support available and working with people who care about what they do, particularly focusing on the students.

Envisioning what might be

Despite initial scepticism about the review in general, and the process in particular, the triangulation of information sources enabled adequate capture of the school activities, roles, responsibilities and staff views. Although the focus was on what individuals valued about their working context it was important to ask their views on any areas for enhancement. Small group dialogue proved useful in eliciting what could/might be, thus visioning the future.

In addition to focus group discussions, one to one meetings were held for particular individuals eg Head of School, programme leads to obtain more detail about issues raised in the focus groups. Follow up focus groups with academic and administrative staff from different teams were held for further exploration of themes derived from previous data sources. Suggestions, for example, included a need for more efficient processes and more guidance especially with outward facing roles, enabling a sense of trust to grow and encourages the confidence to share ideas; the human relationships building in a climate where ideas can be share, creating dynamic working relationships.

Engaging in dialogue about what should be

Follow up discussions in mixed groups and amongst the review steering group provided opportunities for ideas about the way forward were tested

The issue of needing more *direction and a vision* for the school emerged as one of the strongest themes, coupled of course with the need to be more proactive in forward planning, but also the need to be more strategic. With an eye to the future, staff made helpful suggestions about what the way forward might look like, for example, a vision which shows how the different programs of the school come together and which provides a common direction for everyone in the school to work towards. This could include a review of academic structures, teams and management of them. Better communication, especially whole school dialogue, is seen as important in forging this vision but also in continuing to support and develop each other in a volatile external environment.

It was also felt there was a need to be *more proactive in planning*, especially in course development which can be very reactive. Still others raised the issue of needing to be involved in more forums across the university and how to manage the distribution of responsibility.

Innovating, what will be

Building on existing positive core identified through the review, analysis of themes, and use of ideas by the team influenced the draft recommendations.

Main themes from first rounds of focus groups and interviews were used for more in-depth discussion. This enabled aspects of the design and destiny phases of AI to be utilised to gain ideas for the way forward. For example, '*develop "provocative propositions" describing the organization's ideal "ways of doing things" — its structures, systems, values, norms, strategies, relationships.*

The review identified the need for organisational change to achieve more effective management of the School through redefining roles and responsibilities, making better use of expertise across school programmes and use of distributed leadership as appropriate, to include line management.

Weighing up the downsides and upsides of AI?

Some difficulties however were encountered with some of the questions, in that participants did not always understand what was being asked, or why. Sometimes when questions perhaps felt too personal, some participants avoided answering them directly, and spoke instead about the program they co-ordinated, rather than their own experience of working in the school. Sometimes it seemed as if they might have been suspicious of why more "personal" questions (such as what motivates you to stay in the school) were being asked, or maybe it was that they felt their answers might appear too negative, so they were reluctant to voice them. This suggests that because the underlying approach of A1 is non-traditional, participants may need better preparation and understanding of the approach in order to maximise their involvement.

As reviewers, we were hopeful that we could hear and encourage a diversity of views without appearing "non-appreciative". Although firmly committed to the AI approach, we acknowledged that all situations are complex, and that sometimes a range of views is needed to build up this more complex picture. Because this was the first time we had used AI, we were not confident about how legitimate space for this complexity could be created. This meant that asking questions such as 'so what next, what would you change?' and also sharing good practice and individual views was perhaps particularly important in creating an environment which enabled differing viewpoints to be heard.

Creating a positive culture in the official sessions was also very important, in order to encourage frankness, and sending the message that individual staff were valued. We felt this was particularly important, given the current general climate of austerity in UK higher education and the low morale that this has brought about for some academics. There was also potential for setting up this positive climate to "backfire" in that, because not everyone had experienced the university culture in this way, there was in some cases little trust that the reviewers (and the faculty who had commissioned the review) actually did value individuals or that was a general disposition of good will towards the school. It was difficult, indeed perhaps impossible, to convey a more positive message through one review, and indeed what amounted to one session with most individual staff. There was therefore, for some participants, an attitude of mistrust, which presumably meant that they were not frank in their responses. This resulted in not everyone responding to all the questions to the same extent, nor were they able to be reflective to the same extent. We were aware of some of these

misgivings as some people raised questions about the process outside the official review sessions.

In some ways, it was AI itself which assisted with addressing problematic areas however. Because the AI sessions were on the whole experienced as enabling, participants felt reasonably relaxed in airing their views. We did note however that several people felt able to be more frank with us outside the official sessions. Whilst what they told sometimes could not be officially included in the findings, it did allow a better understanding of why they had framed their responses in the way they did. It also allowed us to craft and suggest more specific ways of dealing with the issues which had arisen. The opportunity for official one to one sessions proved useful in capturing additional information.

Conclusion and further directions

What have we learnt from engaging in this process? AI is certainly seen and experienced as a novel way of approaching organisational review. As our review illustrates, there is some literature which attests to the benefits of using AI in healthcare settings. Our experience certainly bears out findings suggested in some of the literature, such as the potential empowerment of staff (Grandy, 2010&Trajkovski et al, 2013); and the positive benefits of collegial reflection (Allan & Innis, 2013). There appears, from our experience, that there are many positive aspects to using AI, especially in a current climate of austerity with public monies, when tensions between managers and staff are potentially more fraught. Given that it is difficult to create easier and more trustful communication in this climate, AI can prove invaluable. In addition, it is helpful to be able to empower and value staff using a systematic process like AI, when staff may often feel that they take different messages from the broader organisational and fiscal climate. It is also clearly a useful process in preparing the ground for change, something which is inevitable in public services in the UK at the moment. AI effectively enables staff to become part of the change process.

Our experience also suggests that given that AI is a novel approach, staff perhaps do need more understanding and awareness of the principles that underpin it, so that they can participate more fully in the process, and so that its benefits can be maximised. There could be some benefit in having an introductory session which allows for open discussion of the pros and cons of AI, so that people can air doubts and uncertainties before engaging in the more formal part of the process. In this sense, such a preliminary discussion might provide the opportunity to build more trust beforehand, and so address some of the issues which we found from our experience. There might also be some benefit, whilst still applying the general principles of AI, to be able to modify the method slightly so as to create space for the voicing of alternative, or what might be seen as more negative views. This could perhaps be framed as naming what needs to change and at the same time envisioning the particular changes which would address it. In this way the positive focus is maintained, but not at the expense of silencing more complex or problematic perspectives.

In conclusion, we believe the benefits of AI are clear, and that perhaps it is becoming even more relevant as an approach in the current economic climate. Our experience suggests

though that specific aspects might be better developed in order to maximise the benefits of such an approach.

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