A Different Approach to Strategic Planning using Appreciative Inquiry

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Abstract

The interview describes the integration of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) into the strategic planning cycle at Medicine Hat College. Appreciative Inquiry can play a powerful role in initiating and managing change through the process of asking generative questions. AI increases the possibility of introducing successful and transformative change at all levels within an organization.

The interview was conducted in December 2015 by Innovations in Practice Editor Jennifer Easter.

Interview

JE: A couple of years ago, Medicine Hat College took a creative approach to strategic planning by using a process called Appreciative Inquiry (AI). Can you give us an overview of what Appreciative Inquiry is?

JO: David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, who are two of the founders of Appreciative Inquiry, define Appreciative Inquiry as the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. This is the heart of it. It rests on the belief that in all human systems there are things that are working well, strengths that can be activated, and opportunities that are available to us. The power of AI is asking generative questions about things that people really know and care about. The heart and soul of AI is the appreciative interview where we ask people about their peak experience, about what they value, and what they wish for in their organization. ‘If you had a magic wand and could change one thing about your organization, what would it be?’ AI itself is not a magic wand, but if you ask people what they would do if they had a magic wand some pretty amazing and transformative things can happen.

JE: Why did the College choose this approach? Why AI?

JO: The College was coming out of a pretty dark place. We had just received a scathing audit on our international education operations that had led to the President being walked off campus. A lot of people were hurt. There had been damage to our reputation, and AI gave us the chance not to look at the failure but to reimagine what we could be at our best. It was a way out, and the leadership thought that AI was not only
the best way forward; it was the only way forward. If we had focused on the problems (and there were many) it could have gotten even worse. One of the ideas in AI is that there is a problem with the problem-solving approach to change. It focuses on the problems, which can then become more complex and even more unsolvable and intractable. The problems sap your energy and demoralize you. Since we were in a dark place and we needed to think about how to get ourselves out, we turned to AI to help us think about what it might look like if we were at our best. It gave us a way to move forward and not get bogged-down. The “us” I am referring to is the Strategic Planning Council. It was a group of about 50 people from across the college. There was, during summer 2014 when we were planning, such a sense of potential and possibility with this broad group of people who were ready to be innovative and do cool things.

JE: What did the strategic planning process using AI look like? What steps did you take?

JO: In August 2014 we held a College Day Summit, and this is where the strategic planning process really began. Over 350 college employees came together, and the individuals all had assigned seating and some people didn’t like it because it put them out of their comfort zone when what they wanted most was to reconnect with colleagues they had not seen for months. But we started the College Day Summit with the appreciative interview and so those tables of eight broke into four pairs and did the appreciative interview about peak experiences, values, and wishes that they had for the college. Each table shared what they had heard from the four other pairs and started to build some common themes, as well as what the AI literature calls “provocative propositions.” What happened with some of the tables was absolutely transformative, with some people who were at first reluctant stating, “I have the best group!” The provocative propositions developed are inspiring statements, grounded in reality, about what we would love to see the college become. There were 6,566 words generated from College Day which the data analysis team broke down into major themes. The College Day Summit strategic planning process gave us the data necessary for the strategic plan.

Group “portraits” of strengths and provocative propositions were displayed through a “parade” so the entire college community could see the many versions of what the college might look like “at its best.”
JE: Can you tell us more about the AI College Day Summit—specifically, the process throughout the day?

JO: It began with everyone grabbing a picture from a magazine of what they felt described them and their strengths. From there, each table created a group portrait, with glue and stars and sparkles. To be perfectly straight up, not everyone loved it. But the level of energy and creativity was awesome. In the AI process there is the “4D Model:” discovery, dream, design, and deliver. The defining question for us was “What does Medicine Hat College look like at its best?” and the individual strengths and the table group portraits was the first part of the discovery process; “who are the amazing people we work with?” The discovery was then completed through the appreciative interviews (where each pair then shared the major themes they heard from their interviewee) and in the common themes. Then we started to dream and design, and that’s where the role of provocative propositions comes in. So the AI summit worked through those first 3 Ds: discovery, dream, and design. We, the writing team, then built the strategic plan—which represents dreams, vision, and a bit of design—recognizing that the design component was incomplete. The high level goals were then given to departments and divisions and they were asked to finish the design with strategies, tactics, and measurable results—the delivery parts—using another AI tool: SOAR. In short, it was outlined; ‘here’s the plan, now you build the rest of it; you complete the cycle and determine the specific actions and measurables that you are going to engage in and track over the course of the next year.’ That completed the cycle at a very local, operational level.
Figure 2. “Provocative propositions,” or possibility statements, begin the process of building the preferred future state.

The provocative propositions became the data that was analyzed and formed the structure of the strategic plan. The writing team also did their best to stay faithful to the original words and creativity expressed at the summit.

JE: What was the Library’s involvement in the process?

JO: I am not a part of the library, but during that time the Library was an active part of the transformation. Many members from the Library were on the Strategic Planning Council and its many different subcommittees. Library staff served as table facilitators at their individual tables for the College Day Summit. The Library also provided much-needed tech support. Each table had a wirelessly-enabled laptop so that at the end of the day the table facilitators could input the work that each table had done into a database. This saved us a tonne of transcription work. It also showed that the Strategic Planning Council was listening in a very real way to what people had to say; that we were taking this very seriously, that their work had been captured.

And the Library has done some other amazing things to support the AI process here at Medicine Hat College. We have a deep collection of AI resources in the Library which has supported my own research efforts, and those managers who want to do planning with their teams now have the resources available to them. The Library also had its own AI planning session to look at its strengths. As a Library, they developed their own provocative propositions; those things that are going to inspire the best in the department and others in all situations. They modeled how to gather the information required to provide the best service possible. The Library developed a substantial list of
service propositions to say ‘this is what the Library looks like at its best,’ and this is what they are going to communicate to the rest of the college and our students. Our library is awesome, and they were living the ideals of AI before we started to do AI.

JE: Were there any other departments that did their own AI process?

JO: It’s been a comprehensive institutional process. Every department, division, every program has gone through an AI planning process. Everyone has done it, college-wide, in order to have 100% engagement—which is not entirely accurate. One hundred percent of the people have been asked to be engaged, but the AI literature is clear: not everyone is ready to engage, so they might not have been fully invested in the process. Each department has developed their own outcomes, their own measures, their own results, because AI is a fundamentally results-oriented process. Now every aspect of the college has results they’ve created. Those are the outcomes that they want to see. So they’ve built their own accountability framework, which, even if flawed, is pretty cool.

Figure 3. The “flash mob” as metaphor—stretching one's comfort zone to move with others in a shared task.

The summit ended with a flash mob, which has become a metaphor for both pushing people out of their comfort zone and for a recognition that we all dance in our own, individual way.

JE: What was your role in this process?

JO: I participated in the Strategic Planning Council and I had the good fortune to be one of the two major facilitators for the College Day Summit. It was awesome to be part of the process. I love this college, I love the people, and I want to contribute to its success.
I was also part of the data analysis team and the strategic plan writing team. I’ve tried to keep the AI spirit going by coordinating some more AI sessions, and our department built an introduction to AI course that’s now being used for new employee onboarding. What I’ve tried to do in my role is bring research validity to AI and to continue to deepen my understanding, and to keep it going—I’m a fan. The chair of my Doctorate of Education in Distance Education program, Dr. Marti Cleveland-Innes, just wrote a great article on Appreciative Leadership. Then there’s Appreciative Pedagogy, Appreciative Advising, and Appreciative Research. AI is most akin to Participatory Action Research. And another one of my heroes, Dr. Terry Anderson, called it “critical theory without the criticism.” I love that. My role has been to help lead the facilitation process, to help work the information we gathered from the Summit into the final strategic plan, and to keep this energy going. And to remember it’s not a silver bullet or a potion. It’s a practice and a process.

**JE: How did you initially become involved?**

**JO:** I was really lucky. I came to the College in June 2014 and the College Day Planning Summit was in August and I don’t know how it happened that I so quickly got involved! I was quite fortunate. I think one of the reasons I got involved is that I actually love strategic planning. I think strategic planning is exciting and I had done some research into AI before. One of the things that’s exciting about David Cooperrider’s perspective (2002; 2007) is that strategic planning can be one of the most exciting times for your organization. It’s a time to reestablish our connections across the community, it’s a time for elevated thought and action. I was really excited to be here and to be a part of it, and it was a great opportunity for me to not only meet people but to come to understand the college as a new employee in a way that I could not have come to understand it any other way. There are so many wonderful people here who are excited to do amazing things. When you can engage them by asking positive questions it’s so energizing and exciting.

**JE: The word “positive” comes up in the literature regarding AI—it’s really meant to be a positive experience, not dragging up negative memories but working from a positive place.**

**JO:** And that’s been a criticism of AI: that it ignores problems. But this is a misconception; in 2007 Gervase Bushe at Simon Fraser University wrote an article about how AI is not just about the positive. AI doesn’t ignore problems. It reframes problems. It’s not really the problem we’re after; it’s the solution. We try to focus on what we have available to us, our assets rather than our deficit-based stories. It’s linked strongly to positive psychology and thinking about the world that we want to live in, our preferred future state. What do we want more of?

There is a classic example in the AI literature of an airline that had been trying to solve the problem of lost luggage for a number of years. Then they brought in some AI facilitators and they said ‘you’ve already taken this problem-solving approach for lost luggage, and it hasn’t gotten anywhere and it hasn’t solved the problem. What’s the preferred future state? What do you really want more of?’ And they came to the
conclusion that what they wanted was exceptional arrival experiences. Focusing on the preferred future state led to not only solving the problem of lost luggage, but a number of other customer-service enhancements that then gained them a certain strategic advantage in the marketplace. At least that’s how the story goes!

JE: How was this process received by the College staff and the Library staff especially?

JO: The Library, as a whole, seemed to embrace the philosophy of AI and supported the transformation by making sure it had the collections necessary to support it. The Library went one step further by using the Clifton StrengthsFinder (Rath, 2007) to come to a deeper understanding of their team and to deepen their team relationships. AI, just like StrengthsFinder, are strengths-based approaches to understanding ourselves and the organizations we work in.

Of course, not all staff received it in the same way but a lot of people got engaged, and some who re-engaged were people who had felt kind of beaten down by the past, who had felt constrained. This reenergized them. In AI research you can see that this happens universally when companies decide to do this. People who have become disenchanted or disengaged can suddenly become incredibly reenergized by the process. And that’s a fantastic outcome, in and of itself. But then there are those other individuals who started to talk about drinking the Kool-Aid, or starting to talk about the ‘culture’ with the focus on cult. I think that that’s unfortunate, but at the same time I think skepticism is important, healthy even. Our intellect is a strength. AI stresses that we all need to feel essential and that we all bring something meaningful and wonderful and unique to our relationships and our work, and so there is a way to see some forms of disagreement as an expression of people raising their voices for a better world. It is reframing resistance in a way that includes rather than marginalizes people with diverse opinions. Our AI process also happened to coincide with a very tumultuous year at the college where 4.1% budget cuts were announced by the PC government, which led to program suspensions and layoffs. Some of the money was then reinstated by the new NDP government. So it was a stressful year and it was honestly difficult to always keep an appreciative mindset.

JE: How has this approach changed the College and the Library, if at all?

JO: The strategic planning itself went into effect in July 2015 so it’s early on in the process. We are now in the first year of using an annual SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results) planning cycle. SOAR has been used by companies like John Deere since 2003. The Library has certainly already developed some cool and meaningful innovations and they are in the process of dedicating some square footage to a Makerspace, a collaborative study space, and redesigning part of the library as a Writing Centre. This is something we need to support teaching and learning at the College. Is AI solely responsible for this? Probably not, but it at least provided an open invitation to dream.
In AI, there is this idea of “track and fan”—track the behavior you want, and then fan the flames so the behavior spreads. The Library is doing this in a couple of different ways—the first is with the Intellectual Property Showcase to publicize the wonderful work of our faculty, and the other is with Open Educational Resources. The Library is leading the charge to draw attention to OER as a way to contain student costs without sacrificing educational quality.

JE: Do you think the size of the institutions make a difference? Would it work for both small and large institutions?

JO: I think AI can work well for any size organization. Bushe and Kassam (2005) studied 20 cases of AI in large companies such as Avon of Mexico. It became the most desired place for women to work in Mexico. Group Health used AI to create a more inclusive and comprehensive strategic planning process. AI has also been successful in very small organizations. I facilitated an AI session with a very small local co-housing group, and worked with a totally cool organization, Medalta Historic Clay District, to use AI in their strategic planning process. It can be adapted to the culture you are working with. Like I mentioned, John Deere has used SOAR since 2003, and they often start with their aspirations, and then align their dreams for specific projects with their larger strategic plan. Some of the AI terminology may not be as applicable in certain environments, but that’s OK because you can pick and choose what feels right for your organization and go from there.

JE: Looking back, is there anything you would do differently?

JO: I think the first thing I would do differently is advocate that we more thoroughly and totally explain to people why we are doing certain things. AI isn’t just about the positive, but when negative things happen it feels pretty easy to throw it out or say it’s all hogwash. But Appreciative Inquiry has a solid theoretical basis, and while this can be boring, it can also be helpful to academics especially. When I think back to the randomized seating at College Day, I think what we needed to do was be a little more up-front about why we were doing that, and why we were pushing people outside their comfort zones, and why we wanted them to interact with the amazing people from across the College they may not know as a way to come to a deeper understanding of the strengths and the talent we have available as a College. Also, telling stories can seem too touchy-feely for some people. But we’re not doing it just to feel good. We want people to remember what it feels like to be successful, to ground it in reality. Jack Nicklaus said, “I never missed a putt in my mind.” That’s the kind of thinking that we are trying to activate—that we will never miss a meaningful putt. Perhaps we could be more up front about the body of research that’s been done, case examples and how it’s being used in classroom instruction, how it’s being used in academic advising, and how to transform organizations of higher learning which goes far beyond the touchy-feely. I think if people had time to digest some of research, the intellectual aspect of it, the whole idea of AI would become more acceptable and more approachable.
JE: Is there anything else you would recommend to a library or organization wanting to undertake this process?

JO: Read some of the literature! There are some incredible books out there—The Thin Book of SOAR and The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry. It’s important to understand the research and why you are doing certain things. It’s important for leaders to understand the assumptions of principles of AI. AI shows that language creates our reality. It starts with the assumption that every organization has its strengths, and that when we focus on the strengths, this becomes our reality. The act of asking questions itself changes the organization. The change process starts the minute you start to ask those questions. So I think that reading some of the literature is really important.

The third recommendation I have is stay realistic. Change management is still going to be hard, it’s still going to be expensive, it’s still going to take longer than you think it should take, and it’s going to be deeply personal, so it still takes sound management skills and a thick skin. Culture trumps strategy. As Patrick Lencioni says in his most recent book, The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business, organizational health trumps everything else, but health occurs with an absolute clarity about the overall business strategy that is over-communicated. AI can create the conditions for organizational health by fostering employee engagement, autonomy, and control. And it’s proven effective as a strategy to reenergize workers experiencing burnout. But it isn’t everything. It’s a new way to approach old problems. It’s a new way to do program evaluation as a developmental process rather than a punitive one. It’s a new way to approach strategic planning, but difficult situations and difficult circumstances remain. So stay realistic.

My final recommendation is to recognize that it’s a practice. At an Appreciative Inquiry conference that I went to at the University of South Carolina last year, I had a chance to work with some longtime AI practitioners. They talked about it a little bit like Zen Buddhists talk about meditation; that it’s a discipline, it’s a practice; that some days we will not be able to focus on our strengths, our opportunities, and our dreams. That’s OK. But at the same time, if we think about what it takes to bring out the best in our teams—the best in people—is to focus on positive and strengths-based stories. And I’ve certainly got to this place where the practice is paying off, personally and professionally.

This interview has been condensed and edited.

END
References


Further reading


