



Developing Australia's VET workforce to
implement the national training system

Appreciative Inquiry and the national training system

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core ideas

Reframing the Future supports the use of appreciative inquiry for national staff development projects. This publication sets out the core ideas behind this methodology and provides examples of its use in VET.

Origins

A doctoral student at Case Western Reserve University in the 1980s, David Cooperrider, and his faculty mentor Suresh Srivastva are acknowledged as pioneering the use of appreciative inquiry. In undertaking change projects, they found that in focusing on organisational problems and designing interventions to address the problems, the problems seemed to multiply.

However, when they reframed their approach as an inquiry, in the sense of seeking to learn and discover the positive forces within an organisation, they shifted their own and their subjects' attention away from the causes of failure and turned attention to the causes of success.

When initially developing the methodology of appreciative inquiry, Cooperrider and others decided to focus on stories of innovation, hope and positive change. They set out to find examples of success and experiences of high points.

In this way, they constructed a methodology for influencing change that concentrated on the positives within an organisation, not the organisation's deficiencies.

Definition

Cooperrider defines appreciative inquiry as an approach based on strengths rather than weaknesses, on a vision of what is possible rather than an analysis of what is not.

Appreciative inquiry is a methodology for influencing change that concentrates on the positives, not the deficits, within a group or organisation. It revolves around asking positive questions about:

- existing strengths (these questions are asked in the discovery stage, as explained below)
- possible futures (dream stage)
- improved designs (design stage)
- preferred pathways going forward (destiny stage).

Characteristics

The appreciative inquiry methodology focuses on the causes and examples of success, as explained by Ludema et al. (2003):

Appreciative inquiry is an approach to organisation change that has been used successfully in small- and large-change projects with hundreds of organisations worldwide. It is based on the simple idea that organisations move in the direction of what they ask questions about. For example, when groups study human

problems and conflicts, they often find that both the number and severity of these problems grow. In the same way, when groups study high human ideals and achievements, such as peak experiences, best practices and noble accomplishments, these phenomena, too, tend to flourish. (p.259)

Ludema et al. emphasise a difference between appreciative inquiry and other methodologies:

Appreciative inquiry distinguishes itself from other change methodologies by deliberately asking positive questions to ignite constructive dialogue and inspired action within organisations. (p.259)

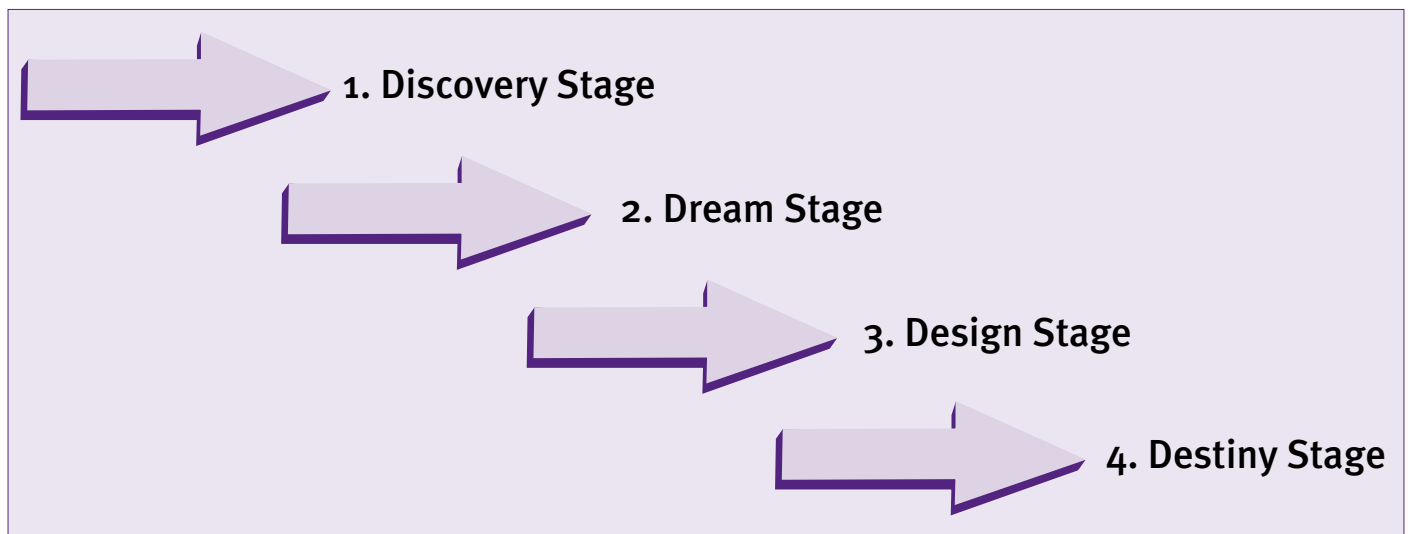
Four stages

Another characteristic of appreciative inquiry is the use of four stages:

1. **Discovery stage.** The purpose of this stage is to identify the positive core – assets, capacities, capabilities, resources and strengths. Rationale: change is more possible if it builds on existing strengths. The discovery stage creates a positive sense of possibilities and builds the momentum to dream.
2. **Dream stage.** The purpose of this stage is to envision a bold future – to imagine what could be achieved if it was aligned with participants' skills, strengths and goals. Rationale: when we are clear about where we want to reach, we become inventive about achieving our dreams. Positive images lead to positive action. We can build on the 'positive core' clarified in the first stage: in this sense the envisioning is grounded.
3. **Design stage.** The purpose of this stage is to design improvements to our work teams or collaborative partnerships to assist the implementation of our dreams. Rationale: structures such as organisational teams or business partnerships have a deep influence on our practice, and these structures can be redesigned to fit with our values and dreams. Ideally our teams and partnerships will be values-based and foster creativity and be open to continual redesign. The design stage encourages participants to clarify their dreams and to develop a set of compelling propositions so that redesigned teams or partnerships can create an improved future. The confidence engendered by this exercise feeds into the destiny stage to follow.

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Diagram 1: The four stages of appreciative inquiry



4. **Destiny stage.** The purposes of this stage are to plan innovations to achieve our dreams and design goals. Rationale: innovation is likely to succeed if it is fuelled by and based on discovery (existing skills and attributes), dreams (visions of a bold future) and design (improved structures of teams and partnerships).

Applications in VET

Reframing the Future has used the methodology of appreciative inquiry as an innovative strategy for addressing high priority issues in the sector. For instance, it was used as the basis of Reframing the Future national forums on:

- increasing the practice of recognition of prior learning (RPL). See the publication *RPL – Done Well in VET*.
- enhancing the practice of continuous improvement in training providers. See the publication *Continuous Improvement in VET*.

Appreciative inquiry can be used for one-day forums as well as for Reframing the Future project teams that function over a six month period. Project teams might spread out over a six month period their use of the four stages, or they might work through the four stages a number of times over six months.

Case study 1: appreciative inquiry and RPL

While Ludema et al. (2003) describe the use of appreciative inquiry for four-day summits, Reframing the Future adapted the methodology for a group learning activity related to

RPL – and the next year, for continuous improvement – that commenced before a one-day forum, pivoted on a one-day intensive forum, and continued for some months after the forum was conducted.

The appreciative inquiry methodology offered *RPL-Done Well* forum participants a participative, collaborative and systematic method for discovering and building on the positive aspects of successful approaches to RPL that are used in VET.

Case study 2: appreciative inquiry and employability skills

A publication produced for the National Quality Council project on employability skills provides twelve practical tips for how to use appreciative inquiry to build the capability of trainers and assessors with regard to employability skills. The publication is called 'Good practice professional development strategies to support the development of skills in assessing and reporting employability skills' and is expected to be available at www.training.com.au. These generic tips can be applied to other VET areas.

Case study 3: appreciative inquiry and Reframing the Future project teams

Appreciative inquiry is used by a number of Reframing the Future project teams each year and as of 2008 is one of the eight methodologies supported by the program. Project teams use the methodology for a range of topics

from working with industry to implementing new Training Packages. Project facilitators find the methodology useful when a change in attitude is required from practitioners on a topic which, in the past, was associated with multiple obstacles. Appreciative inquiry can provide a circuit-breaker to stop negative thinking.

Benefits

The benefits of the appreciative inquiry methodology in VET staff development programs include the following:

- It can highlight for participants the positive aspects of their current organisation, including current capabilities, effective practices and successful case studies.
- It can highlight examples from a variety of VET contexts and exemplars of innovation and change.
- It can provide easy and immediate access to valuable ideas and information.
- It can engage participants in envisioning, designing and implementing improved approaches.
- It can engender confidence and stimulate inventiveness and lead to improved practice and positive, sustainable change.

When to use appreciative inquiry

Appreciative inquiry is not viewed by Reframing the Future as superior to the many other methodologies that seek to identify organizational problems and look for solutions: it is simply an alternative. It is appropriate to use appreciative inquiry when the goal is to find ways to move forward, rather than to continue to identify obstacles and problem solve.

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References and further reading

(items with an asterisk* are available from <http://reframingthefuture.net>)

Cooperrider, D.L. & Srivastara, S. (1987), *Appreciative inquiry in organizational life*. In Passmore, W.A. & Woodman, R.W. (eds.), *Research in organizational change and development* (Vol.1), Jai Press, Greenwich CT.

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Appreciative Inquiry Commons
<http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/>

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