Appreciative Inquiry: How does it support Management Development?

Deborah A. Blackman
University of Canberra
deborah.blackman@canberra.edu.au

Jana Anneke Fitzgerald
University of Western Sydney
a.fitzgerald@uws.edu.au

Beverley McSpadyen

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the potential of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in developing new understandings via Management Development initiatives; it is based upon semi-structured interviews with a management development consultant who has used AI for development work supporting communication and change. Four key themes which will enhance management development implementation were identified: the development of alternative perspectives; the creation and maintenance of increased energy levels; the effective management of stories and the support for improved communication learning and knowledge development. It is argued that by using this technique more creative, novel and synergistic ideas emerge when developing, implementing or evaluating management development and that practitioners should consider using AI as a part of their tool kit.

KEY WORDS: Appreciative inquiry; Dialogue; Problem Solving; Communication, Learning, Knowledge Creation
INTRODUCTION

In 1999 Richard Beckhard stated that “Appreciative Inquiry is, in my view, an exciting breakthrough, one that signals a change in the way we think about change. I’m intrigued by how rapidly it is emerging; but it is something substantive, conceptually strong, not like the quick fads. In my view we are looking at something important – AI [Appreciative Inquiry] will be of enduring consequence and energising innovation for the field.” (Beckhard in Watkins and Mohr, 2001). This paper will consider whether AI is proving itself to be a real alternative to more traditional current practice in the way that it supports, implements and delivers management development, particularly in its ability to act as a framework for improved communications and effective networks. It is posited that by using AI management development can be more effective, as the different world views can be overcome and new shared understandings become the basis of future relationships. Moreover, the focus upon the positive leads to a range of discussions on a common theme, as opposed to a variety of discussions on different problem areas.

Initially, AI will be outlined and then a case example will be used to demonstrate how AI has progressed management development and change practices in development and consultancy scenarios within and between academia and industry. The outcomes will be discussed and their implications evaluated.

APPRECIATIVE ENQUIRY

AI is an approach that truly respects people, acknowledges achievements, appreciates the best within the status quo and yet encourages individuals to dream and build towards a better future (Cooperrider and Whitney, 1999; Watkins and Mohr, 2001). Experts further define it as a process whereby we discover a person or an organization’s strengths, with an outcome of statements as to where that person or organization wants to be based on the high moments of where he/she/it has been (Vitello-Cicciu, 2003).
Although the literature contains many definitions, most agree that the fundamental proposal underpinning AI practices is that they will enable organisational transformation in some form (van de Harr and Hosking, 2004). Cooperrider (1990) identified that a central assumption in AI is that organisations, or in fact any patterned ongoing social relational process, will develop and change in the direction on which they focus their attention. Therefore, if the organisation focuses upon a positive future set of ideas it is more likely that this will occur. As a result, AI initiatives are organised around an affirmative topic; that is, something that an organisation or community wants to develop, learn about or enhance in their way of doing business rather than, as is more common in change management or consultancy, a problem that needs to be fixed (Phillips, 2004; Newman and Fitzgerald, 2001). For example, if there are 85% of satisfied customers and we want 95%, traditionally the focus would be upon the missing 10%. An AI perspective would say ‘let’s look at how we are getting the 85% success and work from there’, believing that from this we can learn about the missing 10% (Lewis and Van Tiem, 2004).

The process of AI is often described as the 4 D process, which is Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny (see figure 1).
At the discovery stage, the focus is upon what is going right and well. There is then a phase of dreaming optimal performance in all areas, establishing how it would look. The design then establishes ways to achieve the dream and, finally, real ways to achieve these are designed into the organisation. The view is that what we focus upon is what becomes reality. If we focus on problems we gain more, whereas if we focus upon a dream then we can attain it “Organizations construct and enact worlds of their own making – which in turn act back on them” (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p133).

It is generally agreed that AI facilitates alternative communication systems by encouraging dialogue, in order to establish the dreams which can then be developed and enacted (Cooperrider and Whitney, 1999; Phillips 2004). This is because it is based upon the theory of social constructionism, an epistemology concerned with the processes by which humans generate meaning together. The argument is made that “As the people of an organisation create meaning through their dialogue together, they sow the seeds of the organization’s future” (Watkins and Mohr, 2001, p. 26). They posit that there are four assumptions that are in place within social constructionism: a critical stance towards assumed knowledge; historical and cultural specificity; knowledge sustained by social
processes and knowledge and social action working together. These all indicate that there are no fixed answers or truths to be found, but there will be many possible knowledge outcomes that will be developed by those involved in AI. This perspective encourages openness to new ideas and indicates the importance of communication between different people involved in the future.

In this paper we argue that by using AI as the focus of dialogue and development there can be real understanding created within the management development process. The knowledge creation will be effective because it will focus initially upon what is understood and from which other things can develop, rather than focusing upon problems at the outset. This will have implications for both management development research and consultancy, implying that a shared knowledge of the world will enable greater synergies.

**METHODOLOGY**

The objective of this paper was to explore the differences in the effectiveness of communications facilitated by AI, by considering its role in developing understanding and networks within and between organisations and individuals. Areas of interest included whether AI was merely a technique or was, in fact, a philosophical approach which permeated a wide variety of techniques and approaches. In order to explore such ideas a qualitative methodology was needed, as the objective was to uncover ideas and thoughts around the technique (Cresswell, 1994; Berg, 1998).

This paper is based upon in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a consultant who has used AI for development work aimed at supporting communication and change within her organisation and between the organisation and other institutions. She works in an academic institution which has been through considerable change, including being merged with others 4 years ago and has been with a part of the organisation for 9 years, working in the area of staff and management development. Her role is to support those undertaking new developments within their work role. The objectives of the interviews were to explore: how she came to use AI; how her practices have changed as a result of AI;
examples of her practice and how and why they have been effective; what are the differences in the processes and the outputs; how far she has adopted the principles and what she envisions will be future developments in her practice. The interviews were analysed and several key themes emerged.

FINDINGS

At the outset the question was asked, why had the respondent initially got involved with AI. She postulated that she had always had a personal philosophy that tended to an AI approach but had not realised it had been legitimised as a method in this way. She argued that, being able to ground her desire to be positive in a technique that enables change in this way, she has made significant improvements in the way she is able to approach her work. Subsequently, the question was asked, what did AI bring to any situation where it was used, especially in situations where there needed to be links inside and outside an organisation. There was much discussion and some specific examples were given where AI was used: two where AI was used to facilitate external/internal communications, one where it was used to overcome change weariness and one where it was used to develop more effective evaluation of management development initiatives. Emerging from the discussion and the examples, there seemed to be four main advantages: alternative perspectives, increased energy, the management of stories and the ability to support communication, learning and knowledge development.

Example 1

The manager of a charity foundation was responsible for getting large industry donations and was also the chair of a charity/industry liaison committee which was responsible for developing the foundation’s strategy for gaining donations. She needed to gain certain information from the committee in order to learn more about their motivations and experiences.

A closed question, standard survey would not have been effective as the research needed to be exploratory and, moreover, was sensitive as a part of what she needed to know was why many of those on the committee did not make donations, despite being apparently committed to the cause and having the means (or their companies had). Instead, questions were used in the survey that were phrased in a
positive AI style such as ‘Why are you on the committee?’, ‘What do you think you have to give to the committee?’, ‘What has the foundation given to you?’, ‘What makes you donate your time?’, ‘What other committees are you on and why do you give them your time?’ then leading on to ‘Would you be prepared to donate to the foundation?’.

What emerged from the AI style survey was much greater clarity about the people on the committee, their motivation to be on the committee and their reasons for behaving in certain ways. Although the survey had been confidential, the committee began to discuss these ideas and found it could be more effective once the shared interests and common ground had been established. There were many common stories that could be shared and lessons for future committee development were learnt. It emerged, for example, that some members of the committee thought they were donating as they gave time. Interestingly, having reflected upon their answers many did choose to donate. Therefore, the approach was successful: the reflection led to greater clarity of role, function and future, as well as raising a reasonable amount of money.

Example 2

In example two, an organisation wished to increase its membership on a council committee which needed a range of internal and external members. Historically, new members had been found via word of mouth, thus the committee tended to get more of the same types of people. An approach was required that would enable those asked to think about new members in a different way. The committee used AI style questions in a survey to find out: why those on the council were there; what they thought the council was there for; how they perceived themselves as adding value to the committee; what did they offer the committee and what did they have to gain from being on the committee; what did they perceive the committee required in terms of skills and attributes and where were there gaps. By asking the questions this way it focused the participants minds on the actual job that needed to be done in terms of missing skills and competences. As a result, a wide range of people were suggested as new committee members who had not been proposed before.
An interesting note on this example was that each time survey questions were used externally to the organisation the questions had to be cleared with the Principal. Previously, the questions had been knocked back and needed to be changed and there were frequently 2 or 3 iterations before the questions were accepted. In this case the questions were accepted straight away, so that not only was the process more effective, but it was much faster as well.

As with Example 1, it was found that the shared understanding that emerged from undergoing the process of the positive questioning enabled greater ease of communication and a greater long-term understanding of future strategy determination.

Example 3
AI is a way of acknowledging that people are weary of change and, therefore, proceeds to treat them differently. Instead of saying they must just deal with it, it is a way of getting people to acknowledge that there is a future through the change. At the outset, everyone is asked to tell stories of places and times where things have worked as they should and more time is spent on introducing ideas. As an example, a workshop on team building does not start with discussing team-building techniques but with stories of successful teams and why they were successful. The dream is not about techniques but about a successful team. The acknowledgement is reached that successful teams are potentially achievable and can be developed, which then gives ‘permission’ and gives ‘buy-in’ to teach the techniques; the concept that there could be change is already accepted and, therefore, the tools they will learn may help. However, even if they do not there will be other tools and the dream will still be achievable. A major difference is that no one expects the techniques to drive the change, the change will be driven by a recognition of a future.

By approaching the matter this way, everyone is brought to acknowledge that there is a future (the dream), which might be achievable. Once this buy-in is achieved, then ways of achieving it can be discussed. The workshop will recognise that there are challenges with current teams but the key is not to get focused on them, rather the focus is upon what it would look like if it worked. As a part of this
example, the analogy was given of looking at AI in the context of crossing a river. If a group gets to a wide river they become focused upon how to cross it and whether it can be done. In AI it is as if you are already standing on the other side of the river so you know you can do it – now you establish **how** it can done but **if** is no longer an issue.

**Example 4**

Appreciative inquiry was also used when designing surveys and focus groups used to evaluate current management development initiatives. Watkins and Mohr (2001) had outlined the potential for evaluation and it was used to design surveys and focus groups in order to evaluate current management development initiatives. Historically, the evaluations had tended to review what had happened (looking backwards) thus, inevitably, focusing upon problems with the design and implementation of the management development. What was planned was to develop evaluation primarily designed to look forward and to focus upon what had been successful, so that this could be built upon and developed further. The current initiatives were planned to be in place for three year cycles and so, in order for the evaluation to be useful, it needed to look at what could be used more fully and be made more useful rather than looking to develop new ideas.

The approach was to present questions that asked the participants to concentrate upon what they were doing differently and what had changed as a consequence of the management development they had undergone so far. This ensured that the respondents focused upon the actual outcomes, not on perceived weakness or what they considered should have been the content. The consultant found that this enabled far greater reflection upon definite results “**perceived problems with the results will not necessarily explain lack of behaviour change. By focusing upon what has changed I can (a) develop better and new content that will build on what is working and (b) identify where the gaps have occurred in what I had planned**”. Her argument was that when the respondents identify weaknesses these are based upon their perception of what should have happened. By discussing what has worked, it is the designer who identifies the problem based on their actual plan and, therefore, what is really missing or failing and how their expectations have not been met. Moreover, by using questions that
concentrated on what had emerged and led to change she found that, where there were ten people in a focus group, instead of having at least 10 different problems emerge and each person wanting to identify new weaknesses, she now had 10 different perspectives on the same theme which gave real insight into the outcomes and a much greater clarity as to what to change, keep and develop.

**ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES**

In these examples, the reason why the approach was successful was that it changed the way that the participants were conceiving the issues. It is a way to "harness glimmers of optimism" by questions such as ‘Tell me about when it worked before’, ‘Tell me what made it work’ and ‘Tell me what has actually changed in what you do’. From this, what can be built on can be explored and new ideas will fall out of the discussions, because the assumption in AI is that there is something good to be built on, whereas most change management and evaluation systems assume there is a problem to be solved.

The issue of whether AI can be too positive was also discussed in this context, as this is a weakness often levelled at AI – that by focusing so much on the positive, real organisational issues are ignored. The response was that it does not ignore issues, since the challenges and problems being faced are discussed because the participants bring them up. However, the difference is in the way that the conversation is managed. If the conversation merely goes with the challenges, then the sessions or processes become problem focused and will not change the current patterns of practiced behaviours. However, if the facilitator turns the issues around and asks what it would look like if it was not a challenge but if it was working at its very best, then the group can work towards a shared dream.

This is interesting as it offers potential solutions to organisations which have become too self-referential and start to repeat behaviours that have previously been seen to be unsuccessful (Mellahi et al., 2002). Currently accepted views of the world can be challenged in this way, leading to shared mental models via dialogue which enable better communication (Senge, 1990), but without them becoming referential (Lee-Kelley and Blackman. 2005). As a result, AI can be seen to develop and support alternative perspectives.
INCREASED ENERGY

An interesting point that was made whilst discussing the way to ensure that challenges were used as a way to develop a dream and not as the focus of problem centred discussions, was what happens to the group’s energies in each scenario. It was shown that when the group became focused upon problems and challenges, as with more usual problem solving techniques, their energy levels became low as they tended to become negative and depressed. However, in AI discussions energy levels stayed high because being focused on when things work and develop led to the problems being seen from a different perspective (as outlined above). This positive perspective led to enthusiasm, higher levels of buy-in and higher energy throughout. When the theories on creativity and innovation are considered (Harper and Becker, 2004) it becomes clear that if high energy levels can be maintained, more creative and extensive idea development is possible. It is, therefore, likely that in the context of research or consultancy development more interesting and far reaching ideas may be aired and discussed.

MANAGEMENT OF STORIES

There is currently a great deal of theory being developed about the role of storytelling within organisations (Gabriel, 2000; Gargiulo, 2002; Randall and Martin, 2003). It is argued that developing stories builds connections with people, thus storytelling can be a strong organisational tool which enables shared mental models, greater communication and real culture change. AI is a way of managing storytelling, because stories get shared in the workshops and the participants can then look for common themes which give world views and contexts of where they are going, providing buy in and enabling communication. From the earlier examples, it can be seen that the narrative of the committee changed as a result of the members being asked to think of things in a different way and share those ideas with others. They were also asked, in Example 2, to make recommendations and these were much more creative than they had been previously. This supports the notion that articulating and sharing stories can formulate new ideas. This in turn leads to the idea of AI being a learning tool.
SUPPORTING COMMUNICATION, LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT

As indicated earlier, AI enables learning as it implicitly recognises the need to learn within its techniques; only if there is learning will there be new knowledge constructed. In the examples, it is clear that alternative solutions were being created as a result of the AI processes and so an alternative construction of the world was being formed. What is occurring is that the open form of communication leads to a greater likelihood that there will be real shared understanding which, in turn, will enable learning (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Learning defined as a Communication Model (source Smith et al., 2003)

Without learning there can be no change, since there would be no understanding of a new state and so it could not be achieved. By undertaking alternative style questioning and more open discussions what is happening is that, firstly, the messages are really being received and, secondly, these received messages are fully discussed enabling a shared understanding to emerge. All too often it is assumed that communication occurs whilst frequently, as is well known, it does not. In AI processes there is a much greater focus on ensuring learning emerges from the dialogues taking place. In the examples given within the interview, there was great emphasis given to this “for them to change the future must
connect with them, ...then people have a choice based on a place of information and understanding. That is why the conversations are so important”.

CONCLUSION

This paper is, of course, limited in its approach owing to being based only upon currently accepted theory and one in depth interview, so that, although different organisational examples are being used, only one person’s experiences are reflected. Despite this, it can be seen that there seems to be a real possibility that the adoption of such an approach when developing new management development designs and evaluations could lead to much more effective outcomes. We propose that further research is undertaken to explore these findings. It is hoped to (a) observe the use of AI being undertaken when designing, developing, implementing and evaluating management development where different world views may lead to difficult communications; (b) undertake longitudinal studies following the use of AI in management development scenarios in both commercial and research contexts; (c) track the impact of AI upon mental model development; and (d) develop evaluation tools using AI to enable a better determination of its real added value (or not) to organisations. Overall we propose that proponents of management development consider adopting AI as a tool when designing new initiatives or planning to evaluate those they have, as to do so may enable them to build on strengths in a way that has not previously been open to them.

References


