

Strategic Planning with Appreciative Inquiry: Unleashing the Positive Potential to SOAR

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**“The times of greatest change are also the times of greatest potential.”
- Dewitt Jones**

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In his well loved video “Celebrate What’s Right with the World”, photographer Dewitt Jones observes that “The times of greatest change are also the times of greatest potential”. Markets change, cultures change, technologies change, and legislative environments change...the list goes on. Whether our organizations are responding to change or driving it, leaders continually ask “where should we go next? How will we get there? What do we need to do now?”

At its best, strategic planning has the power to unleash your organization’s potential in times of change. It can clarify vision and direction, prioritize strategic goals and inspire people throughout the organization to work together to create their ideal future. The traditional process of planning typically involves internal and external environmental scans, analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats and the identification of strategies and changes required to deal with them.

As a high engagement, strengths based approach to organizational change, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) represents an exciting alternative to traditional strategic planning. When the planning process engages everyone from the CEO to the newest recruit in aligning strengths of the organization with opportunities, aspirations and desired results, resistance to change is minimized and the energy and commitment required to turn goals into action is generated.

The following chart outlines the differences between traditional approaches to strategic planning and the appreciative inquiry approach.

*We want to acknowledge the seminal work of Jackie Stavros, in association with David Cooperrider, John Sutherland, Joe Sprangel and D. Lynn Kelley, and others, in developing the SOAR framework

<i>Assumptions in Traditional Strategic Planning</i>	<i>Assumptions in Appreciative Strategic Planning</i>
Who Does It?	Who Does It?
Strategic planning is the job of senior leadership or board of directors. They set the direction, provide the plan and then “roll it out” to be executed by the rest of the organization.	Strategic planning is an invitation to bring the best forward in the service of building something important. Every voice participates and influences the agreements we make about the future.
Approach	Approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SWOT (Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats). Avoiding threats and solving problems to overcome weaknesses is the focus. • The implementation “cascades” through the organization from top to bottom in the form of goals & objectives. • A “Plan” is the starting focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results). Aligning strengths with opportunities is the focus. • Using an AI summit, the whole system can be brought together to move from inquiry to vision to inspired action very quickly. The inquiry itself creates change, and people are more likely to commit to goals and objectives they helped to create. • “Commitment to Implementation” is the starting focus
Results	Results
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resistance to top down change reduces goal achievement • Through each cascade, clarity and meaning are lost • The ‘plan’ is more static — when the external or internal environment changes, the plan becomes obsolete. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct participation increase quality and speed of goal achievement. • Resistance is minimal. With increased connectivity, innovation and energy people feel clear and empowered about what they can individually do to move toward the best future. • The ‘plan’ is more dynamic — As the environment changes the organization is more resilient and adaptive because the strengths, resources, skills and assets are clear.

**The 5-D
Process of
Definition,
Discovery,
Dream and
Design allow
organizations
to focus on
their Strengths,
Opportunities,
Aspirations and
Results
(SOAR).**

While there is no single prescription for creating or executing a strategic planning process, below is an example of what one appreciative strategic planning process might look like, based on a 5-D process of Definition, Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny to focus on Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results. The boxes after each step follow the case story of one of Innovation Partners International's (IPI) strategic planning clients.

Step 1 → Definition: Decide who to invite and how

1. Establish a planning team to co-design and guide the strategic planning process.
2. Identify all the stakeholders and how best to engage them. Will you hold a summit, several small summits or a series of meetings? If you choose a form of engagement other than a summit, how will you communicate and connect each part with the whole system?
3. Create interview guide to gather information about the strengths, resources, perspectives and aspirations of employees and other important stakeholders.

Our client wanted to engage as many parts of the system as possible. A core planning team representing a cross-section of the organization was pulled together. They were trained in AI and co-created the engagement strategy and inquiry design together with the consultants.

Step 2 → Discovery: Inquiry into Strengths and Opportunities

1. Engage employees and other stakeholders throughout the system (including customers, suppliers, partners,) in an inquiry to:
 - Discover the conditions that created the organization's greatest moments of success
 - Scan the internal and external environment for strengths and opportunities.
 - Ask powerful positive questions that generate images of possibility. Threats and problems are not ignored, but rather are reframed and viewed through a lens of possibility. Solutions emerge from a conversation about what we *do* want rather than from a conversation about what we *don't* want. For example, the problem of declining market share becomes an inquiry into a "Strong Market Presence" and an exploration of the opportunities for innovation that would result in a gain in market share.
2. Identify the organization's positive core – the sum total of its unique strengths, assets, resources, networks, capabilities, and creative thought that will carry the organization into the future.

A series of focus groups was conducted with a variety of stakeholder groups including partners and customers. The data collected here was brought into the summit meeting. Further inquiry was conducted at the summit with the participants and the positive core was mapped. Rich dialogue deepened the understanding of the organization's strengths, values and opportunities.

They used images and ideas from the skits to write possibility statements that would act as a “North Star” for their strategic plan.

Step 3 → Dream: Identify Aspirations and Results

1. Create a compelling vision of the future that has the commitment of members of the organization – one that carries forward the very best of the past, but also inspires and challenges the status quo.
2. Create possibility statements, capturing people’s highest aspirations that describe (in narrative form) the compelling vision of the future

During the summit, participant groups prepared skits expressing compelling images of their ideal future—an image of what their organization could look like if all the strengths and root causes of success became the norm. They used images and ideas from the skits to write a possibility statement that would act as a “north star” for their strategic plan. Linking to customer and community needs was important when envisioning the impact and positive results the organization aspired to achieve.

2. Write goal statements for each strategic opportunity and identify measures that will help track the organization’s success.
3. Identify the strategies, innovations, and projects that will be required to pursue each of the strategic opportunities.

Through a prioritizing process, the participants were able to converge and identify their highest strategic opportunities called goal areas. Participants self-selected into groups around each goal area where they dialogued about what possibilities existed. Mini ‘vision statements’ were written for each goal area and some initial strategies were identified.

Step 4 → Design: Decide which opportunities have the most potential

1. Identify the highest strategic opportunities to move the organization toward the desired future. Opportunities may lie outside the organization (e.g. in new markets, products, or partnerships) or inside the organization (e.g. in the redesign of structures, processes and relationships). When strategic opportunities are aligned with a shared, exciting vision of the future, attention shifts dramatically from solving a list of problems to “how can we work together to make this happen?”

Step 5 → Delivery: Implement and Measure Success

1. Self-organize around each goal area. Plan actions and gain individual and collaborative commitments.
2. Capacity development--Provide support, resources, training, etc. and identify integration linkages between the goal areas.
3. Monitor, improvise, innovate and re-inquiry. Connection to the organization’s positive core serves as a constant well of possibility as internal and external environments change. Rather than being a document that sits on a shelf until the next planning cycle begins, the strategic plan is a living process of inquiry, continually aligning strength with opportunity in service of the future we most want to create.

“It is a nice change in approach that brings people on board rather than putting them off.”
--David Kramer

While most of the planning took place during a summit planning event, implementation activities occurred post-summit. During this phase, goal/innovation teams were created, metrics were finalized, and capacity development support to the teams was provided (facilitation, AI, project management, etc.). Teams also received coaching support from senior management, and integration activities between the goal areas were identified and implemented.

In summary, Appreciative Inquiry offers a fresh perspective to traditional strategic planning processes. By elevating and accentuating the strengths, opportunities, and aspirations of the organization and by involving multiple stakeholder groups, results are achieved with energy to help the organization SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results).

In the words of one satisfied client:

“I wanted you to know that I have been involved in many strategic planning efforts over the past 15 years and have always found them useful in moving a school forward. However, what I really liked about (the AI strategic planning approach) and how your team managed the process, was the fact that all during the two days we were together, everyone was smiling and contributing in a positive manner. That, I have never seen happen before! It has already started having an affect on how we approach things administratively...It is a nice change in approach that brings people on board rather than putting them off. We will continue down this path.”

*David Kramer, Head of School,
Jakarta International School*

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A Blueprint for Change: Appreciative Inquiry

How do we free the energy within organizations to find what works in order to enable positive change?

BY TERRI D. EGAN, PHD AND ANN FEYERHERM, PHD

Photo: Radek Siechowicz

In every organization, something “works.” Small to large pockets of time, projects, and people exist who give life to the organizing system. Finding what “works” is a matter of discovering and giving voice to the stories that sow the seeds of positive change. (This is the third article in the **Leading Strategic Change** series. Previous articles include: **Managing Resistance to Change** and **Leading and Managing Change**.)



Imagine that you receive a call today telling you that you will be moving from your current home in the next 30 days. Furthermore, the caller offers “sketchy” details as to the nature of the new house that you will be occupying and no clear idea of what assistance you will be receiving in the move. You are told that additional information may come at “some future time,” on a “need to know basis.” What are your reactions? Perhaps you think, “Fantastic, an adventure.” Or, you might think, “Hey, wait a minute move?...Nobody else has said anything about moving. I think that I’ll just wait and see if this is really serious.” Or your reaction might be, “I love my home. I don’t want to move. Everything is fine the way it is. Why would I want to pull up roots and relocate? I’m not moving!”

The metaphor of moving is one that we believe captures the emotional intensity and uncertainty that many of us experience when faced with organizational change.

Now, imagine another scenario. You are approached with an invitation to consider the possibilities of moving to another location and occupying a house that you will have a part in designing and building. The invitation carries with it a promise that the things you cherish most about your current home will be considered in building the new home. Furthermore, you are asked to consider what you would like to see in a “dream” house, and those ideas will be included for



Photo: Radek Siechowicz

consideration in the new home. Finally, because you have been involved in the specifications and the architecture of the new house, you have faith that it is built on solid ground and will weather internal and external environmental challenges. Now, what are your reactions?

All of us have a *dream house* within a place that we can envision as the perfect setting for our perfect life. We believe this is also true for organizations that people have a *dream organization* a place where they and others can do their best work. This article is about freeing the energy that already exists in people and organizations towards reaching that dream.

Creating the Architecture for Successful Organizational Change Building the Collective Dream House

David Cooperrider and various colleagues[1] have put forward the idea of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a change philosophy and methodology. AI offers a model for harnessing the imagination and passion of each individual’s *dream organization* in a process that can be applied to a total organization or a unit within an organization. This process is often accomplished using variations on four basic processes outlined below.

- 1. Carry the best of the past into the future.** Make sure that “beloved” objects and characteristics are carefully packed for the move. It is easier to let go of the current state of affairs if we believe that in moving forward, we won’t lose what we are most passionate about.

This process begins with an inquiry into the best of the past: What is it that we want to bring forward into the change effort and the organization of the future? In essence, it is a discovery through dialogue. If we are creating a house, the topic of the inquiry is “the ideal house.” If we are looking into employee commitment, the topic of the inquiry is identifying “highly committed employees.”

It is important that the inquiry focus on the desired attributes that one wishes to bring into the future. A series of questions are posed to pairs of people including prompts about times when the best has occurred with whatever is the topic of discovery, what people value about themselves and their work, and what wishes they have for the future. The mutual interview creates connections and energy as people discover more about themselves and other people. The stories from these interviews cascade into larger and larger circles of people in the organization as themes emerge about the organization’s “life giving” forces, the passion of its people, and the possibilities that exist for the future of the organization.

2. Harness the power of imagination and dreaming. Engage each individual in the opportunity to imagine their *dream house* what it would look like, without any concern for time, money, and other resources.

This process creates possibilities and stimulates the desire for change through imagination. During this process in an organization, small groups of people are invited to envision, unconstrained, what the desired organization might look like, be like, sound like, and feel like. While this is similar to visioning, there are some differences. First and foremost, this “dreaming” is grounded in the reality of the past and present the discovery dialogue in the first phase. In addition, we have found it important to tap into the creative energy that is natural to people through use of music, drawing, poetry, or acting. Permission to be spontaneous is often what helps people tap into the wellsprings of creativity just below the surface. Grounded in the discovery of the past, this process asks people to imagine an ideal future.

3. Create a blueprint for change that integrates the past and the future. To start developing clarity, distill the essence of the best of the past and the positive desires for the future in terms that are relevant to today’s organizational reality.

Creation of a blueprint is in effect a unique yo-yo, going from past to future to present. The desire for the future creates a tension that motivates change. People involved in the AI approach have found that you can't short-circuit the process. While nostalgia and dreaming are an important part of the change equation, they are more powerful when joined with a bridge back to the present and a platform for understanding and mobilizing individual and organizational resources. In essence, this creative tension is a means of designing through integration accomplished by forming bold aspiration statements that capture the results of the previous imagination and envisioning process. These statements form the foundation for design elements necessary in creating the future of the organization. For example, in building a house, one must follow a blueprint that shows where to install the doors and windows, electrical outlets, plumbing, etc. Organizations also need a blueprint that illustrates communication networks, key roles, delivery systems for quality products or services, and essential tasks and processes that must be in place for the organization to function.



Photo: Lotus Head

4. Begin the remodeling or new construction by matching resources with interests and abilities. Assess costs of labor and materials, craftsmanship, and timetables. Find out who has a desire for constructing which part of the “house” and who has energy for taking this structure to new heights.

The preferred past is brought forward. The collective imagination of people has created the dream organization. The blueprint has been boldly designed, taking into account the who, what, how, and when that a clear and disciplined plan requires. Now, transforming that design into reality is the task at hand. Many times, the energy of the previous steps in the design process carries that natural momentum into the organization, and people start acting to make this design a reality. Creativity has been tapped and is unstoppable. The key part of this process is that people are committed and take accountability often in new ways.

The general rhythm of the creative process is analogous to an accordion: going from individuals to small groups, to larger groups, and then back through the cycle. This process usually incorporates individual reflection, paired dialogue and small group report-outs

capturing the learning along each step of the way to the gathered larger group. It is an iterative building approach to the change effort which culminates in a planning phase in which actions are mobilized by commitment that has been built in the previous stages of the intervention.

Laying the Foundation: 3 Key Principles of AI

Three principles are critical to the appreciative inquiry process. In addition to shaping the process described previously, we've found that to be an AI practitioner, it is much more effective, persuasive, and powerful if we live the principles listed below.

Principle One: People are drawn towards the positive.

Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, magic, and power in it.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe[2]

A recent (2005) television commercial features young children talking about their desires in a parody on current life. They used phrases such as, "I want to grow up to be a bored middle manager," or "I want to grow up and be a low performing bureaucrat." Is this commercial intended to be funny or sad? What young children say normally is that they want to grow up and be something pretty "cool" in their minds: firefighter, ballerina, or astronaut. When given the choice, almost all people choose the positive: happy marriages, exciting work, great colleagues, etc. Therefore, if enabled to discover, dream, and create such a positive world, most people would work to make their dreams reality.

The power of the positive has been given new emphasis in a variety of fields.[3] The relevance of this principle is illustrated by some startling findings summarized in a recent *Fast Company* article[4] on personal change. In developing an understanding of why patients recovering from heart surgery failed to make the needed lifestyle changes, it was found that lasting personal change must be initiated by an appeal to emotion as well as reason. Furthermore, the emotional appeal must be grounded in positive, not negative emotions. In other words, one is less likely to be motivated by a fear of death than by a desire to embrace a joyous, healthy life. One emotion, fear of death, prompts avoidance of the subject matter and a tendency to slip into old behavioral patterns. The other emotion, joy over a life well-lived, inspires action and willingness to take action.

Principle Two: Thoughts and words create worlds.

Speech is power: speech is to persuade, to convert, to compel.

Ralph Waldo Emerson[5]

Imagine two homes, side by side, identical physical structures. Would you expect that the occupants would describe their home life in similar terms? No. Much of what happens inside depends upon such things as the conversations around the dinner table, or lack thereof, the family stories that are passed down from generation to generation, and the unstated and unwritten rules of behavior that govern what goes on in a given family.

Appreciative Inquiry as a change methodology is based on the power of words to create worlds. Unlike the mortar, bricks, and steel that create much of the physical reality of an organization, the organization's culture is vested in the values, beliefs, and informal rules and expectations that govern organizational life and that are shaped through human thought and conversation. The power of shared conversations to shape this organizational reality is illustrated by the "water cooler effect." Find the place where employees gather in any organization and listen to the conversations that flow throughout a typical day. What are the topics that spark attention? What stories get told and retold? Who are the heroes and villains of the organization? The power of these shared conversations to shape reality is apparent. By intentionally focusing the topic of an inquiry on what is desired and by using the power of story-telling and cascading conversations, AI stimulates a desire for change and motivates individuals to act.

Principle Three: You create the world you pay attention to.

I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.

Michelangelo[6]

What was Michelangelo focused on, the stone which had to be chipped away or the angel within the stone waiting to be revealed? There are several studies that suggest that what you focus on determines what you get, whether this is through the effect of a powerful "other" (such as a boss, a teacher, a parent) giving you messages about your competence and your internalizing it, or your own mind's turning its attention to a particular event or issue or competence. Athletes know that improvement comes from focusing on when they do something well. Teachers know that students can live up or down to their expectations. In an

organization, we can talk about that “turnover” problem, or we can talk about ways to “retain high performing employees.” Think about what is more energizing. This principle also incorporates the idea that inquiry and change are not separate. From the very first question someone asks, the mind is drawn to a response to that question, and therefore the rest of the conversation shifts.

If I ask you to look at a house and pay particular attention to the cracks in the wall, paint that may be peeling in one or more places, etc., those things are what you will focus on and see. If on the other hand, we walk in and I say, “Ah... look at that archway the graceful beauty of the old wood on the ceiling, etc.,” that is what you will focus on.

Summary

Many models of change talk about dealing with “resistance.” You’ll notice that we do not do so when talking about AI. Resistance is only relevant if one is pushing against something. Pushing harder only makes you tired. The alternative is to stop to do something else. AI as a process of change offers the opportunity to experience doing something different that makes life more pleasurable.

We also encourage organizations to “leapfrog” to the desired state. Instead of focusing inordinate energy on “fixing the problem,” we suggest that you focus on what is desired and spend energy on that. We have found that often the “problem” disappears by focusing on the desired state.

Finally, we have noticed there is a perverse belief that struggling is an honorable pursuit. In our culture we seem to have a belief that struggle and pain signify growth. We go to the gym, work out hard, and then talk about with some degree of bragging how “hard” we worked, how much effort we put into taking care of our bodies! What if life and work were effortless that what we wanted flowed from what we could imagine and then create? We are suggesting that the process of change need not be one of pain and struggle, but one of stirring the imagination, creativity, and energy of people.

In this article we have merely highlighted the key components in the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) process. Therefore, to develop full appreciation of the potential of this process and philosophy, we encourage readers to access the references that we list at the end of this article.

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