



# IGNITING POSITIVE CHANGE:

---

## Is Appreciative Inquiry Right for You?

Barbara Lewis, MS, Amanda Trosten-Bloom, MSc, and Kara Schmitt, LCSW

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has been credited with tripling the bottom line, providing a foundation for successfully garnering community support for funding initiatives, reaching the hard to reach, and accelerating effective collaboration – but will it work for you? As the three principals for Rocky Mountain Center for Positive Change, we've been using AI and related strength-based practices for decades to support small and large teams in non-profits, international corporations, leadership groups and entire communities. Recently, we've explored this question: What can you count on when you do AI well? In this brief AI overview, we respond to this question while helping you consider whether AI is right for you.



ROCKY MOUNTAIN CENTER FOR  
**positive change**

## WHAT IS APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY?

Appreciative Inquiry is a profoundly inclusive, strength-based future-forming approach to organizational and community change that is distinguished by its capacity to inspire hope, commitment, collaboration and innovative action. In an AI process, powerful connections – forged through conversation – pave the way to promising new futures.



“

*Taking a risk to try Appreciative Inquiry, a unique and inspiring process, allowed us to include and act upon different voices that are not always heard. Getting authentic community voice is one of the hardest but most important things you can do in a school district.*

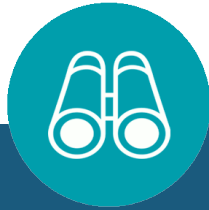
*Kathy Plomer  
Board of Education President  
Adams 12 5-Star Schools*

”

## HOW DOES AI WORK?

The process behind Appreciative Inquiry is known as the 4-D Cycle: Discover, Dream, Design and Destiny (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 16). This 4-D Cycle can drive anything from a brief conversation to a multi-year, multi-stakeholder engagement. While the specifics of each application vary according to the purpose, scale and scope of the initiative, the approach is always explicitly positive: something people want more of. AI puts “relationships first by inviting people to share personal stories and perspectives . . . to feel pride in their own experience and wisdom and connect to a positive vision for the whole. The resulting foundation of trusting, uplifting relationships enables people to move beyond ‘common ground,’ and seek instead *higher ground*.” (Trosten-Bloom and Lewis, 2020)

## THE 4-D CYCLE



### DISCOVER

Appreciating the best of what is. The cornerstone of AI is the appreciative interview. Powerfully positive questions strengthen relationships, uncover strengths and values, and generate confidence in the organization's potential.



### DREAM

Envisioning what might be. Playful activities harness the power of positive images and emotions to stimulate creativity. Dream dialogues and reflections align intention, creating clear and compelling visions that draw a system forward.

### DESIGN

Determining what should be. The appreciative design process blends creative brainstorming and prototyping with strategic thinking. Organizations collaboratively recreate systems, structures and processes to leverage strengths and achieve their ideals.

### DESTINY

Mobilizing for action. This phase involves organizing people, tools and resources to implement the design. Self-organizing, improvisation and celebration help fuel continuous innovation and accountability.



## WHAT CAN I COUNT ON FROM AI?

AI jumpstarts change by creating a trusting environment for people to explore and create future possibilities together. Through storytelling, AI uncovers and unleashes an organization's strengths – which are, in turn, the fuel that ignites positive change. Positive change means both achieving your goals and strengthening your organizational culture and capacity. You achieve (and often exceed) your stated goals. At the same time, you increase people's ability to address future challenges with greater ease and effectiveness. At the end of each AI process, there are always new possibilities on the horizon.

“

*Appreciative Inquiry has transformed how we engage with each other, our Board, supporters and other stakeholders. It's showed us how to capitalize on our individual strengths and align them to make our organization strong. Now, together, we are co-creators, ready to address the opportunities before us and, in turn, make a transformational difference in the lives of the children and families we serve.*

*The Reverend Elliot M. Smith  
President and CEO  
Thornwell Family Services*

”



# I G N I T E

Using AI in a wide variety of settings, we have discovered that a well-executed process will consistently produce six benefits for you and your organization:



## I is for INCLUSION

You'll engage the whole system, including those whose voices aren't often heard, lifting up people's interest, expertise and skills – beyond their formal roles and titles. High level engagement will provide the foundation for committing to and acting upon what comes out of the process.



## G is for GROWTH

Participants will experience personal and professional growth. They will enhance their skills and capacities for strength-based collaboration. Results may include improved products, processes and performance.



## N is for NEW IDEAS

You'll generate innovative ideas and discover how to refresh and improve old ones. You'll gain insights on how to leverage organizational strengths to make these innovations bear fruit.



## I is for INSPIRATION

People will imagine new possibilities and align around shared images of the future that compel forward progress. They'll see how to contribute to the organization's positive impact, both individually and collectively.



## T is for TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS

You'll strengthen how people connect to each other and to the purpose of their work together across roles, systems, and sectors. Respectful relationships will make work more efficient and rewarding.



## E is for ENERGY FOR ACTION

You'll see high level engagement and collective commitment to implementation of new ideas and ways of working.

## HOW DO I KNOW IF IT IS THE RIGHT APPROACH FOR MY ORGANIZATION?

We've learned that AI can produce positive change in almost any organization, for almost any purpose involving human systems. It works in non-profits and corporations, large communities and small teams. Is AI right for you? To answer this question, first clarify what you need to achieve and then consider the following questions:

- Will you achieve more if different perspectives participate?
- Are you open to new ideas?
- Are you committed to act on the results?
- Do you need to transfer knowledge within the organization?
- Do you need to help people work across silos?
- Do you need an infusion of innovation?

Essentially, if what you want to achieve requires people to collaborate and commit to carrying out what they create, AI may be the right approach.



*Many of today's most cherished programs at Hunter Douglas had their roots in Appreciative Inquiry. When organizational momentum moves and continues in a positive direction, great things can happen.*

*Jim Anthony  
Senior Development Engineer  
Hunter Douglas Window Fashions Division*



## WHERE HAS AI MADE A DIFFERENCE?

Are you ready to IGNITE positive change in your organization or community? Consider these stories, drawn from years of work across industries and geographies. On the next page, you'll see how AI processes can be adapted to address a variety of challenges – from small-scale to whole system – producing consistently exceptional outcomes.



### INCLUSION

The economically and culturally diverse Adams 12 Five Star School district used Appreciative Inquiry to forge a community-based strategic plan. Over a period of 8 months, more than 7000 parents, community members, students and staff came together to uncover district strengths, identify opportunities, and prioritize strategies and tactics. The result? A far-reaching strategic plan with priorities that were funded by voters.

### GROWTH

While Hunter Douglas Window Fashions Division's AI culture change and process improvement efforts extended over five years, their effect on the workforce became evident almost immediately. Production and productivity improved, largely as a result of people's participation in problem-solving and decision making. Turnover decreased to negligible levels, and cross-divisional collaboration resulted in integrated and streamlined processes. Reflecting on the five-year life of the initiative, then-President Rick Pellett credited AI with a 30% improvement to the company's bottom line.

### NEW IDEAS

Thornwell Family Services, a nonprofit children and family services organization, used AI-based leadership development, team building and planning activities to create new energy for existing programs and catalyze several new initiatives. Team members reimaged the customer and donor experience, launched an on-site farm, and accelerated implementation of an on-site charter school. In addition, they developed new systems to support productivity, communication and decision making across departments and sites.

### INSPIRATION

The strategic planning process for the City of Longmont, a Colorado community of more than 80,000, connected people around an inspiring shared vision. Karen Roney, Director of Community Services, shared how "magical" it was to see the AI process connect people with different interests. She said, "Focus on Longmont exceeded all of our expectations. It has become the driving force for the future of Longmont. We couldn't have imagined the way the initiative has galvanized energy around Longmont's sustainable future."

### TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS

Key partners from the City of Denver, its Regional Transportation District, and a private firm were tasked with designing, building and operating a \$1.8 billion commuter rail line to Denver International Airport. Using AI, they built a foundation of trust that helped them resolve tough issues and negotiate in good faith. As one official said, it "changed the trajectory of the City's relationships" with its partners.

### ENERGY FOR ACTION

The Boulder County Aging Services Division (CO) launched an AI-based strategic planning process to address the challenge of a rapidly expanding aging population while harnessing and leveraging community resources and partnerships. During the Division's presentation to the Board of Commissioners, 70 community members voluntarily expressed enthusiastic commitment to the plan. Following the plan's adoption, more than 100 county residents provided ongoing leadership and support for implementation. In the end, community members' sustained engagement and commitment transformed every aspect of the Division's work, from funding to grant-making to staffing and more.



As the examples on the previous page illustrate, Appreciative Inquiry doesn't claim there aren't any problems. Instead, it gives people a framework for working together to discover solutions in new and inspiring ways. It is robust, flexible, and able to be used in any number of settings for any number of purposes.

Whoever you are, whatever your challenge, consider using Appreciative Inquiry. It will unleash energy, commitment and innovation, making change seem easy – even fun.

“Appreciative Inquiry opened our team to being vulnerable and encouraged us to work as a cohesive unit.”

Bailey Denmark  
Director of Development  
Work Options for Women

## CURIOUS TO **LEARN MORE?**

Perhaps our stories have sparked your curiosity, and you're ready to IGNITE positive change in your team, organization, or community. **Learn more, schedule an appointment on our website ([www.rockymountainpositivechange.org](http://www.rockymountainpositivechange.org))** or look for one of the resources listed below.

### ABOUT RMCPC



#### **We are your partners in positive change, committed to your success.**

For decades, our collaborative spirit and passion for strength-based work has produced winning results in corporate, nonprofit and community settings.

What makes us special is not what we do, but how we do it. We use Appreciative Inquiry, a strength-based approach that creates positive change. By focusing on what's right, instead of what's wrong – in any organization – you get less resistance to change and more motivation for the greater good. The process and result is transformational.

#### REFERENCES AND RESOURCES:

*Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change*, Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005. • *Appreciative Leadership*, Whitney, Trosten-Bloom and Rader, 2010. • *Appreciative Team Building*, Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, Cherney and Fry, 2004. • *Encyclopedia of Positive Questions*, Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, Cooperrider and Kaplin, 2013. • “Large Scale Appreciative Inquiry: New Futures Through Shared Conversations”, Trosten-Bloom and Lewis in *The Sage Handbook of Social Constructionist Practices*, McNamee, Camargo-Borges and Rasera, 2020. • *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*, Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2010.