

Crafting Meaningful Questions

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A HEALTHIER FUTURE

Appreciative Inquiry as a Tool for Engagement

The key to eliciting meaningful information through engagement lies in the crafting of questions which enable participants to offer information and insight.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a change management approach that focuses on identifying what is working well, analysing why it is working well and then doing more of it.

The basic tenet of AI is that an organisation will grow in whichever direction that people in the organisation focus their attention. If all the attention is focused on problems, then identifying problems and dealing with them is what the organisation will do best. If all the attention is focused on strengths, however, then identifying strengths and building on those strengths is what the organisation will do best.

Appreciative inquiry is an excellent tool in engaging individuals in the change process because it creates opportunities to look at the best of what exists already and then explore what would be the best possible future before unpicking what needs to happen to get to that future. It allows a positive based conversation that moves to possibilities quickly rather than getting stuck in problems and difficulties.

The process of Appreciative Inquiry requires a particular way of asking guided questions that encourage positive thinking and employee-to-employee interaction. The questions focus on four key areas:

Inquire

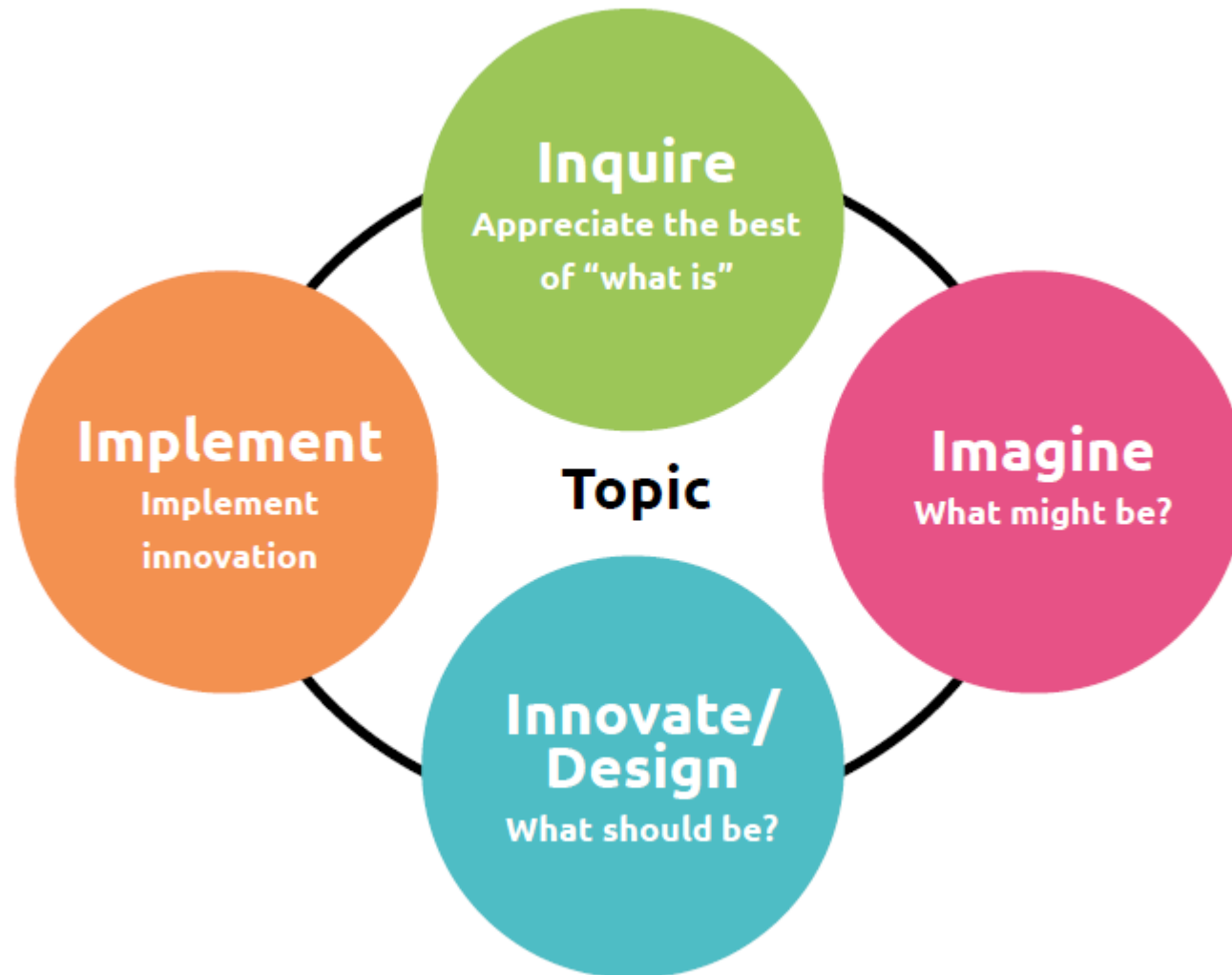
Imagine

Innovate

Implement

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Here are some examples:

Inquire questions facilitate the identification of processes in the organisation that work well.

Question: What part of the product launch do you think went exceptionally well?

Answer: One thing that seemed to go well was using Twitter to build anticipation for the product launch.

Imagine questions facilitate analysis of why a particular process works well and help brainstorm ways to apply that knowledge elsewhere.

Question: Why was Twitter a successful tool for the product launch and how else might we use it?

Answer: It worked because it was easy to administer and didn't take up much time or cost any money. We liked how we could see people Tweeting about our new product weeks before it actually launched commercially.

We could imagine it working well as a way to promote special Internet deals.

Innovate questions facilitate the creation of an action plan

Question: How could we test using Twitter to promote special Internet deals?

Answer: Bob could tweet a new coupon code each day for a week.

Implement questions facilitate the creation of criteria for success and a way to determine whether or not the action plan was successful.

Question: How will we know if it's worth Bob's time to tweet a new coupon code each day?

Answer: We will have at least one online customer use the special coupon code during the test period.

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A 'How To' Guide:

To design good appreciative inquiry questions, remember to:

- Ask about ultimate concerns (e.g. What do you value most?)
- Use positive questions that build on positive assumptions; (e.g. What about this neighborhood makes you especially glad you live here?)
- Give a thought-provoking, appealing definition of topics; (e.g., “Constructive experiences of difference inspire new ways of thinking.”)
- 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?)
- Enhance the possibilities of storytelling by asking questions about trusted personal experience. (Thinking back on your year, please share a high point when...)
- Phrase questions in a conversational, friendly tone (and listen eagerly as to a friend.)
- 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”)
- Good questions invite thinking—they stretch the imagination and inspire new thoughts without evoking defensiveness or hostility. Reach for the “um”!

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The following provides an example of how a series of questions could be structured to develop a coherent appreciative inquiry into communities and leadership:

Inquire:

- What do you love most about this community? What first drew you here and what has most encouraged you to stay?
- What do you consider some of the most significant trends, events, and developments shaping the future of this community?
- What has inspired you to get engaged as a civic leader? What do you most hope you can contribute?
- 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?

Imagine:

- 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?

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- 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?

Innovate:

- 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?
- 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?

Implement:

- What small changes could we make right now that would really encourage more families to get engaged with improving our community?
- How would you personally like to be involved in expanding citizen leadership here?

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The following provides an example of how a series of questions could be structured to develop a coherent appreciative inquiry into healthy communities:

Inquire

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?

Imagine

- 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?

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Innovate

- 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?

Implement

- 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?

These are examples, upon which you could plan and develop One to One Interviews, Focus Groups and Public Meetings which are underpinned by the principles of Appreciative Inquiry.