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# Facilitating Strategic AI interventions

## ABSTRACT

With skillful facilitation, Appreciative Inquiry interventions can be very successful. When selecting Appreciative Inquiry as an approach for strategic intervention, strategic management knowledge and professional facilitation skills are also required. Appreciative Inquiry provides a fertile framework for creativity. Facilitation fosters the birth and development of ideas into action.

When Appreciative Inquiry works, the process is applied with an understanding of the strategic context and is accompanied by excellent facilitation skills and knowledge. Too many consultants and practitioners apply the process superficially without regard to the particulars of the organisation within which they are working and with scant capacity to manage multiple and complex group dynamics.

Designing and facilitating participation in strategic planning requires facilitative competence to work with diverse interests and groups to get agreement on future directions. Appreciative Inquiry offers an approach – a way of thinking – to move participants from the past, through the present and towards the future.

Knowledge of the organisation and the organisational participants enables the facilitator or the Appreciative Inquiry practitioner to contextualise and focus the intervention in ways most relevant to participants. The consulting challenge is to maximise the interplay between knowledge of the strategic context, professional facilitation competence and Appreciative Inquiry application to benefit the organisation.

## Context

Appreciative Inquiry methods are most useful when client organisations:

- Are in transition – attempting to reposition the organisation
- Have diverse stakeholders – all of whom have distinct interests in the future of the organisation
- Require ownership of strategic changes to motivate implementation of new directions

The context of every client organisation is different. For example:

- A university may commission a review and strategic plan development process to produce a new strategic plan for approval by Council
- An Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service may request a review of services and development of a strategic plan for approval by members
- A multi-national mining company may request a change management process to relocate 1500 people
- A remote indigenous community may want to develop a community renewal plan to be shaped and owned by the whole community
- A school may require a triennial school review and development of a strategic plan with input from the school community

### Consultation process

A strategic plan consultation process may involve four phases of inquiry and a series of tasks to which the client can readily agree. For example:

#### Phase 1: strategic inquiry

- Review all strategic planning documents
- Work closely with the client to access information, to identify key contacts and to arrange meetings and workshops
- Facilitate 3 half day workshops with key internal leadership groups
- Engage all groups in strategic inquiry utilizing SOAR (strengths, opportunities, aspirations, results) analysis to envision the future
- Develop preliminary draft statement of strategic directions

#### Phase 2: Board consultation

- Prepare for and facilitate half day Board workshop to challenge draft directions and shape the next five years
- Develop draft Strategic Plan

#### Phase 3: strategic choice

- Consult with key external stakeholders regarding proposed futures (partnerships, infrastructure, finance)
- Facilitate 3 half day workshops with mixed leadership and staff groups
- Challenge the draft Strategic Plan
- Make choices to strategically position the organisation for the future: Statement of direction; Shared vision; Values; Strategic themes; Key performance measures

- Draft a new planning framework and corporate performance report

**Phase 4: strategic plan confirmation**

- Consult key stakeholders regarding final input to the strategic plan document
- Submit final draft Strategic Plan to the Chief Executive Officer
- Amend the new Strategic Plan as required
- Submit Strategic Plan to the Board for confirmation

**Knowledge and skills required to implement AI for participatory strategic planning**

**Strategic thinking skills**

Appreciative Inquiry consulting and professional facilitation competencies are used to conceptualise and facilitate strategic review and planning processes. Context is critical and the best practitioners develop, over time, knowledge of the strategic, structural, systemic and cultural environments in which their clients operate. Contextual knowledge assists the practitioner to scope an appreciative, applied, provocative and collaborative intervention.

The focus of this article is to highlight the importance of facilitative competence when applying Appreciative Inquiry. Appreciative Inquiry may provide a meta frame for intervention; however, without excellent facilitation skills, participants may not be engaged and the process may backfire.

The challenges of Appreciative Inquiry consulting and the related facilitator competence (International Association Facilitators 2003) are outlined in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Appreciative consulting challenges and facilitator competencies

Appreciative consulting challenges	Facilitator competencies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopt an appreciative mindset</li> <li>• Value diversity (people and process)</li> <li>• Locate and maintain energy for change</li> <li>• Integrate macro and micro issues and contributions</li> <li>• Transfer ownership of the process</li> <li>• Reflect on and learn from every AI application</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create collaborative client relationships</li> <li>• Plan appropriate group processes</li> <li>• Create and sustain a participatory environment</li> <li>• Guide group to appropriate and useful outcomes</li> <li>• Build and maintain professional knowledge</li> <li>• Model positive professional attitude</li> </ul>

Throughout the process consultation there are appreciative consulting challenges and every participation strategy requires skilful facilitation. Each

application occurs in a purposive context enabled by the triage of strategic thinking, AI and planned spontaneity.

**Delivering the assignment: Windows of possibility**

As they say, the glory and the devil lie in the detail! In a typical strategic AI intervention the key stages involve a myriad of micro skills. Six windows are used to illustrate the interconnectedness of AI methods, facilitator competence and strategy to deliver the strategic plan consultation.

Window 1: Engaging the client

Appreciative consulting challenge	Facilitator competence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopt an appreciative mindset</li> <li>• Research what exists, the background and context</li> <li>• Reframe problems into possibilities</li> <li>• Identify participant groups in change</li> <li>• Use appreciative language and client specific language</li> <li>• Customise meta process frame – 4-D</li> </ul>	<p>A. Create Collaborative Client Relationships</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Develop working partnerships</li> <li>2. Design and customize applications to meet client needs</li> <li>3. Manage multi-session events effectively</li> </ol>

The client engagement process may lead to an agreement to undertake the proposed strategic plan review, underpinned by AI, in four phases.

First a strategic inquiry process to engage staff and stakeholders; second a consultation with the Board of directors; third a further consultation with key groups to facilitate strategic choices; and finally, consultation with executive groups to confirm the new strategic plan.

The consultant’s approach to designing the AI intervention processes is informed by knowledge of the client environment and the purpose of the assignment.

Window 2: Designing collaborative processes

Appreciative consulting challenge	Facilitator competence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Value diversity (people and process)</li> <li>• Design customised and context specific participatory process, consultation stages and alternatives</li> <li>• Establish AI concept team, steering committee</li> <li>• Identify topics for inquiry</li> <li>• Craft AI interview protocols</li> <li>• Design questions about best experiences, values, sustainability and hopes</li> </ul>	<p>B. Plan Appropriate Group Processes</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Select clear methods and processes that foster open participation with respect for client culture, norms and participant diversity</li> <li>2. Prepare time and space to support group process</li> </ol>

AI interviewing skills may be used to clarify the scope of the assignment and the focus of the client’s requirements. The SOAR analysis process may be appropriate to engage diverse groups of staff and stakeholders to identify and share views about organisational Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results.

Window 3: Creating and sustaining conditions for inquiry

Appreciative consulting challenge	Facilitator competence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Locate and maintain energy for change</li> <li>• Facilitate multiple cycles of inquiry</li> <li>• 4-D meta process frame:</li> <li>• Discover – paired interviews, grouping affirmative themes</li> <li>• Dream – crafting provocative propositions</li> <li>• Design – translating provocative propositions into practice – innovation teams, working groups</li> <li>• Deliver – documenting directions, priorities, learning and sustainability measures</li> </ul>	<p>C. Create and Sustain a Participatory Environment</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Demonstrate effective participatory and interpersonal communication skills</li> <li>2. Honour and recognise diversity, ensuring inclusiveness</li> <li>3. Manage group conflict</li> <li>4. Evoke group creativity</li> </ol>

Multiple workshops may be facilitated using the SOAR analysis with mixed influence groups. Consolidating group data, identifying thematic data, and extracting key planning themes from SOAR data is useful to inform the emergent strategic plan:

- Strengths may be used to inform organisational values
- Opportunities may be used to inform strategic priorities
- Aspirations may be used to inform the organisation vision
- Results may be used to inform strategic performance measures

The key activities at this stage include drafting the following components of the Strategic Plan: Vision, Values, Strategic Priorities, Key strategies and Performance measures. Facilitating workshops with the community to challenge and finetune the draft Strategic Plan provides an opportunity for large scale buy-in and ownership of the plan.

It is important to engage key stakeholders in endorsing strategic priorities and work with key expertise groups to agree organisation performance measures prior to submission of the final draft Strategic Plan to the Board for endorsement.

Window 4: Strategy development

Appreciative consulting challenge	Facilitator competence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrate macro and micro issues and contributions</li> <li>• Illuminate connections between strategy, structure, systems and culture</li> <li>• Acknowledge multiple ways of understanding and articulating shared visions</li> <li>• Create social architecture for organising</li> <li>• Provoke and synthesize possibility statements</li> <li>• Facilitate multiple draft ways of expressing organisational strategic intent</li> <li>• Include opportunities to challenge, extend and modify drafts</li> <li>• Capture personal, team, strategic and whole system</li> <li>• Maintain data integrity with clear lines of sight from original to final versions</li> </ul>	<p>D. Guide Group to Appropriate and Useful Outcomes</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Guide the group with clear methods and processes</li> <li>2. Facilitate group self-awareness about the task</li> </ol>

Window 5: Transfer ownership of the process

Appreciative consulting challenge	Facilitator competence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage purposefully and positively with individuals, small groups and large groups</li> <li>• Stimulate lots of little fires</li> <li>• Share responsibility for organisational direction and quality with everyone</li> <li>• Deliver on contractual agreement</li> </ul>	<p>Maintain positive relationships</p> <p>E. Build and Maintain Professional Knowledge</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Maintain a base of knowledge in management, organizational systems and development, group development, psychology, and conflict resolution, dynamics of change, learning and thinking theory</li> <li>2. Know a range of facilitation methods, problem solving and decision-making models, group methods and techniques, new processes, methods and models in support of client's changing/emerging needs</li> <li>3. Maintain professional standing, industry knowledge and networks</li> </ol>

Window 6: Continuously improve professional practice

Appreciative consulting challenge	Facilitator competence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflect on and learn from every application</li> <li>• Show genuine interest in organisational and individual wellbeing</li> <li>• Build personal and professional understanding of challenges and opportunities across diverse government, corporate, educational and community sectors</li> <li>• Recognise personal (energy) and professional (expertise) limits</li> <li>• Pursue lifelong learning and participant centred potential for change</li> </ul>	<p>F. Model Positive Professional Attitude</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Practice self-assessment and self-awareness</li> <li>2. Act with integrity</li> <li>3. Trust group potential and model neutrality</li> </ol>

**Conclusion**

Appreciative Inquiry can be risky for organisations. Without sufficient appreciation of the strategic context and skilful facilitation, participant centred approaches to planning can be disastrous. Every application occurs in a different setting, with different people with very different agendas.

For organisations to achieve the results they seek from AI interventions, the consultant is challenged to guide participants through unknown territory. Trusting the process is one thing; however continual improvisation and inventing just-in-time, fit for purpose, cyclical adjustments in-process is more likely to deliver creative results and a commitment to implementation.

AI methods are invaluable for conceptualising strategic change interventions and for designing participatory processes to include people in planning. Appreciative Inquiry is a fertile framework for creativity. Facilitation fosters the birth and development of ideas into action. Both are vital to provide clients with valuable processes to engage in strategic thinking, include people in change, build commitment in the process and generate goodwill and energy for delivering organisational success.

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