

What Is Appreciative Inquiry?

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When a company needs to fine-tune its strategy or troubleshoot organizational issues, the best problem-solving solution may have little to do with the problem itself. A host of organizations, including British Airways, Verizon, and NASA, have embraced **Appreciative Inquiry** (AI), a strategy based on the idea that focusing on what's working is a better way to fix what's wrong. Despite the esoteric-sounding name, AI is gaining real traction at companies that need to make big or complex organizational changes.

Popularized by Dr. David Cooperrider, a management professor at Case Western Reserve University, AI consists of a series of discussions and brainstorming sessions designed to tap into the existing strengths of an organization and to figure out how to perpetuate them. More importantly, AI proponents claim that the positive approach is the antidote to one of the most vexing problems that nearly every organization faces: resistance to change.

Key Stats

- **Buzzword coined:** 1986
- **Popularized by:** Dr. David Cooperrider, a management professor at Case Western Reserve University
- **Advocates:** British Airways, Verizon, United States Navy, NASA, John Deere

How It Works

AI involves a four-step process typically led by an outside consultant. The steps are usually done either in a day-long workshop or over a period of four days, but the end goal is the same: develop a concrete action plan and carry it forward.

The first phase consists of a series of interviews with employees of all levels, and even customers, to find out what's already working well in the organization. Then the group participates in an open-ended brainstorming session, using the successful elements they identified in step one to envision how a more perfect organization would operate. In the third phase, the team defines and prioritizes next steps to make that ideal vision a reality. By the final phase, participants are working exclusively on the necessary tasks to execute the plan.

In 2000, John Deere used AI to turn around the performance of its combined manufacturing unit. The numerous problems included poor equipment quality, increasing customer dissatisfaction, low morale in the workplace, and stalled cost-reduction efforts. More than 200 of the division's 250 employees showed up for the weeklong AI summit. By the end of the process, the group had identified, received approval for, and launched 10 new strategic business opportunities. The end result? Morale soared,

and one project — a faster product-development process — saved the company \$3 million. [Read the [John Deere case study](#), PDF download.]

What It's Good For

According to its proponents, AI helps businesses focus on long-term goals, and by bringing people together in a positive atmosphere, it reduces dysfunction. In 2005, Cleveland-based consultant and physician [Emory Petrack](#) successfully used AI in one of the most stressful work environments around — the emergency room of an Ohio hospital. Referring physicians had begun to complain about the ER's standard of care and the number of tests given to patients. Meanwhile, the ER doctors were concerned about the lack of trust from their colleagues.

Dr. Petrack interviewed the referring physicians and discovered that while they had specific complaints, in general they acknowledged that the ER doctors' work was a crucial resource for their medical practices. It's not that you ignore the problems, says Dr. Petrack. "AI gives you the springboard to boost yourself up over your personal problem and focus on the change that does need to happen," he says. In the case of the Ohio hospital, AI ultimately led to better communication between the hospital and external physicians — and an increase in overall referrals.

What It's Bad For

AI is not a strategy for short-term results, like boosting sales numbers in the next three to six months. While employees may feel an immediate change in attitude, the ongoing processes can take anywhere from six to 18 months to fully play out.

Because of the amount of time required to see the process through to its end, companies also face the challenge of convincing everyone involved to make a commitment. "Sometimes you'll have a CEO who says, 'I want to focus on the problem. Who cares where the energy comes from?'" says Mary Key, a director with the [Institute for Corporate Productivity](#). But if the group isn't willing to put aside skepticism, the AI process loses its effectiveness.