# Positive Problem Solving: How Appreciative Inquiry Works

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In the current economic downturn, both individuals and organizations are challenged to "do more with less." In the midst of uncertainty, one tendency is to be fearful of what we don't know or to focus on the "bad" things that are happening around us—revenue shortfalls, collection lags, shifting budget allocations, or double-digit unemployment—that strain our ability to provide services to those who need them. The practice and philosophy of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) enables public officials and organizations to recognize and build on their strengths to meet these challenges. This article provides a framework for exploring this approach, describes the experiences of others in public sector settings in using AI practices and philosophies, and outlines how managers can use AI in their own communities and offices.

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## Positive Problem Solving: How Appreciative Inquiry Works

In the 1995 movie, *Apollo 13*, there is a scene that epitomizes the concept of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). The infamous line "Houston, we have a problem" let us all know the astronauts were in an emergency situation. The physical resources for the ideal solution were not in the space capsule. Back at NASA, the scientists and engineers were gathered into a room. Someone dumps out a box of assorted items and tells them this is everything available in the capsule. It does not matter what else they might have wanted to use in a perfect situation; these things were the available resources. They had to find a way to fix the problem using a random inventory of supplies and tools. The resources that saved the day were the creativity of the engineers and the skills of the astronauts. As history tells us, they were able to find a solution—using the resources they had on hand—that enabled a safe return home.

In the current economic downturn, both individuals and organizations are being challenged to "do more with less." Governments are challenged to respond to the public's increasing need for assistance while facing uncertainty about when declining revenues may be reversed. In the midst of uncertainty, one tendency is to be fearful of what we don't know or to focus on the "bad" things that are happening around us—revenue shortfalls, collection lags, shifting budget allocations, or double-digit unemployment—that strain our ability to provide services to those who need them.

Facilitators from the School of Government at UNC-Chapel Hill have found the use of a relatively new organizational approach—called Appreciative Inquiry—enables public officials and organizations to recognize and build on their strengths to meet these challenges.

This report provides a framework for exploring this approach, describes the experiences of others in public sector settings using AI practices and philosophies, and outlines how you can use AI in your own communities and offices. Our intention is to introduce readers to three key practices that define the AI approach:

- Focus on strengths rather than weaknesses
- Ask powerful, positive questions
- Use positive images of the future to motivate positive action.

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Each of these practices can strengthen relationships and decision making every day, as well as in large-scale planning or organization change efforts. After a brief overview of AI and its history, this article describes each of these practices, provides case illustrations, and offers exercises for testing them.

## What is Appreciative Inquiry?

Appreciative Inquiry focuses on strengths and opportunities. As part of the strengths-based revolution that includes positive psychology and new applications from neuroscience, the AI approach calls for us to rediscover and organize the good and the strong rather than focus solely on the problems we face. We are better able to meet our challenges creatively by defining and using our strengths, instead of spending so much time defining our deficits. Organizations and the people in them do not need to be fixed, but instead *affirmed*, so that they can build on the resources and skills they already have.

The sidebar below outlines how AI differs from a traditional problem solving process.

Gallup Poll surveys show that people have several times more potential for growth when they invest energy in developing their strengths instead of correcting their deficiencies, and that they are six times as likely to be invested and engaged in their jobs when they do have the opportunity to focus on their strengths.[1, 2] This is consistent with a growing body of research on the constructive effects of positive thinking.

Positive emotions—like all emotions—arise from how we interpret events and ideas as they unfold. The balance of positive to negative emotions a person experiences is called the Positivity Ratio.[3] Making small changes in how we appreciate and frame daily events can enhance our positivity.

Research into positive emotions shows that positivity builds our resilience (useful during challenging times), enables us to cope with adversity with open minds (useful for healthy longevity in public careers), and builds greater connections to others (useful for creating teamwork).[4]

Another practical consequence of positivity's mind-broadening powers is enhanced creativity. A broad mind changes the way we think and act. When we have a broader vision, more ideas come to mind and more actions become possible. Research identifies three factors that distinguish business teams that flourish. In effective teams, members' statements tend to be

- More positive than negative
- Other-focused instead of self-focused, and
- Based on "inquiry" (asking questions) rather than defending a point of view.

### Comparing Basic Practices and Philosophies

| Problem Solving | Appreciative Inquiry |
|---|---|
| Identify the problems | Identify current successes and strengths |
| Analyze the causes of the problems | Identify the factors that enable our success; envision our desired future |
| Treat the problems | Innovate to build more support for those factors that enable success and move us toward the future we desire |
| "We get better by solving our problems." | "We get better by enabling our best work." |

For example, whether or not a team is able to see the big picture and engage in effective strategic planning depends on members' feeling hopeful and looking toward a positive future.[5]

These researchers do note the value of "appropriate negativity" in keeping grounded. By "appropriate" they mean information that is realistic and timely—information that is true and relevant to the situation. Negative information is appropriate when it provides the specific boundaries within which a challenge must be met. In an economic belt tightening scenario, for example, appropriate negativity might include a target budget reduction amount and time frame. It might also include recognition that staff and elected officials will have to make hard decisions. Of course, it would also include any legal requirements or non-negotiable mandates that must be met.

AI provides an effective framework for strength-based conversations. It helps people share knowledge and find new ways to work together. The AI process is helpful in a variety of settings from pairs and small teams of people to large organizations and even entire communities. Time frames for using AI range from one-day conversations to intensive four-day summits to initiatives cascading through large systems over months or years.

AI literature and case studies make many references to its application through "summits," which are multi-day, inclusive efforts to encourage innovation and planning.[6] Some public sector processes, especially those that depend on citizen engagement, such as community visioning [7] or strategic planning, are well suited to use the format of a traditional AI summit where large numbers of people gather to engage in discussion. However, public officials can also incorporate simple AI practices on a daily basis. That is the focus of this article. The sidebar provides some examples.

People will find what they are looking for: indicators of success or failure, creative solutions or passive endurance, excellence or mediocrity. AI approaches help people recognize and build on their positive experiences. Shifting to an appreciative or positive perspective may take time, of course, for cultures in which

### Building Appreciative Inquiry Skills for Yourself and Those You Work With

1. Observe your organization at work. Notice what people talk about and focus on. How much of the conversation is forward-looking and strength-based and how much is deficit-based?
2. Shift your own perspective to focus on organizational and community strengths and opportunities. Pay attention to strengths.
3. Consciously focus on and talk about what's good, what you want more of, and about the direction you want to head. See what happens.
4. Review organizational successes. Find out what strengths caused those successes.
5. Tap the wisdom of the whole. Include the whole system in choosing direction and creating solutions. Share and include broadly.
6. Ask for ideas, stories, and each person's experience around solutions for your current challenges. Find the knowledge and wisdom people already have.
7. Ask powerful, open, solution-focused questions that help others find answers and have insights. Questions are your best tool.
8. Ask what people want more of and what they recommend, rather than just settling for a description of the problems.
9. Reinforce good ideas with praise and affirmation. Appreciate.
10. Invite the positive. Create a work environment where good ideas can flourish.

people truly do not value or respect each other, are not willing to listen to each other, or want to remain engaged in power struggles. The AI practices open the door to organization change by helping people put aside negative habits to focus on larger, shared interests. Organizations that already use facilitation tools, such as Roger Schwarz's *Groundrules for Effective Groups*,[8] to encourage effective group conversation and problem solving already have positive practices on which to build, including skills to uncover or jointly develop shared interests.

The sidebar below summarizes how AI is appropriate for public sector organizations today.

## The Origins of Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry originated from the doctoral thesis of David Cooperrider through the Organizational Behavior Program of Case Western Reserve University.[9] In 1980, David Cooperrider conducted an organizational analysis of the Cleveland clinic, using an inquiry focused on what was working well, instead of what was dysfunctional.

He continued with a study of the "life-centric" properties of the organization and published his findings with his advisor, Suresh Srivastva, in 1986. As his research continued, he found connecting practices and philosophies that grounded his work into a new theory and framework.

After twenty-five years of experience and innovation, AI has emerged as one of the most refreshing strategies for enhancing organizational and community life. Academic and professional literature has proliferated. There is an ongoing online discussion group with more than 2,000 members; a practitioner's journal; international conferences around AI; and an enormous research-oriented, practice-sharing web page, the "AI Commons."

### Why AI? Why Now?

In *Appreciative Leadership*, the authors discuss four trends (listed in the left column) that are affecting all organizations today. The right column lists characteristics of AI that create congruence with these trends.

| Trends Facing Organizations Today | AI Practices |
|---|---|
| 1. **New generations have come of age.** Today, people want to be engaged and heard. They want to be involved in the decisions that affect them and be acknowledged for a job well done. | • Invite participation from all those involved.<br>• Value the differing perspectives and information that people bring.<br>• Draw on both life and work experiences.<br>• Enhance creativity and innovation.<br>• Uncover aligned interests.<br>• Build resilience through its positive focus.<br>• Help identify direction and immediate next steps to take.<br>• Recognize the value of relationships.<br>• Build ownership and engagement. |
| 2. **Diversity is the norm.** Speaking many languages and sharing many different histories, people in today's organizations want leadership to be collaborative and just. | |
| 3. **Institutions are being reinvented.** These new institutions are more fluid and more agile. In them, distributed leadership and power emerges as people self-organize to meet the needs of the whole. | |
| 4. **Holistic, sustainable approaches are essential.** The most pressing social, economic, environmental, and political challenges of our time are global in nature. They cannot be resolved by one person, one country, or one business. | |

Source: Adapted from Diana Whitney, Amanda Trosten- Bloom, & Kae Rader; *Appreciative Leadership*, McGraw Hill, NY 2010, pp. 2-3.

## Key Practice 1: Reframe to Focus on Strengths

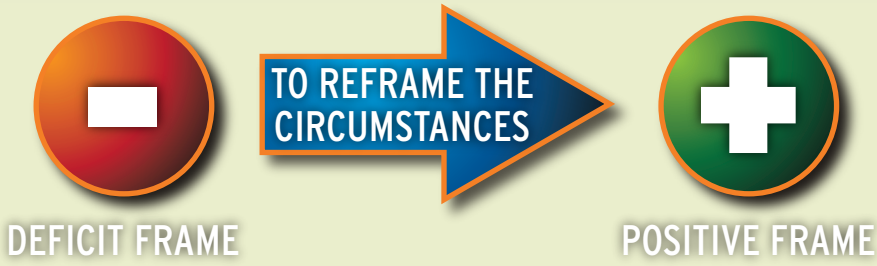
Appreciative Inquiry is realistic but also optimistic. The AI approach recognizes the difficulties individuals, organizations, or communities face, but does not focus there. Instead, the AI process asks about existing assets and how those strengths can be developed to address the challenges we face.

With AI, the content of the work does not change, but the orientation toward the work does. Instead of solving problems (deficit focus), we focus on creating the future we want (positive focus). The sidebar demonstrates the difference.

Learning how to shift focus to the positive can take effort, and it might even feel irresponsible at first. In an AI training event sponsored by the School of Government, one participant resisted this shift for a particular situation in which she was engaged. Public health officials were planning a response to a projected flu pandemic. They projected a

### Reframing Statements to Encourage More Creative and Positive Action

Scenario: A manager discusses upcoming budget reductions in a department head meeting.




| | | |
|---|---|---|
| We are facing big budget cuts next year. Everyone is just going to have to deal with it. People are going to be upset for lots of reasons. Whining isn't going to help. We just will have to make some hard decisions and power through. | Speak in terms of the positive (what assets and strengths do we have to build on?) instead of talking about what we lack (expressing disapproval, sarcasm, cynicism). | This team holds valuable, comprehensive knowledge about our organization. We have a good track record of creative problem solving while respecting our legal and moral obligations and boundaries. We have been successful in the past in identifying the short- and long-term implications of our decisions. Right now we don't know what our plan will be, but we will figure one out together. |
| We need to make permanent cuts of at least 7 percent, because the previous administration made bad decisions. We've been spending too much for too long. There is no telling how long this stress will last. | Share and incorporate all relevant negative information in reframing the future we want to create. | Our community is following a national trend in declining revenues. Somehow we need to reduce overall expenditures by 7 percent for the next fiscal year while retaining our priority services to the community. How we reach that dollar amount is up to us. It is too soon to know what our financial prognosis will be the year after that. |
| We will share the pain equally and cut each of our departments by the same percentage. | Seek others' perspectives, instead of assuming the certainty of having the answer. Assume others have valuable information to share. | What does your experience tell you about what we should do to protect our core functions while still reducing departmental budgets? |
| We should close the library on Sunday afternoons and by 6:00 p.m. in the evenings. | Ask questions in order to explore all possible options. | Let's hear other ideas about how we might maintain key services while reducing the budget for the library. |

less than adequate supply of flu vaccine and health care for victims, which could result in significant human suffering, and even death. The workshop participant thought that taking a positive approach was disrespectful of the potential for distress and loss of life. The trainer's response was not to deny the potential tragedy, and she did acknowledge that by not focusing on the potential for such loss, leaders might initially appear callous. However, to find a solution, leaders would have to focus on the systems, services, and resources that are working well now, and figure out how to best use them in a flu pandemic, then to look at what further resources would be needed. The positivity is applied to designing the best response possible under the circumstances. If we pause to reflect on this strength-based way of thinking, we can see that, in fact, we can only begin to build solutions to big issues from the platform of what we already have, from our current strengths and resources.

Case 1 highlights the implications of intentionally shifting to a positive perspective. Reframing the discussion in terms of strengths focuses discussion on available assets and the development of creative responses.

**Case 1: Using a Positive Frame**

Organization X had surveyed its clients to assess how well its seventeen local offices were meeting their needs. The report with the survey results was prepared prior to a regular meeting of the state office staff and satellite office directors. As the director reviewed the report, he saw that all of the satellite offices were rated 87 or better on a 100-point scale, and most were over 95. By his standards for excellence, though, anything less than a score of 95 was inadequate.

His executive staff watched him begin to simmer, focusing on the few offices that scored relatively low. He contemplated ways to call the slackers to task at their meeting. Public humiliation was not his goal, but accountability certainly was. The staff experienced a growing concern for the potential negative impact that approach might have on both the content and the interpersonal dynamics for the whole meeting. Having just attended a workshop on Appreciative Inquiry, the staff began considering how they might reframe the concern of inadequate performance in a more productive way.

They ultimately decided to shift the attention to the offices that scored the highest on the client survey and invited them to share their best strategies for meeting client needs. The meeting turned into an energized discussion of successes with helpful offers of assistance between offices.

Asking, "What did these high-performing offices do right?" generates a very different conversation than "What did these low-performing offices do wrong?" A negatively-framed discussion can easily generate reactions of fear, accusation, defensiveness, and shutting down. In contrast, inquiring about the circumstances or strategies that lead to excellence is energizing and more likely to stimulate positive actions of sharing, support, creativity, and community-building.

Taking a positive frame to focus on successes and strengths leads us through a very different planning process and accesses very different knowledge than our usual problem solving planning methodologies.

In the 2010 book *Appreciative Leadership*, the authors refer to this shift from the deficit-based to the positive, affirming perspective as the "Flip." Appreciative leaders have the capacity to "see positive potential, and they invite it to come to life by asking positive questions." They listen carefully to when others are complaining or describing problems, ask questions to discover what is really desired, then summarize that desired state into a short phrase or topic.[10] Inquiring into existing positive experiences uncovers effective responses to the challenges we face. Mining those positive experiences through dialogue encourages innovation.

This shift to a positive context is essential; it means beginning with the end goals in mind and addressing the challenge by looking at desired outcomes. When we shift our

perspective, we shift what we find. If we think our co-workers are too bound up in following petty rules, we can find evidence of that. If we look for ways our co-workers are creatively and actively engaged in meeting the needs of clients while respecting mandates, we can find evidence of that, too. The ways in which people talk and think determines how we approach our decisions and actions. Discussion can enliven or depress. It can spiral us up, down, or leave us spinning.

Exercise 1 offers examples of and provides opportunities to practice finding the possible "Flip," or positive reframe, present in any challenge.

*"If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on it, I would use the first 55 minutes to formulate the right question because as soon as I have identified the right question I can solve the problem in less than five minutes."*

—Albert Einstein

## Key Practice 2: Ask Positive Questions

Questions create attention and focus us. They are our most readily available and powerful tool to impact our circumstances, our conversations, and our stories.

Taking the time to clearly focus a topic in a strength-based, positive direction can yield powerful questions that bring out the wisdom and creativity of the group. By asking the right questions, we set out to discover our strengths and resources as well as move us in a direction of greater energy.

The AI approach recommends posing questions that initially draw on what we already know how to do and focus toward what is possible: "What expertise and experience do we have that applies to the current situation?" and "What do we want more of?" instead of "What is going wrong?" or "What do we want to avoid?"

### Exercise 1: Identify the "Flip," or positive reframe, to elevate the conversation so that solutions can be found.

Focusing only on the problem feeds the negative spiral. Instead, identify its positive opposite, and then discuss how that can be achieved. One way to begin is to ask the question, "What do we want more of?"

| The Challenge | The Positive Reframe |
|---|---|
| **1.** Example: Changing circumstances are forcing us to reorganize how our staff members work together. People are stressed out about the unknown. | We want to be a cohesive team -understanding, supporting, and reinforcing each others' work. |
| **2.** Example: We seem to have either entry-level workers or managers with 20+ years of experience. 80 percent of our department heads are eligible for retirement within three years. | We want the next generation of staff to have the leadership skills and knowledge they need to succeed. |
| **3.** Our citizens want their government to be more accessible online and in-person during evenings and weekends. Most offices are still primarily open 8:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m., M-F. | [Try your hand at articulating the Flip. The authors' suggestions appear at the end of this report.] |
| **4.** Reduced revenues require us to set priorities among many compelling plans for action. No matter which options we choose, we will be disappointing someone. | [Try your hand at articulating the Flip. The authors' suggestions appear at the end of this report.] |

Asking appreciative questions helps people develop more effective working relationships. Take the example of ineffective communication. Whether a communication challenge is between just two people or is shared by a work group or larger organization, asking and answering positively framed questions can help people communicate more clearly by building on their good communication skills. Case 2 provides an illustration.

### Case 2: Asking Positive Questions

School of Government facilitators used positively-focused questions during a county government retreat for department heads. The area had lost its economic base of furniture manufacturing and was now dealing with the national economic downturn as well. The county government expected to be on the receiving end of the stress that loss would generate. The county manager and key leadership staff were concerned about how best to communicate with each other and with local residents through the challenging times ahead.

They were asked to reflect on past experiences in which successful communication happened during a time of severe stress. Either personal or professional examples could be used. Then, they identified the practices and expectations that enabled that prior success and discussed how those same lessons might be applied to the current situation.

A year and a half later, the county manager reported that their retreat time had given participants an opportunity to understand each other better: what motivates them, what bothers them, and which experiences shaped their communication patterns. These enhanced relationships are affecting how conversations take place now: how department heads approach one another, the meaning they attach to a person's response, and the thrust of their own reactions.

The manager acknowledged that they did not make formal changes in their communication policies, but he also reflected, "Department heads are much more likely now to go to each other directly to resolve matters rather than come through me. Our time together in retreat helped deepen our relationship, break down our silos, and build our rapport with each other." By sharing stories of successful communication during times of extreme stress, they gained useful insights into each other's preferred practices in sharing information and began communicating more effectively with each other and with the public.

How can you begin to create very powerful, strength-based questions? Maximize the potential for success by ensuring that your questions are:

- Open: inviting the unique opinions and experiences of the individual
- Inclusive: relevant and appealing to people of any position or experience in the group or team
- Challenging forward thought: requiring that the respondent stretch from "what is" to "what might be better."

Questions should be tied to a theme that provides a genuinely compelling focus. If the theme does not interest people, then it does not address the issue that actually warrants group discussion. Questions should also be big enough to offer respondents latitude in choosing how to answer. Encouraging responses about either personal or private life, for example, enables group members to get beyond their organizational roles or hierarchy. Finally, questions encourage creative responses rather than proscriptive or "party line" reactions.

Exercise 2 offers an example and provides opportunities to practice drafting positive questions. You can do this in everyday situations.

The answers from the appreciative questions you ask provide data you and your colleagues can use in designing and deciding how the group wants to work together and what they want to accomplish in the future.

### Exercise 2: Create Positive, Strength-Based Questions

Use the following scenarios to practice drafting appreciative questions (open, inclusive, and encouraging forward thinking) to use in informal one-on-one conversations. The purpose of these questions is to identify existing strengths, collect the intelligence in the room, and build shared support of the desired future.

***Example 1:*** A manager is leading the first meeting of a cross-organizational committee that has to make a plan for riverfront development. What questions might that manager ask to introduce committee members to each other, set a healthy tone for the collaboration, and learn what the group members bring?

- Tell us about a time when you were part of a group or committee that really succeeded. What made it so successful? What can we learn from that?
- What skills, resources, or knowledge do you bring to this committee that will help us succeed in our work?
- What other less obvious, or even surprising, gifts might you contribute if invited to do so?
- How should we conduct our work together in order to enable your best contributions to our collective success?

***Example 2:*** A program manager is trying to introduce and design a new service into a stressed neighborhood. The neighborhood has strengths to build on, despite some obvious challenges. How might you inquire about the interests, strengths, or potential partnerships among community members?

- Tell me about a time when your neighbors looked out for each other?
- What about your neighborhood do you value the most?
- What small or simple changes would affect your neighborhood in a positive way?

***Example 3:*** You are meeting with a staff person who has been struggling at work. You think the person is talented and motivated but just not placed in the right position. How might you assess how best to use this employee?

[What questions would you raise? The authors' suggestions appear at the end of this report.]

***Example 4:*** You have three new board members about to begin their terms on a volunteer advisory commission. You plan to meet with each one individually. How might you inquire about their interests, motivations, or logistical preferences to enable mutual success in public service?

[What questions would you raise? The authors' suggestions appear at the end of this report.]

## Key Practice 3: Jointly Develop a Positive Future

Once we inquire into our current strengths, we can then build on those strengths to design the future we find most compelling.

Intentionally or not, we create our futures by what we talk about, the stories we tell, and the images we hold of the future. The power of future vision is expressed in a quote broadly attributed to Henry Ford: "Whether you think you can, or think you can't, you're right." Our images of the future define, and limit, our performance. When the image of the future is powerful, the resulting action is likely to be as well. An example of the influence of expressing such an image happened in 1962, when John F. Kennedy proclaimed the United States would put a man on the moon by the end of the decade.

The power of future images has been proven over and over in scientific research across very different fields of study, from studies of athletes improving their performance by visualizing it in detail ahead of time to the troubling "Pygmalion" studies in education that have shown that students respond to their teachers' expectations and beliefs about them, performing well if much is expected of them and poorly when they are treated as inferior or slow.[11]

The more people share the same positive image of the future they want, the more probable that future becomes. The process of drawing ideas from everyone involved builds buy-in. There is no need to sell people on the vision because they helped create it. Especially in times of having to do more with less, it is beneficial to tap the power of the whole group—their wisdom, desires, and motivation to move towards a better future.

AI practitioners have developed various ways to ask about people's desires for the future. The following example illustrates four alternatives for uncovering aligned ideas among members of a city's volunteer boards and commissions.

### Alternatives for Envisioning the Future

The staff and elected officials of a municipal government have realized that they now have thirty-eight volunteer advisory boards and commissions—more than the government can manage well. City government is organized into nine departments. The purposes of some groups overlap, creating confusion and, sometimes, tension. In a few instances, the groups accomplished their original goals, but decided to keep meeting in order to talk about emerging interests or because they just enjoyed meeting to discuss current issues. The geographic representation of some boards no longer makes sense, given how the city has grown and changed over the years. Some members of these boards and commissions would be happy to disengage. Others are strongly, personally identified with their public roles or responsibilities. Each volunteer is going to be interviewed.

Here are four different ways to inquire into each volunteer's ideas about ways to strengthen the work of the boards and commissions.

#### *Emerging Trends*

The economic recession encourages us to consider innovative ways to do our work together better and more efficiently. What have you observed other organizations doing to generate even better results during these times?

#### *Miracle Question*

It is five years in the future, and our city has successfully redesigned our network of volunteer boards and commissions to be more effective and efficient than ever before. Our system is so impressive that people come here from other places to learn how our system is aligned with our departments and bigger goals, how our volunteers are trained and supported, and how we use their perspectives and skills to improve our town. What is in place? What did we do to achieve this great success and attention?

#### *Wishes*

If you could have three wishes granted that would create greater efficiency and effectiveness among all of our volunteer boards and commissions, what would they be?

#### *Overheard Conversation*

It is five years from now, and you are in the local diner. You overhear someone in the next booth talking about the city's system of volunteer boards and commissions. That person says, "You know, all of the boards and commissions have always been well-inten-

tioned, but they are really effective and impressive now. I think things really began to change for the better about five years ago. That was the year that they changed_____."

Asking a question that is anchored in the distant future can also be helpful if a group is too enmeshed in dysfunction or competition to be able to envision working together well now. Thinking forward, the group members can describe their desired future condition without being challenged (yet) to describe how their own behaviors might change today. Case 3 provides an example.

### Case 3: Envisioning a Desired Future

A newly hired city manager sought guidance about how to work successfully with the council in the upcoming years. Council members had highly polarized political views and strained interpersonal relationships. In fact, historical conflict in both the city and county boards reflected the tension among residents throughout the area. As a result of the power struggles, distrust, and ever-changing political winds, public leaders had a history of high turnover. The manager, in preparing for the budget season, scheduled a retreat and hired a facilitator. The manager's hope was that council members could figure out how to improve their working relationships and agree on some future goals. The most successful part of the retreat was generated in response to a future-oriented question in an "overheard conversation" format. In small group and plenary discussions, council members were able to identify common goals and strategic priorities on which this council needed to focus in order for the city to move forward.

As mentioned earlier, AI cannot provide a quick fix for community cultures in which people truly do not value or respect each other, are not willing to listen to each other, or want to remain engaged in power struggles—all of which were present in this situation. However, it should be noted that, even in this example of challenging dynamics, a positively framed question did generate useful data (the hard decisions that needed to be made) and civil discussion.

Exercise 3 provides an opportunity to try creating questions in these different themes within one common scenario.

### Exercise 3: Creating an Image of the Desired Future

Use the following scenario to practice drafting questions for envisioning the future. Draft at least one question using each of the four alternative approaches.

What questions would you use to help envision the future?
[The authors' suggestions appear at the end of this report.]

There are two towns located within a rural county. Both municipalities are financially challenged to maintain two independent aging water supply systems. Representatives from both towns are meeting to discuss the possibility of working together to seek federal funding to rebuild the infrastructure, knowing that a joint application would likely be better received than two separate applications.

Trends and Opportunities:

Miracle question:

Wishes:

Overheard conversation:

## Summary

Organizations today exist in an ever-changing sea of possibilities. Growing or declining populations, changing demographics, shifts in the economy, state and federal policy changes, environmental challenges, new ways of communicating: all these and more create opportunities for strategic responses from local governments. Our ability to act on these opportunities to build on our community and organizational strengths in positive ways depends on how we approach change. An Appreciative Inquiry approach to the opportunities we face can help us provide the best possible products or services for the people we serve.

Using AI more consistently may require disciplined thinking and repeated personal reminders. AI calls us to remain focused on strengths rather than weaknesses. Many of us may find it challenging to modify a usual pattern of *telling* others what to do to a pattern of *asking* them to provide their strengths and ideas. Yet shifting from "What do we need to fix?" to "What do we know works?" and "How can we get more of that?" can yield us powerful reminders of our strengths and images of the future that can, in turn, motivate positive action.

## Notes

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11. See Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson, *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (New York: Irvington, 1992) and J. Sterling Livingston, "Pygmalion in Management," *Harvard Business Review* (September/October 1988) available at www.e-learningforkids.org/Courses/Coaching_for_Results/res/media/hbr/88509.pdf

## Additional Resources: Learning More About Appreciative Inquiry

The best way to learn about AI is to first experience the process. There are myriad resources available online and through consultants who explain the concepts and support groups working in this way. We recognize that a public leader comfortable or familiar with traditional approaches and unfamiliar with AI might have to make a leap of faith to entrust a critical problem solving situation to this process.

### Publications

- Sallie Lee and Cheri Torres, *Sustaining Collaboration: Practicing AI to Engage, Innovate, and Energize Everyday*. 2010, (To order this workbook contact Sallie Lee at sallie@sharedsun.net .)

### Multimedia

- AI Commons—huge repository of great resources: articles, interview guides, research, and calendar of events, sponsored by Case Western Reserve University. www.appreciativeinquiry.case.edu
- Taos Institute - supports training and research on AI and social constructionism, solution-focused brief therapy. www.taosinstitute.net
- AI listserv - http://mailman.business.utah.edu:8080/mailman/listinfo/ailist

### Public AI Projects in the US

- Imagine Chicago designed and managed small and large scale civic programs in Chicago focused on renewing public education, revitalizing civic commitment, developing and connecting community leaders, and linking spirituality and public life. www.imaginechicago.com
- http://imaginechicago.org/docs/cases/IC%20intergen%20case%20study.pdf A case study of the 2005 intergenerational AI process describes how adults and youth interviewed each other and produced three significant outcomes related to reconstituting a shared sense of civic community: (1) shared identity, (2) intergenerational partnership and accountability, and (3) creating new possibilities and methods of civic conversation.
- Whitney, Diana, and Amanda Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change*, 2nd edition (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2010). Chapter 11, "A Process for Community Planning," describes AI processes used in three types of public communities.
- Longmont, Colorado - urban planning process related to land use. Another account of this project is available online at http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/research/bibPublishedDetail.cfm?coid=8155
- Sisters of the Good Shepherd—strategic planning related to future direction of the order
- Boulder County, Colorado—Aging Service Division, strategic planning related to accommodating retiring baby boomers.

## Sample Exercise Answers

### Exercise 1: Identify the "Flip," or positive reframe, to elevate the conversation so that solutions can be found.

3. *We are responsive to our customers by offering programs and services at times that are convenient for them and in ways that will make them most accessible to the citizens we serve.*
4. *Tough times require us to demonstrate leadership and discipline by balancing competing needs, setting priorities, and making difficult choices about programs and services. Our role is to take the long-term, comprehensive view which may be a different perspective than others.*

### Exercise 2: Create Positive, Strength-Based Questions

3. *Tell me about a time when you felt you were performing at your best at work. What was it about you, your coworkers, your organization, or the work itself that allowed your performance to be its peak? What can we learn from that experience about the factors that encourage you to flourish? How can we take what you know seems to work for you and apply it here in this setting or organization?*
4. *Describe a time when you did some meaningful volunteer service. How did that experience make you feel? What was your contribution? What do you hope to gain through your work on this advisory commission? What do you see as your role in contributing to the success of this work? What specific practices for approaching or completing your work would you like to see in place here?*

### Exercise 3: Creating an Image of the Desired Future

***Trends and Opportunities:***
*How do our current water supply needs and infrastructure complement each other? What positive experiences have we already had working with each other? How might we build on those experiences and our current water infrastructure to meet our joint needs for water over the next ten years?*

***Miracle question:***
*It is five years into the future. Your joint application was funded, the system was redesigned or rebuilt to meet the needs of both localities, and your joint water project is so successful that other local governments keep calling you to find out your infrastructure serves our needs, our billing process works for both jurisdictions and customers, and our customers have the water capacity that suits their requirements. What is in place? What did we do to achieve this great success and attention?*

***Wishes:***
*If you had three wishes that would enable us to figure the best solution for both of us and make it work in the long run, what would those wishes be?*

***Overheard conversation:***
*A city from across the country read about your success in a recent ICMA publication. They call you up and ask you to identify the three most important small steps you took to initiate the work of creating a better water system. You reply:*
*(1)*
*(2)*
*(3)*

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|---|---|
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