APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY:
Beyond the Duality of Positive & Negative; Problem & Solution; Symptom & Cure

Written by Ezelle Theunissen,
Certified Appreciative Inquiry Training and Facilitator,
Center for Appreciative Inquiry – Director of Africa

"*Appreciative Inquiry Is Not (Just) About The Positive*," written by Gervase R. Bushe, Ph.D., is a popular article circulated amongst AI enthusiasts. Many readers find the article useful in providing additional insight about the generative nature of Appreciative Inquiry; however, the title – at face value – can baffle newcomers. What do you mean AI is not about the positive? Their confusion is understandable. One of the five original principles of Appreciative Inquiry, for example, is named the Positive Principle. Confusion can also stem from the words of Dr. David Cooperrider, the founder of Appreciative Inquiry. In one of his many writings regarding Innovation-inspired Positive Organisational Development (IPOD), Cooperrider reinforces the connection between Appreciative Inquiry and other Positive Organisational Systems thinking.

So, is AI positive or is it not?

The answer to this question depends on what we understand the word "positive" to mean.

The word positive (and opposite) have "posit" as its root, meaning: 'to set' or 'to position towards'. The word negative, has "negate" as its root, meaning 'to be against' or 'to ignore'. Simply put, to be positive is to be "for" whereas to be negative is to be "against".

Perhaps a better question to ask ourselves is – what is *it* for, and not against?

In looking at the deeper meaning of "positive" in the Positive Organisational Scholarship (POS) schools of thought, "positive" points to what is life-giving and life-affirming. Where are Life and life-affirming qualities, attitudes, values and actions at its strongest? This creates a different question than simply inquiring about what is positive. It also means we do not need to inquire as to what is negative in order to reframe it to its opposite in order to identify the positive.

Similarly, "negative" is not just understood in its basic meaning, but can be a synonym for many attributes, attitudes, actions and events that, rightly or wrongly, have fallen out of favour.

So if by "positive" we mean to deny what is "negative" or unwanted, disliked, feared or ill-understood, I would say AI is not positive. However, if positive means to position oneself towards what is life-giving, and not to ignore or negate what is life-giving as is sometimes our habitual tendency, then I believe AI is positive.

And that's why I like Bushe's title... because AI is not *just* about positive (or not positive). As soon as we ask that question we are getting caught in dualistic thinking, and recruited into taking up an either-or position. Rather, AI allows us to transcend the trap of opposites, to a deep investigation into what lies beyond positive and negative, problem and solution, sickness and cure. It raises and broadens our perspective and increases our awareness. It brings in to focus what we habitually

tend to ignore or negate which is 'What and where is the source of our energy, our vitality, our natural impulse to thrive? In other words, "Where is Life?"

There's a joke in the Madyamika school of Buddhism - a group of scholars dedicated to the profound investigation of ultimate reality. The joke goes something like this:

Q: How many Madyamika scholars does it take to screw in a light bulb?

A: Four. One to screw in the light bulb. One to not screw in the light bulb. One to both screw in the light bulb and not screw in the light bulb. One to neither screw in the light bulb nor not screw in the light bulb.

Perhaps AI is both positive and not positive, and neither positive nor not positive. And perhaps that is because its quest goes beyond the either-or, for-or-against, broken-fixed type of inquiries we are so used to, and straight to the heart of what matters most to you and me in any given situation.

About the Author:
Ezelle Theunissen practices as a coach and appreciative inquiry trainer & consultant to create "generative & learning" organizational cultures that wish to thrive in a rapidly changing environment. She specialises in organisational and community transformation and the design of innovative programmes that integrate learning and coaching at individual and team level. She especially enjoys participating in environments that are innovation-focused and possibility-oriented.

Ezelle has gained considerable experience working in diverse environments – from rural, small town and peri-urban communities to big brand corporate industries. She feels equally inspired collaborating with private, non-government and / or public sectors and thrives in environments rich in diversity. She is equally fluent in English & Afrikaans and especially enjoys working with other English-second-language speakers throughout the world.

Ezelle's coaching practice focuses on coaching leaders and managers at the cutting edge of their fields. Her areas of expertise include entrepreneurship and business development, managing change, learning and development, and increasing effectiveness and quality of experience in the workplace. She thrives in settings lead by avant-garde visionaries who pioneer new enterprises and programs in fast-paced and growing environments.

To learn more about Ezelle Theunissen, visit:
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