

Appreciative Enquiry: A practical guide

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Appreciative Enquiry

'What if, instead of seeing organizations as problems to be solved, we saw them as miracles to be appreciated?' Bushe, 1994

Appreciative Enquiry (AE) has been used in North American organisations for some time but perhaps is less well known in the UK. Organisations who have used the technique are positive about its benefits. As an innovative form of change and development, AE has the potential to help many organisations.

AE's starting point is the concept that organisations and people have moments of peak performance: moments when people feel they have been highly effective. It acknowledges that these experiences are a motivating factor to the achievement of good practice. AE is a technique that allows the factors that underpin best performance to be explored and built upon. Understanding the enablers of exceptional practice, the values, attitudes and motivations that produce these working experiences, can ensure these factors are in place more often, to facilitate the improvement of organisational performance.

This contrasts with approaches that see organisations as problems to be solved with tools and techniques drawn from the external world. These approaches can overlook the tacit knowledge about what works well from within. When this knowledge is appreciated, the risk of alienation from the change process is reduced. Participants in the AE feel ownership for the change since their ideas and perspectives form its components parts. At its best, AE encourages organisation members to continually assess best practice enablers, and to further embed these within working structures.

To help demystify them, this guide provides a practical summary of AE processes. We contextualise this with information from a case study organisation with experience of using AE, and from published practitioner reports. We conclude with some suggestions about the situations to which AE could usefully be applied and note the adaptability of its format.

What is different about AE?

Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) state that AE '... refers to both a search for knowledge and a theory of intentional collective action

Figure 1: The differences between problem solving and AE

Problem solving	Appreciative Enquiry
Identification of problem	Appreciating & valuing the best of what is
Analysis of causes	Envisioning & talking about what might be
Analysis of possible solutions	Innovating what will be
Action planning	Embedding the vision

Source: Adapted from Pullen, 2001

which are designed to help evolve the normative vision and will of a group, organization, or society as a whole'. Further, citing Cooperrider (1990), Bushe 1994, argues that '... groups, organizations or societies have images of themselves that underlay their self-organizing processes and that social systems have a natural tendency to evolve toward the most positive images held by their members. Conscious evolution of positive imagery therefore is a viable option for changing the social system as a whole.'

So AE aims to generate collective images of a new and better future organisation by exploring the best practice of the present and past. These new images, derived from people and experiences within the organisation, create a pull effect that generates evolution in the way people work, and work together. But what makes AE different from problem-solving in practice is the focus on involving the organisation's people in defining the values, practices and processes that underpin effective working.

'(AE) seeks out the exceptional best...to help ignite the imagination of what might be.' Pullen, 2001

As Pullen (ibid) argues, AE surfaces the tacit knowledge about effective working within the organisation from its people. The people are at the heart of creating the vision for change and their responsibility in, and ownership of, the process helps to ensure the vision can be made a reality.

What processes are involved in AE?

AE is achieved through a staged process which Cooperrider, *et al.* (2002) have conceptualised as the 4-D Cycle.

- **Discovery:** searching for the best experiences, the successes, sources of pride, best people, great achievements; developing insights into what it is about the people, the organisation and its context that creates these best experiences at work
- **Dream:** discussing these insights to explore the drivers and enablers of excellence and develop a collective vision of the organisation in the future
- **Design:** working together to create 'provocative propositions' about how the organisation will get to the future vision; the

values, the ways of interacting with others, and the mission and working on these till they represent the desired state

- **Destiny:** making the vision real. Participants work in ways that engender the processes and values of the 'new' organisation and continue to consider opportunities to further improve the processes that underpin the vision and people and divisions involved in its creation.

The **discovery** phase begins with the identification of the 'best of what is' through a series of stakeholder discussions. The stakeholders are drawn from all levels, roles and divisions within organisation or system to which the change will apply – in a small organisation, or within a division of a larger organisation, all staff might be involved.

The interviews aim to capture the range of perspectives about excellence in the organisation and what made each experience excellent. The AE interviewers themselves are most often stakeholders within the organisation.

AE interviews are managed differently from most work discussions. Because people are often more used to focusing on 'problems' there is a need to manage them to remain focused on when things worked well. To aid interviewers, AEs use pre-defined positive prompts, an example of which is given below. The discussions share similarities with social conversations: the priority is to seek information about the factors that made the situation memorable and feel successful, not to criticise or critique. Through the process of the discussion participants are encouraged to describe in detail what facilitated and underpinned their peak experiences, the 'who' and 'how' of excellent practice and are engaged in caring about the change process.

In our case study, AE was used to create and embed the Mission, Vision and Values statement for Siemens Business Services (SBS). It was essential that senior managers sponsored, and were seen to sponsor, the AE process. The new CEO undertook AE interviews with senior stakeholders drawn from the global divisions. These stakeholders were then tasked with undertaking their own series of interviews, and similarly the people they interviewed were encouraged to interview colleagues from around their business divisions. Thus the AE cascaded throughout the organisation and large numbers, and the range of stakeholders, were involved.

The AE interviews provide an opportunity to appreciate diversity within organisations and diverse views on why systems work, and when they work well – and they also identify commonality and shared thinking. They have the added benefit of creating a buzz in the organisation about the change that is being explored and so start the process of marketing that change, involving people and gaining their buy-in, is begun. The interviews are also an opportunity to build new relationships through which innovations in ways of working can be achieved.

Figure 2: An example of the positive probes used in an AE interview:

- What were your hopes and aspirations when you started your current role in the organisation?
- Describe a situation in the organisation when you were at a high point and felt energised to perform at your highest level? When was this? Who was involved? What made it memorable?
- If we asked three people what they valued about you, what would they say? What do you value about yourself?
- What do you value about your team? ... organisation? ... the individuals in your team? When do things work best? Who and what helped that happen?
- What is your dream for your team, your organisation and yourself? How do people act? How does that work in practise?
- How can this dream happen: what are the small steps? What larger steps? Who should be involved? What do they need to know?

Source: Adapted from Vitello-Cicciu (2003)

The HR Director at SBS was interviewed by the new CEO in the first stage of the discovery process and was subsequently tasked with undertaking his own series of AE interviews. He reported the benefits of meeting with staff with whom he had little previous contact and with whom he had thought he would share little common ground.

Through the discussion of best practice and effective working, he and the people he interviewed better appreciated each others' viewpoints but also the proximity of their perspectives. Having established a relationship through the interview, there is now the opportunity to build on this trust in work.

Following the discovery phase, the AE participants, or a subgroup of them, enter into an analysis phase to understand and articulate the enablers of the peak experiences. The aim of the **dream** phase is to establish a shared vision of 'the best' in the organisation. This analysis is arrived at through collaborative effort to discuss and explore the range of stories and characteristics, values and processes emerging from the interviews.

The focus here is on surfacing common themes: the values that are re-occurring in the different narratives, the emerging collective understanding of principles of operation. Through discussion, a shared vision of the new organisation emerges, with the enablers of exceptional practice as the bedrock of the change process. Hierarchies and subgroups of values and processes may emerge from the analysis phase. However outcomes are not prescribed. The methods for analysis tend to adapt and change to the people undertaking the analysis and the organisation using AE.

The **Dream** and **Design** phases were combined SBS's application of AE and involved a sub-group of AE interviewers.

Workshops were designed to maintain the positivity about the AE and to allow for innovative ideas to emerge. The starting point was participants recounting stories from their interviews and discussing the understanding that had been generated from them. In break-out groups, techniques such as collaged 'rich pictures' were used to evolve the collective understanding of the 'essence' of the narratives.

A plenary process shared the findings from each group, and enabled a collaborative development of the final possibility statements.

In the 4-D cycle, the outcomes of the dream phase are a set of action-oriented provocative propositions, known as possibility statements. These describe the 'changed' organisation: the way it works, the values that underpin its operation and how the people interact. The statements are written in ways to cause reaction and discussion about their fit with, and how they can be embedded in, organisational practice. This is the **design** phase.

The possibility statements allow for the wider dissemination of the AE findings – and people are interested in them because they helped to create them. Because they are engaged with the design principles they feel empowered to explore how to make them happen. As people attempt to enact the vision of the organisation they develop the systems and values that underpin its operation. And, at its best, AE initiates a process of continuous evaluation of best practice.

Once the possibility statements are collectively agreed through the testing process the new vision has to be marketed to aid the

Figure 3: Some example possibility statements

1. **Decision making** — Through clear communication we empower our employees to make informed decisions.
2. **Leadership is a partnership at every level** — We establish goals, standards, and a positive vision of success, which creates high achievement and leadership. Leaders foster accountability, innovation, high levels of collaboration, and effective communication. We empower people through mentoring, educational opportunities, and the sharing of knowledge and trust. We lead by example and accentuate the positive — 'Building strengths so that weakness' are irrelevant'.
3. **Communication** — Effective communication is one of the foundations for phenomenal, sustainable growth; and as such is a core competency of each employee. Relevant information is shared between all stakeholders to maximise alignment with company goals. GMCR recognises that timely, consistent information fosters individual empowerment and facilitates decision making throughout the company. This serves to clearly define to the world who we are as an organisation.

Source: Growth Summit, Green Mountain Coffee Roasters VT (2003) available at AE Commons

process of embedding the practice in the organisation. The buzz caused by the participation in the various stages of the AE can help to keep stakeholders engaged with making the change happen.

Dissemination is key to this phase – the possibility statements aim to empower and inspire individuals to achieve results through innovation, and challenging old ways of working, however to do this the messages have to reach all areas of the organisation in ways that members value. This might include: publicity on the company intranet; reporting successes throughout the organisation; a continued focus on the AE outcomes at meetings; or opportunities to informally share experiences eg intranet forums.

SBS aimed for transparency throughout the AE and felt it was a key to its success. The dream/design workshops involved a sub-set of those who had been involved in the interviews but it was important to ensure everyone felt able to engage with the outcomes of the dream/design conference.

To enable the wider group of stakeholders to understand the processes of analysis, and how their own stories had contributed to the design, the various workshops were captured on videos and 'key moments' clips were made available as part of the process to enable feedback.

The Mission, Vision and Values were also shared with company stakeholders in a series of regional workshops delivered by the people who had participated in the various stages of the AE. The company also distributed mouse-mats, coasters and other gifts to its members promoting the AE outcomes.

What are the results of AE?

We noted at the beginning of this report, the extent of support for AE in companies where it has been used. Below are just two examples of the kinds of impact AE has made.

'There was a strong sense of empowerment from the approach: people... seemed confident about making things happen... and there was a real appetite to channel this confidence legitimately into getting things right first time by being encouraged actively to challenge the way we do things and so be more flexible and innovative for the customer.'

Harben and Findlay, Royal Bank of Scotland

'The most important was a change in the mind-sets of people... they had opened their boundaries to discovering the difference, had started to acknowledge the tremendous amount of innovative practice... began to move... to a more inclusive adult-adult culture, and were growing positive relationships up and across the organisation. Senior managers described a sense of renewed energy.' McLean and McLean, London Magistrates Court

In SBS, views about the AE were similarly positive. It was also felt that the process had been effective and economic, and there was a focus on how AE could be used for organisational development in the future.

An outcome from the AE emerged in the development of a business partnership arrangement. Members of the partner company were concerned that there was a mis-match between the values and systems of each company.

The AE process had engendered a deep understanding of the lead company's value system and enabled the manager heading up the partnership working group to develop a mapping exercise to prove the connectivity of each organisation's underpinning values.

The partnership was successfully established and the members of each organisation were satisfied that the values and attitudes that were important to them were part of the new organisation.

Results of AE in our case study organisation

Above we noted how AE had provided a tangible outcome in a business partnering arrangement. However, the benefits and results of the AE were more broadly felt by the organisation and in this section, we review in greater depth the process and outcomes that were achieved, quoting materials provided by the organisation.

To recap, when a new CEO took over SBS, he found there was little documented about how the division operated and specifically, its mission in relation to the vision for the business and values that underpinned operation. It was with this objective, that the AE was introduced: to develop the mission, vision and values statement for the people within the organisation and its working practices – based on their tacit knowledge of how things and people work best.

An information pack (SBS AE Guidance) about AE was distributed to senior stakeholders during the early interviews with the CEO. The pack comprised an overview of the AE process, and tips and guidance for AE interviewing. These included:

- ask for positive experiences, not the description of problems
- present questions as an invitation to expand and describe experiences
- good questions convey an unconditional positive regard for the respondent and their experience
- the assumption throughout is that we have something that is healthy - aim to discover the ways in which it works
- allow for ambiguity and dreams

- it's fun! Encourage your interviewee to enjoy the discussion through showing your active engagement in, and enjoyment of, the interview.

A conversation guide accompanied the information pack, and was used in the interviews each senior stakeholder had with the CEO. His interviewees took the guide and their experience of the interview to their own set of AE interviews. In the next sections we review the themes and questions used, and give examples of the outcomes achieved.

Exploring experiences of excellent leadership

As you remember back over your time working with SBS, I would like you to reflect on one moment or initiative that stands out as something of a high point of professional and/or inspirational leadership. Please share a story about a time when you had this experience at SBS.

- My manager puts things in context and explains the bigger picture.
- Outstanding integrity and commitment to the customer and the truth.
- The team showed drive, confidence in knowing what they were doing and positioned the change as a mutual benefit for the company and employees ... SBS delivered on its promise.
- The key was knowing what made each person tick and treating everyone as an individual, recognising their personal motivation, skills and attitude.

Values and qualities

If we had a conversation with people that know you well and asked them to share what they most value about you as a leader and a participant in SBS what would they say? Tell me about what you value about yourself and what you offer to others as an individual and a leader in SBS?

- I really care about the people around me and show this through my actions.
- I foster teamwork and value the contribution of individuals.
- I rely heavily on integrity and judgement – I am prepared to listen and consult.
- I believe that others see me as someone who shows a willingness to support others and to help individuals or organisational units to move themselves forward. In all cases I am keen to transfer my knowledge and skills to others.

Performance, co-operation and responsibility

When have you seen exceptional performance in SBS? What was the story that led up to it? Or tell me a story of when you experienced great co-operation within SBS; what happened? Or recall a time when you participated in an incident or project in which active responsibility was a key to success. What did the people do?

- Everyone seemed to understand what was needed and was prepared to get it done.
- Good team work ensured that the upgrade was performed very quickly and with no negative impact to the customer.
- Each member of the team made a personal commitment to making improvements in the business. The team then worked together to implement the agreed improvement approach/method in their own areas.
- My active responsibility was to calm, reposition and recognise the issues, in order to move forward.

What if ...

Thinking back over the things you have said, would you now imagine we have moved forward two years into the future? Those things that were most helpful to you leading in a professional and/or inspirational way in your story, have grown and flourished, become amplified and extended. What is happening in this future? What does SBS look like? What purpose do we serve? What values do we have? How are we organised, designed and led?

- All board members are seen as role models for our values and united as one team.
- An organisation that has embedded but flexible processes, that are consistent, repeatable and robust.
- People feel valued by acknowledging and rewarding their contribution and aspirations.
- Importance of quality as an essence of our reputation.
- Where hard work and fun are combined.

From these outcomes AE could be viewed as a mechanism here for understanding what makes SBS and its people 'tick'. The HR director interviewed for this case study found no difficulties in keeping interviews positively focused and found that once people had been interviewed they were keen to carry out their own set of investigations to find out more about how about the best of SBS.

These outcomes were widely shared throughout the organisation, handed over to its people to try to make them happen more often. While embedding the values and the ways of working may take time, people are enthused to make it happen.

Using Appreciative Enquiry

An aim of this paper was to provide a practical overview of AE to enable managers and HR practitioners to use it in their own organisations. Based on our knowledge and experience, we have put together a set of suggestions of situations where AE is particularly applicable.

Appraisal

Appraisal meetings are frequently described by both appraisers and appraisees as occasions where the conversations are difficult. The process often focuses on performance in the past that was not up to standard, in the eyes of the appraiser, and the meeting seeks to get the appraisee to accept the shortfall before the meeting moves on.

Using an AE approach would allow the appraiser to talk about the positive achievements over the period in question and would lead to how their performance might be even better in the future. The emphasis would be in finding positive experiences and building for the future, which is more motivating for most people.

Coaching

In coaching situations the person being coached can be encouraged to take a positive view of their past successes, as well as a forward looking view of what might be, by using AE. The benefit of this approach is that the person being coached maintains a positive perspective on their situation and they are able to think in a constructive way about how they will take actions in the future. This is in contrast with so-called problem solving approaches, which assume that the secret of success is likely to be found by an in-depth analysis of previous failures.

Team strategy meetings

Teams meet from time to time to devote their attentions to their forthcoming strategy. Frequently this entails analysis of previous difficulties and situations where the team has been less effective. Rather than recognize that much of the year has been a success, the meeting examines the failures, with the underlying tacit belief that discovering and analyzing failures will provide the basis for onward success. Future success is likely, in most situations, to stem from a building on previous successes. Hence, by purposely employing AE approaches during strategy discussions it is likely that the actions and approaches that brought previous successes for the function will be identified and harnessed for the future.

The 'dream' phase will provide a combination of previous success with a view of what the best might be in the future. Strategy

documents that result will have a more positive outlook, and, therefore, will be more readily communicated in a positive and motivating way.

Product development

Products have a definite lifetime, and organizations constantly review their products with a view to renew them when the time is right. However, a product can be dispensed with before the real successes of it are analysed and built in to future products. Using an AE approach the product development group would focus on the successes of the product, albeit that the product is at the end of its life cycle. This ensures that the key positive features might be built in to future products and not lost by dispensing of the product without recognizing its successes. Also, in a 'dream' discussion the possibilities might be considered – what the product might be able to do in the future and how the strengths of the old product might be successfully incorporated into new products that will be even more successful.

Outplacement discussions

People who have been selected for redundancy are most often at low ebb at the start of any outplacement discussions with their outplacement specialist. Feelings of personal worth and self-esteem are low. It is as though their recall of previous successful work and career is lost.

Outplacement specialists can adopt an AE approach to their outplacement work. By focusing on the successes the person has had in their career there will be recognition of value and worth. Assisting somebody to regain positive perceptions of their career is the starting point of the outplacement discussions that follow. In the forward-looking phase of an outplacement assignment, the specialist can then help the person to be creative and positive about their future choices.

Thinking new and positive thoughts enables the person to move on to a situation where they can re-frame their future and see positive outcomes, which is so important in both choosing a new future role and in coming over well in hiring interviews.

Adapting AE to your organisation

As we have seen, AE can be applied to an extensive range of HR practices. To enable this, organisations and practitioners need to consider how to adapt the format to suit the situation or process they wish to address. The key to achieving AE is to remain focused on the positives, appreciating what works, and what is good, so that new understandings of good and best practice can emerge.

References and resources

Appreciative Enquiry Commons

<http://appreciativeenquiry.cwru.edu/>

This website provides comprehensive information about AE, recent practitioner reflections, toolkits and example implementations. We used it extensively in our research for this project

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A note about the authors

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Becci Newton is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Employment Studies, in the Learning and Skills Research Team. Since joining IES in 2004, Becci has worked on a range of projects that review adult and work-based learning in the UK, for example, the evaluation of the Employer Training Pilots, DfES,

and Adults Learner Week Evaluation, NIACE. Most recently, she has led a series of three projects for the Age Partnership at the DWP about Age Dimensions to Training Participation, amongst the workforce and unemployed/inactive people. Her research interests include learning, e-learning, and experiential learning methodologies *eg* action learning.

Vic Hartley

Vic's focus is on consulting in organisational development (OD) within large organisations.

He is interested in all aspects that relate to the development of organisations: through structural changes, *eg* during in organisation change; in deciding and planning strategic direction, *eg* in facilitating strategy workshops; and in developing ways in which people can work more effectively with others, *eg* in team development.

His other interests are in research in resourcing and organisation, and in the development of advanced client handling skills for experienced consultants.