

Storytelling at the Heart of Appreciative Inquiry

By Cathy Royal, Ph.D. and Madelyn Blair, Ph.D.

Introductions

Madelyn: I am excited about doing this with you. I have participated in e-conferences before but never as a presenter. Second, I have done Appreciative Inquiry before but never on-line. So I am doing two things I have never done before, and it energizes me. I love taking risks.

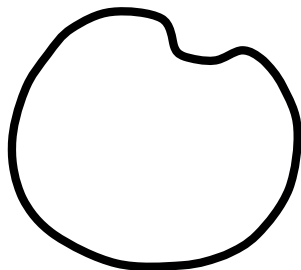
Cathy: Now, for me, I prefer to say that I am curious about how a virtual conference on Appreciative Inquiry will unfold. I have been using AI processes and theory for over 7 years now and believe in the power of the positive. I also am strongly attached to the idea of creating intimacy in organizations. Appreciative Inquiry is most often done as one-to-one direct contact story telling. This conference is an opportunity for me to experience virtual storytelling and AI in a combination.

Both: All that said, we invite you to join us in an experiment. Our approach will be to ask you to read some, think some, do some, and comment some. There are questions for you to ponder, ideas to consider, and stories to enjoy. Please join us. Our plan is to begin with talking about Appreciative Inquiry (we'll tend to use A/I). Second, we'll talk about story's place in A/I. Lastly, we'll tell some stories about using A/I in the business setting and how stories were a part of this.

Join us.

I. What is Appreciative Inquiry and why should you be interested in it?

Seeing what we see



Exercise 1: Looking at the picture above, what do you see? Take a moment now and jot down what you think it is. When you have finished your thinking, enter our discussion space, tell us what you think it is, having

done so, check out what others have thought when they looked at this graphic. When you have finished checking out what others have thoughts, return here.
[LINK TO DISCUSSION HERE.](#)

Did your thinking match that of anyone else? Did you see the same things? Did you focus on the same aspect? After having read the other interpretations, can you see new perspectives now? Did it change yours? Or did it simply add to your understanding of the possibilities? You've probably guessed by now that there are many answers. What did you learn from this exercise?

Our intent is to convey how the same "reality" can honestly be interpreted differently. And that we can choose our interpretation; we can choose what we see, we choose what we focus on, we choose what we highlight.

Exercise 2: Take a moment now and focus on something in your life that gave you great satisfaction when it was done. Think about what made it so? Who was a part of it? What did they do to help you? What was the environment like? When did it happen? Where were you when it happened? (If this is hard for ?) you to do by yourself, find a friend to ask you these questions.) If you wish, ask your friend the same questions.

You have just taken an A/I step. Look over your responses to these questions and look for the common threads across the responses. Now, imagine doing this with 10 other people, 100 other people, 1000 other people, and you begin to get the idea of how powerful A/I can be.

In Appreciative Inquiry, we CHOOSE to see those things that work, those things that produce useful products, those things that are joyful and fun, those things that give satisfaction.

Why focus on the "good stuff" only?

Exercise 3: One more step is needed before we proceed. Using that same event you thought about above, "that something in your life that gave you great satisfaction when it was done," think of a person who played some positive roll in this event. Ask yourself how you feel when you think about that person and the good things they contributed.

How do you feel right now just thinking about it? Return to the discussion space and add your feelings to the list. While you're there, check out the feelings noted by others and then return here. Don't skip this step. Do it now.

[LINK TO DISCUSSION HERE.](#)

You've probably noticed the positive nature of the feelings listed by others (and probably by yourself, too). Now, turn those positive feelings into the energy you are feeling right now just thinking about this. This is the kind of energy that is released through A/I. Image the

force that can be unleashed to transform an organization based on what you just experienced yourself.

Positive ideas, positive thoughts actually energize us.

If we want to learn what to DO, then we have to focus on what works. If we want to energize what we desire, picture what gives a real sense of well-being.

Let us tell you a story.

Shara watched her manager with care. She noticed that every time he ran a meeting, he asked each person to contribute to the meeting and he spent more time listening to the other members of the meeting than he spoke. The amazing thing was that the agenda was always completed, and folks had fun doing it. When it was her turn to run the meeting, she imitated his approach, and the group completed the agenda, and they seem to enjoy the time together. Shara noted the success for future reference.

Olympic athletes use this power all of the time. They imagine the best run they can do down the slopes. They don't concentrate on all of the obstacles, they focus on the best course, the best movement, the techniques that work.

A/I begins from the 2 basic premises -- that we can choose to focus on what works (and it is a choice), and that by focussing on what gives success, we are energized to achieve.

Appreciative Inquiry is a three level organization transformation model that begins with discover and documentation of affirmation through the telling of stories. Appreciative Inquiry captures the organization history and memory by sharing and telling the stories of members/employees of the institution, organization, community, team or family. A/I is future focused and demonstrates how any system can discover and deliver it's future through Appreciative Inquiry and the use of story as a source of organizational data.

Appreciative Inquiry is an organizational paradigm shift. It is an opportunity to use affirmation and story to examine the sources of organizational excellence. A/I inquires into all policies, practices, norms, principles and attitudes of a system to locate areas of potential for transformation. A/I allows processes for redirecting the future to its "best possible" state.

It is dynamic and powerful because it is an opportunity for the members of the organization to "talk to each other about their best." It seeks knowledge about areas of opportunity for further excellence. Story is pivotal to A/I because of several key factors inherent to A/I. Dialogue is open to all and easily available for stakeholders (and all participants are stakeholders in A/I) to review. A/I is guided by three principles: every voice counts, communication is open and transparent, and the significance of affirmation, success, or the positive inquiry about an organization is essential.

II. What does story have to do with it?

Exercise 4: In an earlier exercise, we asked you to focus on something that you did really well, thoroughly enjoying the experience. Describe that event in a way that represents the 'reality' it was for you so that someone else might understand your perspective. Is it looking like a story? We think it will.

If you feel adventurous, share your story with our discussion group and/or read the stories already supplied by others. As you read them, ask what you see that is common across these stories? Do the common elements teach you anything about how to design a project so that the whole team (no matter who they are) is energized?

[LINK TO DISCUSSION HERE.](#)

Story gives image to the person and their role in the organization, and validates their personal positive place in the organization's history and future.

Appreciative Inquiry protocol stories inquire into the past to carry forth the best from the past to define and activate the preferred future. (The term "preferred future" is the A/I term for the vision. The term is used to convey that vision is something that is actually desired and preferred to any other future.) Each storyteller becomes a stakeholder in the continuity and history of the organization. Each storyteller is given voice to contribute to the organization. In A/I, every voice counts; every voice has something to say; and every voice deserves to be heard.

In A/I –

Every voice counts.

Every voice deserves to be heard.

Every voice has something to say

Information based on personal story, personal experience, personal reality has unassailable credibility. We don't question another person's sense of reality when it is told to us as a story from experience. Believing in our reality because it is from our experience adds to the strength of our commitment to any conclusions drawn from it. And our experiences are transmitted through stories.

Appreciative Inquiry is organizational change dynamics from the focus of the positive. It honors the importance of story as a valid and magical data collection process. Appreciative Inquiry is strong research that seeks what is novel in a system or institution. What is it that captures the energy and imagination of the people in the system? It uses this information and generates dialogue that leads to the design of a "specifically tailored change model." The model and delivery of change (through A/I) is created from the internal inquiry of the total system about its employee peak experiences and positive factors about the organization.

A/I validates the significance of each peak experience. It is this individual validation and the state of being "open to inquiry" that allows novel and transformative actions or models of change to emerge. It is not important that the factor be statistically reliable or have a repeat value of X for a community to want

it to be part of their future. It is important that the dialogue about this factor generates meaning for the community. This is where the significance of story factors becomes exciting to the community and the meaning that the community applies to their future. Factors are created and implemented based on the meaning and energy that is generated from the community engaged in the A/I-based activity.

If we are trying to choose what brings success and well-being in order to energize our future actions, we must start with stories of the experiences of others. In A/I, we are looking for the aspects within the culture that lead to satisfaction and success simultaneously. And those aspects are embedded in stories. Finding them can only be done by looking at the common threads across many stories from the organization. Now, consider the story we just asked you to think about for yourself. Look again at the stories others have shared. Do the common threads you see across them tell you something about this group and what energizes it?

Yet, another way to talk about this is to ask what is meaningful in an organization? We are all drawn to things that have meaning. If we relate to them, we do so through their meaning. And one of the powerful results of storytelling is that the listener is treated to finding the meaning for her or himself.

One story in an organization can be a powerful force. Imagine it being shared along with other stories in the same organization. As they come together, a special place, we would even say a sacred place is formed, where conversation leads to mining for the meaning, where conversation creates the meaning together. This is A/I at its finest. This is the role of story – at the heart of A/I.

III. How do we apply A/I in business?

A/I can imbue many processes by helping the participants to use what works as the principles or signals to energize any change that is dreamt. It has been used in:

Strategic Planning
Team building
Designing projects
Creating Communities of Practice
Building bridges across disparate groups
Setting ground rules for engagement
Turning around a failing team or organization
Guiding exit interviews
Training design

If you're interested in learning the specifics on how we and others have used A/I to help achieve results, see **Lessons from the Field: Applied Appreciative Inquiry**. And here are some other stories about stories in A/I.

IV. Stories of using A/I and story in business

Madelyn's story – simple and illustrative.

The retreat for the work unit was scheduled for 2 days. As the group came into the opening session, each seemed glad to be away from the office, but as a group, it was rather subdued. Their manager was leaving soon to take up another post, and they didn't know what would happen to them after that. They did know that the results of this retreat were to help them tell the new manager who they were

and what they wanted to do in the future. Thirty five people filled the tables around the room chatting with their table mates in a familiar but quiet manner. This was one way to begin a retreat of such significance.

Their manager opened the session with real encouragement in his voice. He said they were to determine the results of this retreat – no holds barred. They listened.

When it was my turn to begin the formal facilitation, I opened with a question to them. I asked them all to think of a time when they had done something for which they felt very good, very proud, fully satisfied. “Pick a partner from your table, and tell that story to her or him,” I told them. They knew each other well, and they began the task quickly. About 10 minutes later, I asked for one of the tables to begin introductions by one introducing her or his partner and telling the story of the project and saying what it was that seemed to make that project such a success, and then to swap roles.

The response was immediate. When the story was finished, I wrote on the flip chart the elements that had made it a success. Each story came forth with increasing vigor. They were into this. At the end of an hour, all 35 participants had been introduced and the list of elements that had made each a success were up for all to see, covering a full page. Suddenly, they began to call out what they saw across the 35 plus words I had captured. As they began to see the common threads weaving through that list of words, the noise level got higher and higher. Within less than 5 minutes, they were practically cheering as they saw how similar they were in terms of what made success for this group. The energy in the room just about blew the roof from the hotel.

Two days later, they had completed their work, smiling, laughing, and enthusiastically looking forward to their future, knowing what made it possible for them to succeed and weaving those ideas into their vision. I have never doubted the power of the A/I principles since.

Three years later, I worked with the same group. They had lost some ground in the meantime, there were new members within them, but they hadn’t forgotten that event. They hadn’t forgotten what it was like to feel connected by a common understanding.

Cathy’s story – how story can tell what can’t be said otherwise.

I was working with a wonderful client who has a long history of creating good products for the global market. The organization is a fortune five hundred company with high name and logo recognition. In fact, it is considered a “household word”. The teams that I was consulting with were about to merge. This was creating quite a series of emotions and expectations for many of the members of the two teams. In personal interviews with team members many voiced their views on the anticipated merger. Several members were wondering how the two teams would fit together. All agreed that they had a clear sense of the mission and vision of the company, but were unsure of how their line functions would work together. Some people wondered if the “could” fit at all, or was this just a “forced march”.

The members of both teams knew each other and had contact with each other for various reasons, so there was a base to begin from. The two teams were in Sales and Marketing and Personnel. The intended merger would put the two separate and distinct teams under one supervisor. A member from each team came to see me to discuss the “possibilities” of an appreciative inquiry for the teams. We talked and agreed that AI was the “way to go”. The other members of the team were skeptical but supportive and were agreeable to stay with the process and design. At least for the two days we had set aside for this initial contact and introduction.

We began with a question about a peak experience in their teams and gathered data about the experiences. We captured “best quotes and best stories” from team members and began the dialogue about what were key factors or life giving forces for them and their organization. The conversation was guarded yet candid. Each member definitely contributed and the passion about team, family centered organization, equitable treatment and other factors began to give them “first source” information on what was important to them as individuals and as team members. When they began to dialogue and validate what would be their 5 key factors for their preferred future and the merged teams they found themselves avoiding the factor of TRUST that had been so spirited and present in the dialogue about what was important to each of them. In short it did not make the list of key factors.

When I asked them about this there was silence in the room. The silence lasted for several minutes. I waited. After some minutes I began the next phase of dialogue by asking them what the absence of this theme said to them. After some musing, several members at the same time acknowledged that they would like to see trust as a factor present on their teams. The group agreed to do some thinking about trust. The next session of the group was dynamite. They discovered that they had avoided the subject of trust because they did not yet trust the merging team.

They talked about trusting individuals on the teams but they were not sure how trust for the team would look. It was a fabulous conversation. The members agreed to do more work on discovering peak experiences about trust and request more A/I time to gather stories about trust. We agreed to continue to work in the A/I fashion to create the best team merger possible. It was a breakthrough moment for all involved. We worked together for a year beyond the merger and continue to connect as new members join the team and the organization.