

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

By Nan Boss, DVM
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One of the tools you can use to implement change is Appreciative Inquiry. This handout introduces the concept and gives a few examples. The worksheet at the end helps to apply the concept to the veterinary school environment. The concept is also a good one to use for team meetings in practices.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a positive, proactive approach to change, which deliberately focuses on what is already working well in order to build on success. As the name implies, the two basic tools of AI are **appreciation** - putting attention and focus on what is already working for a business; and **inquiry** - which is about asking good questions and searching for meaning. Rather than asking, “What’s the problem?” AI asks “What’s working here?” Once a group understands their conditions for success, they are much more capable of dealing with “problems” constructively.

As a change process, AI is parallel to the positive reinforcement methods that we use with animals. For example, a dog who jumps up on visitors can learn to do an endearing trick instead. Similarly, people can focus on strategically shaping their strengths and skills. AI is particularly useful because it focuses upon the value of every person’s successes and contributions. It does not engender defensiveness, finger pointing, or guilt and anxiety about fault and blame.

AI has been used successfully in small and large change projects with hundreds of organizations and corporations worldwide. It is based on the simple idea that organizations move in the direction of their questions. For example, when groups study or try to work on their problems and conflicts, they often find that both the number and severity of these problems grows. In the same way, when groups study their achievements to date – such as successes, best practices, and emerging skills and innovations – these phenomena, too, tend to flourish. The artful creation of a positive, shared image of the future may well be the best activity that individuals and organizations can engage in if their aim is to help bring to fruition a significant future.

Positive images and discussions lead to positive actions. Organizations tend to evolve in the direction of positive, anticipatory images of the future. The AI process consists of **Discovery** – identifying the organization’s root causes of success or what is already working well; **Dreaming** – envisioning bold, new possibilities for the future, or how we want to build on what’s already working; **Designing** – preparing the organization for excellence with collective, clear intentions, protocols or guidelines; and lastly **Destiny** – committing to meaningful, lasting and achievable plans and goals, and celebrating every step.

With Appreciative Inquiry, everyone involved has a voice in creating the vision and the plan. It helps people to discover, study and expand upon what is already working, which builds confidence and competence for future planning and achievement.

“Appreciative Inquiry gets much better results than seeking out and solving problems. We concentrate enormous resources on correcting problems...[but] when used continually over a long time, this approach leads to a negative culture, a descent into a paralyzing sense of hopelessness. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not advocating mindless happy talk. Appreciative inquiry

is a complex science designed to make things better. We can't ignore problems – we just need to approach them from the other side.” Thomas H. White, President, Telephone Operations, GTE Wireless

AI is about the best of the past and the present, and an awareness of the value, strength and potential of ourselves and others. It also means overcoming the limits we impose, often unconsciously, on our own capacities. The background of our culture tends to throw us into a chorus of hopelessness, irony and negativity. What we pay attention to has everything to do with how we see ourselves, how we envision the future, and how the future actually turns out.

Whether you approach change via AI or by another route, the truth is that people don't like to change. However, any new idea, method or program will involve change. It will create problems you will need to discuss and iron out. It will require buy-in. In a veterinary school setting, say a VBMA chapter trying to incorporate more communications skills training into clinical rotations some of the problems you'd encounter might be: How will you convince your faculty or residents to implement your ideas? What will you do when the doctors don't agree or the dean says “no”? When people attempt to sabotage a program or simply don't do what they are supposed to do? When it doesn't go as expected?

If you fail to plan you can plan to fail, so have a strategy. Then communicate your strategy to your team or class or VBMA chapter. Tell them your goals, and focus on the vision that you have for the change you want to make. It should be clear not only what you want to do but why – how will it improve customer service, patient care or the skills of the students?

Involve everyone and listen to fears, needs and concerns – really listen, don't just pretend to listen. Brainstorm how to go about the change you want to make. Paint pictures in peoples' minds by telling stories, or musing about what if... For example, if you are introducing a new client communication SOAP form, talk about a time you could have used it to improve your interaction with a client or how it will help you to feel more comfortable in the exam room with clients. How will it change the way you interact with them? What part will the person you are presenting your idea to play in the program? How will it affect or help them? Will it mean extra work on their part? If so, acknowledge the fact and explain why you still think the idea is worthwhile.

Address any concerns that you can. Be sure to ensure continuity of what is really important – the customer, patient care, the development of communication skills. Discuss positive rewards for the team. Assign charts, reports and tasks to keep everyone involved if possible.

As you go along, review and revise your program if needed. Remember that the things that push you the most help you the most. Success is the culmination of failures, mistakes, false starts, confusion, and the determination to keep going anyway. You may not get it right the first time, so learn from your mistakes and give it another go if it seems a worthwhile change to make.

Since you aren't really in a position of power but you want to make some changes, how should you go about it? Again you need to plan and strategize. How important is what you want to change to the faculty? How will it impact your consistency of care? How will it impact the hospital/school financially? How much time will it take?

Conflict arises from unmet expectations such as:

- ✿ I thought, since you sent me to the conference, that you would want me to utilize what I learned
- ✿ I expected to be able to learn about communication skills and be able to practice them while I'm in school
- ✿ I expected to get coaching

Conflict can also arise from inaccurate assumptions:

- ✿ I thought we were deciding on that together
- ✿ I thought we had all agreed that we would...
- ✿ I thought she would do it this way
- ✿ I thought I was making that decision

The more clear you are about who is making which decisions and why, the better off you will be. Who makes decisions for a practice or a school? What happens when it's not clarified? In a practice situation, the practice owner leader may have sole responsibility for a decision, for example to hire or fire a DVM; to purchase a new x-ray machine or to offer a new service, such as canine rehabilitation. Or the leader can decide with input from the team, such as when hiring a new receptionist or deciding hours of operation or schedules. The leader and the team can decide together, for instance whether to offer boarding or perhaps a management team within the hospital makes hiring decisions or plans marketing projects. The last way is for one or more team members to decide, such as when hiring kennel staff or modifying the reminder system

As trustworthiness and trust increase, so does the level of empowerment. Your job description or role does not empower you. You empower yourself based on the issue or the problem or the challenge at hand. You exercise your own level of initiative or self-empowerment. The key question is always: What is the best thing I can do under the circumstances?

As you can imagine, conflict can arise when a boss and the employee, or a VBMA chapter and a faculty member, have different ideas of what level each task or decision should be at. A micromanaging boss may want to stick his nose into even the simplest decisions, while a hands-off boss may allow employees to run wild and spend money heedlessly.

What is your circle of concern at this point in your position here? These are the things that concern and interest you. What is your circle of influence – those things over which you have influence or control? How do you exert your influence in these areas?

If you are sitting here feeling squashed and disempowered, and you don't feel excited to implement changes when you get home... Do something about it! "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be?" All of us can consciously decide to leave behind a life of mediocrity and to live a life of greatness – at home, at work and in the community

- ✿ What is a life of greatness for you at work or school?
- ✿ How would we know you are being world famous?
- ✿ What help do you need from others to become your best self?
- ✿ What can you contribute back to your school and your hospital?

AI WORKSHEET

Please fill out the following questions about what you want for yourself and your organization – what is your dream? What do you see as the positive, best things that you do? What should you do more of, and what is your vision for your position and your responsibilities at your school?

1) What is your school doing right? What communications tools and techniques are used?

Ideas to get you started:

One school has a rule that before a student can perform a surgery they have to call a faculty member, who pretends to be the pet owner, and the student must present what he or she wants to do for the pet and get the faculty member's "authorization" before performing the procedure. This lets the student practice going over risks and benefits and obtaining consent from clients.

Some schools have students do call backs after the pets go home. Others have the students call pet owners with twice daily updates on hospitalized patients.

2) Once you have heard other ideas, which ones do you think could be implemented in your school?

3) How would you go about doing that?

4) What obstacles might get in the way & how will you overcome them?

5) Whose help do you need and how will you ask for it?

6) What resources will you need?

7) How will you ask for them?