



## CHAPTER FIVE



# Appreciative Inquiry

*The Design of Net-Positive Organizations*

Lindsey N. Godwin, Jacqueline M. Stavros, and David L. Cooperrider

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a theory and practice of inquiry-and-change that is an adaptable organization development (OD) method that demonstrates that the act of asking generative questions has profound impact in an organizational system. Since 1987, AI has offered an alternative change imperative by suggesting that we be aware of the negativity bias that pervades our investigations into organizational life and shift our focus to the good, the better, and the possibilities that often go under noticed in our systems. As Cooperrider and Godwin (2012) summarize, “AI posits that human systems move in the direction of the questions they most frequently and authentically ask; knowledge and organizational destiny are intimately interwoven; what we know and how we study it has a direct impact on where we end up” (740).

AI invites change agents to explore their organizations with “appreciative eyes”— co-inquiring with the system for things for which to be grateful, seeking out what is next and what is possible, and focusing on *valuing those things of value worth valuing*. AI theorists posit that such a shift in our approach to organizational change is needed if we are to inspire our imaginative capacities to their fullest potential.

At its heart, AI is about the search for the best in people, their organizations, and the strengths-filled, opportunity-rich world around them. AI is not so much a shift in the methods and models of OD and change, but





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a fundamental shift in the overall perspective taken throughout the entire change process. The *appreciative paradigm* has emerged to describe any OD change approach that attends to the *positive core* of relationships and organizations. It is a *causative theory* applicable to OD, transformation, and change methods. Examples of interventions with an appreciative perspective are discussed throughout this book.

AI practitioners discover that applying such an appreciative perspective increases the effectiveness, and sustainability of any OD intervention, from strategic planning and organization redesign to team building, diversity, coaching and personal growth approaches. AI is being used worldwide in both small- and large-scale change initiatives across every type of sector. (Case studies, podcasts, and video clips are available at the David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry website.) Given the vast usage of AI across the globe, Ken Gergen, a thought leader in social constructionism, reflects that, “The growth and application of Appreciative Inquiry has been nothing short of phenomenal. It is arguably the most powerful process of positive change ever devised” (in Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, and Rader 2010, 1).

This chapter begins with further defining AI, followed by a brief history and an overview of the classic and emergent AI principles. The AI 5-D model is then briefly reviewed, and AI is situated within the emerging field of positive organization development (POD). The chapter concludes with a discussion of how AI is informing the rise of Earthshot OD practices and the design of net-positive organizations.

### DEFINING APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

To begin understanding Appreciative Inquiry (AI), it is important to first examine the very words themselves: that is, what it means to *appreciate* and *inquire*.

ap-pre-ci-ate, v., 1. to recognize and like a favorable critical judgment or opinion; to perceive those things that give life (health, vitality, excellence) to living systems 2. to feel or express gratitude 3. to *increase* in value (e.g., the economy has appreciated in value) 4. to fully know of; realize fully. *Synonyms*: value, prize, esteem, honor.

in-quire, v., 1. to explore and discover 2. to question 3. to be open to seeing new potential and possibilities. *Synonyms*: discover, search, systematically explore, and study (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros 2008, 1).



Over the years, AI has been defined in many ways. It has been called a philosophy, an approach, a method, a process, and a way-of-being for engaging all levels of an organization system in an inquiry into its *positive core*. The positive core is the best of its people and all its relationships in an organization. Many have defined AI as an approach to organization dialogue, development, design, and learning. The most commonly cited definition used is:

AI is the cooperative co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves the discovery of what gives *life* to a living system when it is most effective, alive, and constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves the art and practice of asking unconditional positive questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten its potential. (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros 2008, 3)

No matter how AI is defined, it is deliberate in its life-centric search to help those discover their positive core of what gives life to their system. AI encourages us to see the world through the lens of the "miracle of life" rather than a series of problems to solve (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987). By appreciating the value and potential of our world, we can better identify and cultivate what truly matters. This mindset drives us to explore new possibilities, open our minds, ignite curiosity, and inspire fresh ideas that lead to meaningful progress and growth in our organizations.

The 5-D Process (described later in this chapter) for applying AI in organization systems intentionally evolves Kurt Lewin's diagnostic action research model. The major difference is in the *appreciative* perspective and the role of the OD practitioner. Rather than the practitioner working to identify problems and deficits in an organization, AI involves the whole system in dialogues among members (including external stakeholders) of the organization. These narrative-rich conversations focus on lifting up the "life giving factors" inside and outside of a system. Instead of analysis of the information being done only by the OD practitioner, AI encourages dialogue to learn about the best of the past to understand what relevant stakeholders want more of as a basis for imagining the most preferred future for their organization. It is not a top-down nor bottom-up approach; rather it is "whole," with all voices in the system working in concert. When the whole organization aligns with a positive image of the future based on discoveries from the storytelling, dialogue of strengths and opportunities, and images of the future, multiple projects are designed, agreed on, and implemented to create that future.



## BRIEF HISTORY OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

In 1980, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) emerged from the collaboration between Dr. David Cooperrider and his advisor, Dr. Suresh Srivastva at Case Western Reserve University. Engaged in a diagnostic analysis with the Cleveland Clinic, David observed remarkable levels of positive cooperation and innovation within the organization. They became the first organization where a conscious decision to use an inquiry focusing on life-giving factors formed the basis for an analysis (Cooperrider 2021).

The term *Appreciative Inquiry* (AI) was first introduced as a footnote in the feedback report of “emergent themes” for the board of governors of the Cleveland Clinic. The report created such a powerful and positive stir that the board called for ways to use this method with the whole practice. Dr. William Kiser’s leadership at the Cleveland Clinic, recognizing AI’s potential to elicit the best from individuals, went on to transform the Clinic into a world-class medical institution, demonstrating the transformative power of AI in fostering positive OD and change.

This early work at the Cleveland Clinic illustrates the profound impact of inquiry on organizations, akin to the Heisenberg “observer effect.” Merely focusing attention on something, asking questions, and gathering information can initiate significant change within an organization. While this phenomenon is commonly known as the “mere measurement effect,” its implications for AI are far-reaching. This pivotal work at the Clinic laid the foundation for David’s seminal dissertation (Cooperrider 1986) and his subsequent articles that advocated for a paradigm shift in organizational thinking. AI has spread to become a global phenomenon.

Many OD practitioners and scholars continue to advance Appreciative Inquiry (AI), reflecting a shift in the social sciences toward constructionist, strengths-based, and positive approaches. Thousands of organizations across for-profit, nonprofit, government, and social sectors worldwide have used AI. AI World Conferences have been held in five countries. In 2015, the David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry was established at Champlain College in Burlington, Vermont, through a generous gift from the Stiller Family Foundation, recognizing AI’s impact on the success of Green Mountain Coffee Roasters (now Keurig Green Mountain).

## APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY PRINCIPLES

Appreciative Inquiry (AI), in whatever form it takes, rests on a set of five principles originally articulated by David Cooperrider (1986) and are central to AI’s theoretical basis and practice for OD work. The five original principles detail the underlying beliefs that connect AI from theory to practice. Besides



using these principles to guide change efforts, applying these principles in one's life leads the OD practitioner to experience their relevance in creating strengths-based relationships and success in organizations and communities based on their conversations. Conversation is the heart of how we interact with selves and others (Stavros and Torres 2022). These principles include:

**Constructionist Principle.** Rooted in social constructionism (Gergen 1995), this principle challenges the notion of absolute truths, instead recognizing reality as co-created by organizational members. It emphasizes how conversations shape our perceptions and approaches to organizational change, underscoring the evolving nature of organizational systems through collective dialogues.

**Simultaneity Principle.** This principle posits that inquiry triggers change the moment a question is asked (not afterward). Questions, whether positive or negative, become fateful because they are the catalytic force that sets the stage for the areas where we focus our attention and energy. Just as Heisenberg's principle applies to the physical world, we create new social realities through inquiry. What we focus on- and ask about- appreciates in value, underscoring the importance of how we ask questions.

**Poetic Principle.** This principle invites us to see organizations as co-created narratives. Like poems, these narratives are open to various interpretations, influencing the organization's trajectory. It encourages exploration of diverse human experiences within organizational contexts, highlighting the broad scope of topics we can study, because we can study *any* topic related to human experience in *any* human system (from breakdowns to breakthroughs). This emphasizes the richness of organizational narratives and the ongoing potential for learning and growth.

**Anticipatory Principle.** This principle asserts that our actions are driven by anticipation of future events, shaping both individuals and organizational systems. In concert with the Simultaneity and Constructionist Principles, it encourages organizations to ask questions that foster a collective vision for the future. This vision guides current behavior, underscoring the importance of co-articulating an ideal state for change.

**Positive Principle.** This principle posits that positive images lead to positive actions. By fostering positive emotions like hope and optimism, it enhances the effectiveness of organizational change work, fueling upward spirals of positivity in organizations (Fredrickson 2009). This emotional impact strengthens individuals and organizations, empowering them to manifest their positive visions for the future.

The five principles have since been augmented by the principles of wholeness and free choice (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2010), awareness (Stavros and Torres 2005), and narrative (Barrett and Fry 2005). A summary of AI principles is in Table 5.1.

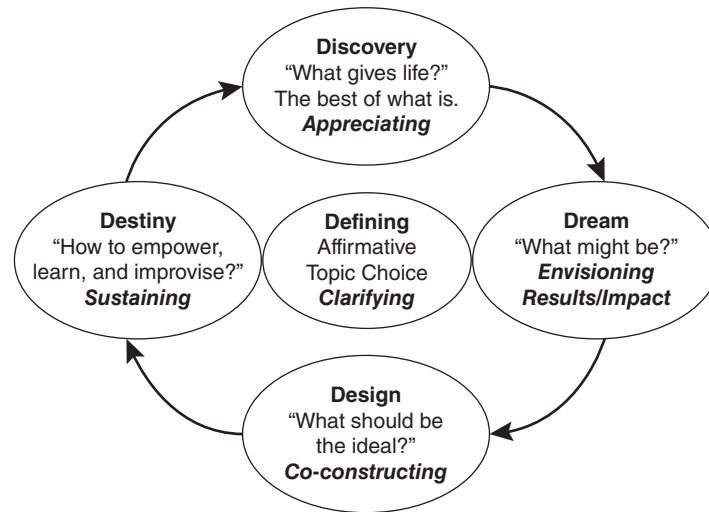
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Table 5.1. Appreciative Inquiry Principles

<i>Principle</i>	<i>Headline</i>	<i>What Matters</i>	<i>Implications for OD Practice</i>
Constructionist	Words create worlds	Words	Consider words used to describe processes and initiatives.
Simultaneity	Inquiry creates change	Questions	Intentionally ask questions about what you want to create more of.
Poetic	Choose the focus	Focus	Be mindful of the topics of inquiry.
Anticipatory	Images inspire action	Future images	Encourage the co-creation of desired images of the future.
Positive	Positivity leads to flourishing moments	Positivity	Seek to cultivate positive emotional spaces, images, and actions.
Wholeness	Wholeness bring out our best	Inclusion	Include all stakeholders in processes and decision-making.
Free Choice	People choose how to engage	Choice	People perform better and more committed when they have a choice.
Awareness	Tune in to self	Self-awareness	Be tuned in to the AI principles in your thoughts, habits, and actions.
Narrative	Stores have transformative powers	Stories	Share stories to reflect the best.

## THE APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY (AI) 5-D CYCLE

The principles provide the foundation of all AI work, while the 5-D cycle provides a practical framework for applying AI, as shown in Figure 5.1. Each “D” represents activities and dialogues occurring systematically across the organization. Whether it’s one-on-one coaching, team building, or system-wide change, the 5-D model can be leveraged to guide positive change. Each phase is summarized below, with many resources available for detailed exploration based on specific OD work. We recommend exploring The Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry and the *AI Practitioner: The International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry* (see Resources at end of chapter) that combined have hundreds of illustrations of 5-D Cycle.



**Figure 5.1.** AI 5-D Cycle.

Source: *Practicing Organization Development*, 4th edition.

### Define Phase: What Is the Topic of Inquiry?

While the AI 4-D (Discovery, Dream, Design, and Delivery) cycle remains the simplest and the most used visual when describing the appreciative process, in OD work there should always be a conversation on *defining* the purpose of how and why AI will be used. Many OD practitioners have added this fifth D, *Define*, to center the model to cover what OD practitioners typically call the “contracting” phase of the process. In this phase, the guiding question is, “What affirmative topic do we want to focus on together?” This phase often involves reframing or clarifying a pressing issue into opportunity area for inquiry.

For example, when British Airways initiated a major customer responsiveness program, they reframed the problem from “excessive baggage loss” to a more generative topic of “creating outstanding arrival experiences” (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005). This shift sparked a successful discovery and dreaming process for what outstanding arrival experiences looked and felt like, and what was needed to create them, resulting in one of the company’s most successful change programs (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2010).

### Discovery Phase: What Gives Life?

In the *Discovery* phase, the focus is on uncovering the best aspects of individuals or organizational systems through gathering strengths-based, life-giving, and future-oriented data. This is often done through appreciative one-on-one interviews, but can also be augmented with group dialogues, surveys, and



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other qualitative and quantitative data. The guiding question is, “When we have been at our best, what were we doing?” It’s assumed that everyone has strengths to be discovered and leveraged. Sharing stories is key, as it helps members understand peak experiences and fosters creativity (Stavros and Torres 2022). Five classic questions used in this phase include:

1. *Reflecting on History and High Point Moments*: What is a peak experience of “x” or at “y” (customized to the focus of the topic)?
2. *Learning from Others/Search for Inspirational Practices*: What are best practices from others regarding “x” and how might we learn from what has worked elsewhere to inform what we want to do?
3. *Building on What We Value Most/Continuity*: No matter what changes about “y,” what do we value most about ourselves, colleagues, and organization?
4. *Images of the Future*: Imagine it is five years in the future and the organization has become what you most want it to be, what does it look like?
5. *Three Wishes*: If you had three wishes for your organization, what would they be?

The “x” refers to a topic of inquiry such as a high-performing team and “y” could refer to the organization. The insights from this phase are typically culled and themed (often by a facilitator in collaboration with members of the organization) and then shared back to participants to help set the stage for the Dream phase.

### Dream Phase: What Might Be?

The *Dream* phase encourages participants to envision future possibilities for the system, building on the positive aspects identified in the Discovery phase. Guided by the question, “What will success look like?” This phase aims to inspire momentum and excitement for what could be. Data can be generated through a myriad of methods depending on the size of the organization. Typically, teams across the organization will engage in this process and share their collective visions with the wider system. There is no fixed method; it’s about deciding how to engage all stakeholders in the process and ensuring that you are focused on the affirmative topic. We do suggest making it fun and creative.

### Design Phase: What Should Be the Ideal?

The *Design* phase uses insights from the Discovery phase (i.e., strengths and assets to leverage and continue into the future) to guide action steps toward



achieving the desired future state from the Dream phase. A guiding question is often, “How might we make our vision a reality?”

The design steps vary depending on the complexity of the project, typically including two steps: (1) brainstorming a list of ideas of things they want to create in their ideal future image and (2) rapid prototyping where teams create tangible prototypes to actualize their concepts. Prototyping represents the Constructionist Principle in action, where an idea such as “We need a new employee-orientation program” gets co-created into an initial iteration of what that would look like (i.e., the elements of the program are sketched out, communication templates are mocked up, a calendar for the program is drawn out, etc.) for further evolution in the Destiny phase.

### **Destiny Phase: How to Empower, Learn, and Improvise?**

In the *Destiny* phase (also referred sometimes as *Delivery* or *Deployment*), members strategize how to deliver and sustain their co-constructed dreams and designs using strengths and resources. Guided by the question, “How do we leverage our strengths to fulfill our dreams and ensure ongoing future success?” this phase varies in form based on system complexity and desired outcomes. Typically, it involves ongoing application of the 5-D process to monitor project progress and adapt plans. This phase fosters an appreciative learning culture within the organization, ensuring continuous improvement. Make sure co-champions are assigned to follow through.

While the AI 5-Ds are straightforward, their execution varies greatly. In traditional OD, large group planning results can be a list of desired actions, expecting senior leaders to enact them. However, AI requires ownership by the entire organization, with external facilitators serving as coaches or advisors vs. implementors. The key is to ensure that a representative group collaborates to achieve lasting change, whether it involves the entire system or selected members. Of major importance in all of these phases is that some configuration of the whole is working together to bring about the lasting change they have identified as desirable. This could involve the entire organization in events like an AI Summit (McQuaid and Cooperrider 2018) or representative members working on behalf of the whole system.

## **AI AND THE DESIGN OF NET POSITIVE ORGANIZATIONS**

The challenge of our modern era is to enable collaboration at scales of impact rarely seen in the past. Alex Steffen’s book, *Worldchanging*, underscores the



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significance and urgency of this global transition, emphasizing the pivotal role we play in shaping our collective destiny (2008, 21). He writes:

We need to consciously re-design the entire material basis of our civilization. The model we replace it with must be drastically more ecologically sustainable, offer large increases in prosperity to everyone on the planet, and not only function in areas of chaos and corruption, but also help transform them. That alone is a task of historic magnitude.

This unprecedented global change agenda offers a significant opportunity for OD, especially as organizations focus on the quadruple bottom line: people, planet, purpose, and profit. This work will require us to co-create futures that prioritize caring for people, protecting the environment, and understanding our organizations' purpose. We need to create environments that work for all, including present and future generations (Cooperrider and Selian 2022).

As we confront the pressing global challenges of our era, referred to as our "earthshot" moment (Cooperrider and Godwin 2022b), the next decade assumes critical significance. Unlike the monumental "moonshot" endeavor which focused on technological advancements, our collective task today involves regenerating our interconnected ecosystem across interpersonal, organizational, national, and environmental realms. There is a growing need to merge micro-OD and macro-OD, engaging diverse stakeholders in co-creating the future, enhancing organizational effectiveness, and achieving collective excellence.

OD is increasingly tasked with designing "net positive" organizations that create more positive than negative impacts (Polman and Winston 2021). Cooperrider and Godwin (2022b, 40) posit that "net positive" will be the standard for the field, "where the aim of every touch point with an organizational system is to create an organization that improves the well-being for every stakeholder it touches, including employees, suppliers, communities, customers, and even future generations and the planet itself." In this era, the guiding appreciative question for every organization becomes: How is the world better off because your organization is in it? Organizations are no longer conceptualized as clients of change, but as change agents themselves creating positive ripples in both their social and physical systems.

Given AI's inherent focus on strengths, assets, and what is possible within people and systems alike, it is primed to play a pivotal role in this next epoch of OD's history addressing the global community's change agenda. This will require macro (global) approaches in OD theory, practice, and education. The macro-management context requires an even greater reconstruction of OD than the shift to participative change or AI's initial influence to move the field from deficit-based to strengths-based approaches (Cooperrider and Godwin 2022a). To illustrate, Table 5.2 highlights five net positive organization interventions that leverage AI to accelerate solutions with global impact.

**Table 5.2. AI Net Positive Interventions**

<i>AI Net Positive OD Strategy</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Case Example</i>
Applying biomimicry as a discipline for the design of positive institutions	Biomimicry advocates for nature innovation by shifting to regeneration. This mindset rethinks processes to eliminate waste and align with organizational and industrial transformation. Jenine Benyus underscore the focal life-centric synergy between AI and biomimicry as complementary approaches to sustainable development.	Interface’s adoption of biomimicry and sustainability principles, outlined by Mona Amodeo (2022), exemplifies an OD-based approach to fostering net positive organizational change.
Leveraging the AI “whole-system-in-the-room” process to create sustainable design factories	This intervention merges biomimicry and the large-scale-change AI summit. Design teams generate innovations that are both eco-friendly and economically beneficial.	Clarke is one of many organizations to leverage the AI sustainable design factory method to transform into a flourishing organization with greater world benefit (Pavez and Laszlo 2022).
Engaging in “strategic convening” to create win-wins and play at larger scales of impact	Strategic convening empowers organizations, regardless of size, to act as positive institutions and create impact beyond their boundaries. It leverages strategic capabilities to seize opportunities within customer communities, industries, and beyond.	National Grid’s took the role as strategic convenor at increasingly larger system-wide levels, illustrating a journey of widening circles of compassion and impact toward becoming a positive institution (Warren and Cooperrider (2022).
Creating strengths-based mega communities	Mega communities foster cross-sector cooperation to tackle grand challenges. Strengthened by tri-sector collaboration, they leverage diverse organizational strengths to create sustainable value for all stakeholders and unlock collective organizational wisdom.	In 2004, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan utilized the AI Summit method to convene the largest World Summit in UN history, involving CEOs and civil society leaders to create a strategic plan for expanding the UN Global Compact. The Compact has grown from 44 businesses into the world’s largest corporate sustainability mega community, with 23,268 companies from 163 countries (Cooperrider 2013).
Conducting global inquiries to spark appreciative action-research on a global scale	A “world inquiry” is a quest to apply action-research methods. It leverages OD techniques to foster collaborative action and design positive institutions worldwide. The goal is to create a world that benefits everyone, leveraging data collection, shared dialogue, and collaborative action on a global scale.	The world inquiry into Business as an Agent of World Benefit (aim2flourish.com) demonstrates how a world-wide inquiry can be an appreciative action-research intervention for building positive institutions (Fry, Buchter, and Abazza 2022).

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## SUMMARY

Originally, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) served as an evolution in action research, intentionally exploring the life-giving aspects of systems for future-oriented prospective theory building (Cooperrider 2021). It debuted “as a qualitative research technique—action research—a way of asking questions to discover what is best (strengths) and what is possible (opportunities and aspirations)” (Stavros 2024, 14). Originally, AI was grounded on a powerful set of principles and over time, it has evolved into an OD philosophy engaging the whole organizational system in renewal and positive transformation.

Today, AI is one of the most effective and widely used approaches for change. AI, now a global movement, offers a strengths-based lens for organizational inquiry and positive transformational change. It can be applied at all levels of a system, using its 5-D cycle, emphasizing collective responsibility for change through generative dialogue.

As the field of OD faces increasing calls to bring its strengths and skills to bear on the pressing issues of the world today, the idea of supporting the creation of net positive organizations is becoming a superordinate goal for the field. In this work, embracing a *living systems* mindset is key for today’s OD practitioner. A living systems mindset involves recognizing and treating the organization as a living system, emphasizing holistic, adaptive, and integrative thinking, and acting. It encourages seeing beyond mechanical or static views of management, change, and strategy, focusing instead on adaptability, emergent properties, and the interconnectedness of all organizational elements within and outside of the organization. This mindset is exactly what Appreciative Inquiry invites by focusing attention and intention on the search for what gives life to a system—both today and tomorrow.

Appreciative Inquiry presents a strengths-based, transformative approach to co-creating at the scale and speed of change needed locally and globally. AI can be the fuel for helping OD reshape organizational landscapes for a sustainable and flourishing future.

### Discussion Questions

1. Take a negative situation; using the AI philosophy and principles, how would you reframe it into a positive situation—something that you wish to learn about and have more of?
2. Discuss the significance of the AI principles and its implications for how you communicate with others and impact on your team and organizational culture.
3. Reflect on how you might experiment with the impact of inquiry—how often do you track the impacts of the questions you ask? How does a





- deficit-based question lead to a different dialogue than an appreciative question?
4. Can you explain how the AI 5-D Cycle facilitates a holistic approach to OD, and provide an example of how it might be applied in your work?
  5. How can you integrate AI with other OD methodologies to experiment with new approaches for creating net positive organizational change?

### Resources

- AI History, TimeLine <https://aicommons.champlain.edu/learn/appreciative-inquiry-brief-history/>.
- David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry in the Stiller School of Business, Champlain College: <https://appreciativeinquiry.champlain.edu>.
- Appreciative Inquiry Practitioner—The International Journal of AI*: <https://aipractitioner.com/>.

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