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[Return to Current Issue](#)

## **Using Appreciative Inquiry to Advance Extension**

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**Abstract:** The Appreciative Inquiry philosophy challenges conventional problem solving methods of managing change. The Extension profession could benefit from utilizing this approach because organizations grow in the direction on which they focus and around the questions that they repeatedly ask. The principles of Appreciative Inquiry are applied using the 4-D cycle (Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny). This article is written to be a practical approach on how to capitalize on the positive and to help create a positive environment for growth and development of Extension personnel and programs.

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### **Strategy to Address Change**

The Appreciative Inquiry philosophy challenges conventional problem-solving methods of managing change. The Extension profession could benefit from utilizing this approach because organizations grow in the direction that they focus and around the questions that they repeatedly ask.

As a profession, we are good at looking at our problems and trying to improve. However, we think Extension can be great at embracing change by identifying the best of "what is" to pursue possibilities of "what could be" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999). The Appreciative Inquiry method looks at organization successes and encourages positive change. Appreciative Inquiry was developed by David Cooperrider and his mentor Suresh Srivasva in the 1980's (Cooperrider & Srivasva, 1987). Businesses, organizations, and individuals have adopted its unique approach to organizational improvement. In 2007 the Extension committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) Leadership Advisory Council published a report on the strengths of Extension and its personnel. In this report leaders used the Appreciative Inquiry method to help envision a vital future that builds on personnel and organizational strengths (NASULGC, 2007).

### **What Is Appreciative Inquiry?**

Watkins and Mohr (2001) explain that Appreciative Inquiry must be viewed as more than a tool, technique, or intervention. It is a philosophy. It revolves around five key principles.

1. *The constructionist principle.* This principle recognizes and accepts a social constructionist view toward reality and social knowledge. What we believe to be real in the world, according to this view, is created through our social conversation.
2. *The simultaneity principle.* This principle states that the "first question is fateful" because the organization will turn its energy in the direction of the first question of an inquiry. As a result, the seeds of change are embedded in that question.
3. *The poetic principle.* This principle emphasizes the value of storytelling as a way to gather more holistic information that includes, in addition to facts, the feelings that affect a person's experiences.
4. *The anticipatory principle.* This principle emphasizes that behavior and decisions about actions are based not only on what we were born with or learned from our environment, but also on what we anticipate. What we think or imagine will happen in the future.
5. *The positive principle.* This principle is a foundational belief that a positive approach to any issue is a valid basis for learning and just as contagious as a negative approach can be.

The principles of Appreciative Inquiry are applied using the 4-D cycle. It gives us a framework to implement the process. Whitney, Cooperrider, and Trosten-Bloom (2003, p. 23) explain that "each application of Appreciative Inquiry is unique, because no two Appreciative Inquiry processes can be exactly the same." Cooperrider & Whitney, (n.d.) briefly summarize the 4-Ds.

1. **Discovery:** The Discovery phase mobilizes a whole system inquiry into the positive change core.
2. **Dream:** The Dream phase creates a clear, results-oriented vision in relation to discovered potential and in relation to questions of higher purpose.
3. **Design:** The Design phase involves creating possibilities of the "ideal organization," an organization design that people feel is capable of focusing on a positive core.
4. **Destiny:** The Destiny phase strengthens the positive capability of the whole system, enabling it to build hope and momentum around a deep purpose and to create processes for learning, adjustment, and inventiveness.

## Why Use Appreciative Inquiry?

You may be asking yourself why Appreciative Inquiry is a good tool or philosophy for the Extension profession. One answer is that "practitioners of appreciative inquiry believe this approach is true to human nature because it integrates different ways of knowing. Appreciative inquiry methods allow room for emotional response as well as intellectual analysis, for imagination as well as rational thought" (IISD Appreciative Inquiry and Community Development, 2000). We believe it has the potential to build positive change in the ways we work and the programs we provide.

This article is written to be a practical approach on how to capitalize on the positive and to help create a positive environment for growth and development of Extension personnel and program. According to Yopp and Kroth, "Appreciative inquiry focuses on a new way of seeing the world and heightens the imagination of what might be" (2007). We challenge Extension leaders and administrators to become familiar with the Appreciative Inquiry model and to adopt it as one tool for their toolbox.

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