



Tapping Into the Power of Learning Part 4B:

Using Appreciative Inquiry

by Marilyn Herasymowych, MCE

“... we human beings create our own realities through symbolic and mental processes and that because of this, conscious evolution of the future is a human option.”

— David Cooperrider, **Appreciative Management and Leadership: The Power of Positive Thought and Action in Organizations** (1990)

The human brain is designed to do what we tell it to do. According to brain research, we create what we think. If we think about barriers, we create barriers. If we think about opportunities, we create opportunities. Appreciative inquiry focuses on creating opportunities. Today, most organizations focus on solving problems (**InfoMine**, Vol. 4, No. 3). Therefore, what most people in organizations do is create more problems, simply because they are constantly thinking about problems. Solving one problem usually creates

another. What people need to do is to create an environment of appreciative inquiry that, in turn, creates a successful future. Instead of solving a problem, one focuses on creating a future in which the problem no longer exists. Cooperrider observes “that the central executive task in a [learning community] is to nourish the *appreciative* soil from which affirmative projections grow, branch off, evolve, ...” and become reality.

How does appreciative inquiry work at both an individual and a team level? To demonstrate, I describe one activity that uses the principles of appreciative inquiry (**InfoMine**, Vol. 4, No. 3). This activity works because it causes 80% of the brain’s neurons to fire, as if the brain were actually experiencing the image of the future being created. In this way, the brain begins to create a pattern for this future. This pattern prepares the brain to accept information from the environment that affirms this pattern. For example, within one week of attending a session on visioning,

people notice a multitude of opportunities to create their envisioned futures presenting themselves. The opportunities were probably there all along; however, it is difficult to see them if one’s brain pattern is accustomed to seeing problems, rather than opportunities. The key to appreciative inquiry is to create a positive image, rather than a negative one.

Individual Activity

To practice appreciative inquiry, tell the story of your successes. This activity is most successful if you are not interrupted, so set aside approximately two hours of time to be alone. Record your responses to the questions below. Use a journal, a computer, or a tape recorder, whichever one works for you. Be sure to add as much detail as possible. Use all of your senses (i.e., sight, smell, hearing, taste, touch) to describe your responses. The more specific your descriptions are, the stronger the image you create.

1. Review your life experience, and list all of the moments in which you experienced success. These moments can be as small or as large as you wish. If you find this difficult to do, focus on moments of achievement, insight, stability, change, and/or competence. You need to define success in your own way.
2. Use the following questions to guide you in analyzing these moments of success:
 - What did you do to contribute to the success (e.g., attitudes, values, beliefs, knowledge, skills, behaviours)?
 - What did others do to contribute to the success (e.g., attitudes, values, beliefs,

- knowledge, skills, behaviours)?
- What factors contributed to the success (e.g., support, resources, timing)?
 - What factors hindered the success (e.g., lack of support, lack of resources, poor timing)?
 - How did you deal with the good times?
 - How did you deal with the hard times?
3. Answer the next two questions to diagnose your next step:
- Do you want to create a personal vision of your future? If **yes**, go to **step 4**. If **no**, go to the next question.
 - Do you want to solve a problem? If **yes**, go to **step 5**. If **no**, go to the next question.
 - Do you want to take advantage of an opportunity? If **yes**, go to **step 6**. If **no**, you need to think about what it is that you want to do.
4. To create a personal vision, complete the activity called *Drawing Forth Personal Vision in The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* by Peter M. Senge et al., on pages 201-209. When you are finished with the activity in the book, go to step 7.
5. To solve a problem, complete the activity called *Developing Preferred Scenarios in Developing Critical Thinkers: Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting* by Stephen Brookfield, on pages 120-121. When you are finished with the activity in the book, go to step 7.
6. To take advantage of an opportunity, answer the following questions:
- What would be the result of leveraging this opportunity?
 - What desired patterns of behaviour would you be demonstrating? Review what you discovered in step 2 above.
 - What positive conditions now exist?
 - How is this affecting you personally?
 - How have you changed the processes for making decisions and taking actions, in order to take advantage of this opportunity?
 - How are you measuring and evaluating the effects of taking advantage of this opportunity?
7. Imagine that you have achieved your vision, solved your problem, and/or taken full advantage of an opportunity. Writing in the PAST tense (i.e., as if today were the future), answer the question: What did you do (i.e., tasks, goals, milestones) to accomplish this? To answer this question, follow the steps below:
- List all of the tasks, goals, and/or milestones that you accomplished. Do not worry about the order at this time.
 - Once you have generated all of the tasks, goals, and/or milestones, arrange the tasks, goals, and/or milestones in the order in which they occurred. Some tasks, goals, and/or milestones may have occurred simultaneously.
 - For the first two milestones, list the specific tasks that occurred to achieve that milestone.

- For each task, list the most probable timeline, the resources required, and the specific and measurable results of the task.

If you have done all of these steps, you now have a direction on which to focus your energy. You also have an action plan to begin working on, in order to create your desired future, to solve a problem, and/or to take advantage of an opportunity. Thinking about success and planning for it are only the first two steps. In order to create your future, you need to take action on your plan. Use your plan to guide your decisions and your actions.

“The image of the future not only acts as a barometer but actively promotes cognition and choice and in effect becomes self-fulfilling because it is self-propelling.”

— David Cooperrider,
Appreciative Management and Leadership: The Power of Positive Thought and Action in Organizations (1990)

MHA Institute Inc.
Unit 248, Suite 205
259 Midpark Way SE
Calgary, Alberta T2X 1M2 Canada

Phone: (403) 257-4597
Fax: (403) 257-4649
E-mail: info@mhainstitute.ca
Web: www.mhainstitute.ca