

The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry **by Sue Annis Hammond. Bend, OR: Thin Book Publishing, 1998.**

Reviewed by Louis Mazé

Louis Mazé is a staff development officer in the Human & Organizational Development Office at Texas State Technical College System. Before coming to TSTC he taught abroad extensively and is fluent in several languages which affords him unique opportunities such as translating for the Marketing Department's press screening when Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi landed at the TSTC Waco airport.

The next time someone complains to you about something, which will probably happen in the next five minutes, try asking them this question:

“What would you like more of?”

That person will then answer, “Well, I sure don't want any more . . .” and you'll have to remind her, gently, that you asked what she wanted more of, not less.

And that, in a nutshell, is the essence of Appreciative Inquiry – an emphasis on the positive results that are desired rather than on problems, on negatives. “Appreciative Inquiry” is the name given to a novel approach to change management in which the usual focus on problems, on the negatives, is replaced with a focus on positives – on what's going right, in sum, rather than on what's going wrong.

Appreciative Inquiry is novel because, like the hypothetical respondent in the example above, we have a natural tendency to look for and focus on negatives when analyzing a situation. We try to “fix” things – we find the problem, diagnose the causes, and propose a solution.

That approach works fine for repairing a car engine that has broken down (despite preventive maintenance, which is a closer analogy to Appreciative Inquiry), but it has drawbacks for dealing with organizational or human situations, which are much more complex. Organizations are not machines with interchangeable parts, so a mechanistic approach to improving them can be counter-productive: when we look for problems, we find them. And by focusing on them, we enlarge them, and it seems as though the organization is a failure.

Among other effects, this approach tends to demoralize people, since they know that what they're doing is not all bad, but everyone always seems to be emphasizing the problems. A problem-focused approach can be as bad for an organization's self-esteem as for a person's.

Appreciative Inquiry holds that finding out what's working well, and finding ways to deliver more of what an organization does well should be the focus of process and product improvement.

Instead of asking, "What problems are you having?" Appreciative Inquiry asks, "What is working around here?"

In other words, rather than seeking out students who have had customer service problems at TSTC and focusing on remedying those problems, we would find out what the satisfied students like best about us and focus on providing more of those services.

Once the strengths of the organization have been determined, all efforts are

devoted to increasing the value that those strengths bring to the organization.

"But," you're thinking, "Problems do exist, and they will need to be fixed. How is focusing on strengths and positive results going to take care of that?" The answer of the practitioner of Appreciative Inquiry might be that in designing the path to achieve the increase in what's working well, obstacles will naturally be addressed and disposed of.

Appreciative Inquiry does not replace or even preclude the use of traditional problem-solving techniques in change management. But it does provide the user with an innovative alternative.

Like the organizations whose needs it addresses, Appreciative Inquiry is organic as well: it evolves with time, continuously improving

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Appreciative Inquiry was developed in the '70s and '80s at Case Western Reserve University, and it has since spread through management consulting worldwide. Sue Hammond's book provides an introduction not only to why the process can be so effective, but how it works. In addition, several pages of references guide the reader to other, more fulsome resources.

The best feature of the book, however, is its simplicity and clarity.

The book emphasizes that Appreciative Inquiry is not a cure-all but rather one more tool for the work team, the supervisor, the management consultant, or for anyone wanting to produce improvement in a process or product.

Reading about Appreciative Inquiry, I can only wonder about applying it to interpersonal relations as well. Could we change the problem-focused, negative approach we may be taking with our children, for example? Could couples benefit from an approach that focuses on what they're doing right rather than what's going wrong between them? Appreciative Inquiry represents a profound shift in how we view our workplace and ourselves within it. This "Thin Book" contains a wealth of food for thought!