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Appreciative Inquiry and the Value of Conflict

In this article the authors discuss what different researchers have written about the effects of AI on situations which involve tension, what the downfall of AI is and what their own experience was through a case study. They also discuss how they provoked tension in a WAIC 2019 workshop, how they dealt with this, the participants' responses and what their conclusions were.

In our work, we often encounter relational tension, controversy, even conflict. It keeps us busy, even when we have an appreciative approach.

We encountered reactions from clients and colleagues like: "we don't have room for negative thoughts", "we work appreciatively, and we only focus on the positive", "no, don't mention negative comments, that's not appreciative". The real concerns have no place. Sometimes the effect is that people drop out, and their concerns live on under the surface.

That's why we like to talk about tension and conflict, and we like to do that in an appreciative way. But that can be very challenging. We asked ourselves, how do other AI practitioners think about this subject? How do they deal with tension? Can we identify different approaches? How does AI help in situations where there is tension? The idea of a workshop was born.

AI and conflict: Research

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an approach that advocates harmonious relationships and positive interactions. Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) argue that an approach to leading, managing and changing organizations focusing on problems, deficits and dysfunctions is demoralizing and ineffective in bringing about change. They called, instead, for a focus on opportunities. Focusing on what is working in an appreciative way raises morale and promotes generative

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inquiry. AI generates spontaneous, transformational action on the part of individuals, groups and organizations, which leads to a better future.

According to some researchers, such as Ralph Stacey, Robbert Masselink and Gervase Bushe, by focusing on the positive, AI creates an incomplete image that conceals the real processes going on when we are negotiating our realities (Masselink in Stacey, 2016). There seems to be a dread of “negatives” such as conflict and a conviction that success can only be achieved when all share the same view, with breakdown as the consequence of not doing this (Stacey, 2016).

The critics of AI argue that positive and negative feelings are intimately connected (Stacey, 2016). Without friction, no shine. And with exclusive attention to the positive and trying to reach consensus, AI denies patterns of power relations, resistance, conflicts and difference, resulting in a positive fantasy. In that way AI focusses attention only on a small part of ordinary, daily life in organizations (Stacey, 2016).

According to Gervase Bushe (2007), the positive can enhance generativity and change. It is *generativity* that is the core of AI. Not the *positive*. “If someone wants to talk about what they don’t like in their organizations telling them ‘no, we can’t talk about that, this is an appreciative inquiry’, is likely to turn people off” (Bushe, 2007). Especially if they have a lot of emotional charge around a discussion, it is not wise to banish it. You can’t simply ignore it; it won’t go away (Bushe, 2007).

In addition to that, research by Johnson, Johnson and Tjosvold (2000) shows that it is very important to discuss controversy. In well-structured controversies, participants are challenged with opposing views and get the chance to incorporate others’ perspectives and reasoning into their thinking to reach a new set of conclusions. This process significantly increases the quality of decision making and problem solving, relationships and psychological health. Although constructive controversy occurs naturally, it may be consciously structured in decision making and learning situations.

A case from our own practice

Although constructive controversy occurs naturally, it may be consciously structured in decision making and learning situations.

We are part of an institute that educates professionals in Appreciative Inquiry and intervention studies: how to help our clients to build bridges between what they need, feel, think and say to what they really do, in order to make personal and professional meaning out of their actions.

One of our groups had a hard time. They started their studies with three teachers. But one of their teachers passed away and, shortly after that, another teacher

quit her job, leaving the group feeling abandoned. The last teacher standing asked new teachers to continue the curriculum. But the group didn't accept their presence so easily. Some participants threatened to quit the curriculum because of all that had happened. It was really a difficult time for the whole system.

To sum up: we had to deal with resistance against the new teachers, who also felt uneasy. The company feared losing participants – and income. The participants who didn't want to leave feared they might lose their group members. Also, there was unresolved conflict between a few people. On top of that, there was a lot of emotional charge. What did we do with this situation?

Back to the case

They asked them to only list those things that were facts: things they have seen and heard with their own eyes and ears.

To deal with this conflict, we decided to work on a Wall of Wonder together, combined with “Think Advising” (Edu Feltmann), around the question “What happened?” The new teachers asked the group members, the director of the company who was also the wife of the teacher who had passed away and the last teacher who went through it all to list all the events of the previous few months. In doing so, they asked them to only list those things that were facts: things they have seen and heard with their own eyes and ears. While they were creating the list, one of the participants said with tears in her eyes: “I can't go any further, I am so sad. We need to talk!” We made room for all the pain, discomfort, distrust, resistance, anger, grief, etc. to come out. Once it came up, we were able to talk about it. By talking about it, it started to dissolve. In the end, all the group members graduated with good results. They worked really well together, as well as with all the teachers. One of them explained: “From that day on I felt more secure, so I could experiment more and eventually learn more”.

Conclusions from our case

We couldn't go any further until we dealt with the tensions first.

We couldn't go any further until we dealt with the tensions first. Like Bushe (2007) suggests, if we had continued without doing so, there would have been more tension and anger, and group members might have left.

We organized a group conversation with all the people involved, trying to neutralize the emotional charge by talking about facts. Importantly, emotions are facts too. The group shared the facts, so everyone could hear the different points of view, learn from them, and be able to immediately respond to the emotions that were present in the here-and-now. This case encouraged us to explore dealing with tension further, as well as how AI helps that process.

The workshop

We decided to do a short experiment, formed into a workshop. During the WAIC 2019 in Nice, we introduced this workshop with the title “How to appreciate conflict”. We were scheduled at 8 o’clock in the morning. We thought: “way too early, nobody will come.” But over thirty participants joined us in this workshop, a sign that the topic is relevant for a lot of AI practitioners. They came from different cultures, countries, and fields. We asked them to think about how they deal with tension, as an AI practitioner. And after that, they divided themselves in four groups*, as showed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Way of dealing with tension



*Ignoring in this context means not actively doing anything with the tension, keeping focus on the positive. Inquiring means immediately and in the here-and-now inquiring into the tension, which sometimes means talking about the negative. Flipping means flipping something negative into something positive, and from then on focusing on the positive core of the theme. Acknowledging means acknowledging by naming the tension, and then letting it be, not intervening.

The groups stood in the four corners of the workshop space. The members of each group had to discuss what was good about their point of view and discuss different statements that defended their position. Then they had a few minutes to present their opinion and defending statements to the other groups. They were also given the opportunity to ask questions to clarify what they had said.

This set-up provoked tension. The different groups faced each other from different corners of the room. Because they had to “defend” their opinion, it was a “one against three” situation. And because the facilitators “cornered”

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the groups, they also felt tension towards the facilitators. This was part of the design, so there was an opportunity to explore tension while present.

After that, we asked participants to encounter a participant “from another corner” and have an appreciative interview about the tension provoked. The last question was: “How can I help you to overcome the tension in our conversation?”

Results and effect

After the interviews, we had a plenary conversation about what happened, and we were pleasantly surprised by the answers of the participants. Some of the quotes were:

- The four groups are not distinct but different points of actions in the AI continuum. It's not a straight line but a journey where you pick and choose action.
- This was really helpful. I will continue to reflect on how AI helps me respond to conflict creatively.
- Thank you for reaffirming that conflict in a session is a gift.
- A very valuable question in this workshop was “What can I do to help you to overcome the tension?” After that, we were really in touch with each other.

Lessons learned and general conclusions

We learned a way in which conflict can turn into sympathy, using AI. We learned that every suggested approach to conflict and tension has its positive outcomes. The best approach depends on the situation. Also, talking about differences and tension can deepen relationships. Most of the time when people have a controversy and different interests, people only discuss their opinions, not feelings. When you acknowledge the feelings and give people the opportunity to talk with their “rivals” in an appreciative way, building a relationship is possible. This helps diminish tension so that conflicting interests are easier to discuss. That leads to help improving problem solving, relationships and psychological health (Johnson, Johnson & Tjosvold, 2000).

When working with AI, there is no reason to avoid tension and conflict.

Since facilitating the workshop, we have become more aware of the fact that people do experience tension when you talk about conflict but often only show it or talk about it when you invite them to discuss it.

As in the case we described earlier in this article, the results of the workshop show us how liberating and tension-releasing it is when you are able to have a conversation about it. It makes it easier for us to bring up tension or conflict when we feel it in a group while facilitating. AI helps with this by starting the conversation with the right questions.

So, our conclusion is, when working with AI, there is no reason to avoid tension and conflict.

If you have questions, or would like to know more about the workshop, please contact us at instituut@instituutvoorinterventiekunde.nl.

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