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Appreciative Empathy
New Frameworks for New Conversations

ABSTRACT
Since its inception, Appreciative Inquiry has focused on the transformational power of appreciative questions. Underlying that power is the ability of such questions to establish empathic connections. As AI practitioners, we would do well, then, to expand our understanding and use of empathy in the inquiry. Knowing how to fully appreciate the feelings and needs of others holds the key to AI success.

Students of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), like students of professional coaching, have learned well the importance of those first, fateful questions. Asking seemingly neutral-sounding questions, like 'How is it going?', let alone explicitly problem-focused questions, like 'What is going wrong?', can both lead to downward spirals in energy and initiative. That is why AI and coaching place so much emphasis on strengths-based and possibility-oriented questions, like 'What is going right?' and 'How can we get more of that?' Initiating conversations in this way can awaken self-efficacy, stimulate the imagination and expand the range of motion for individuals and organizations alike.

AI and coaching fall short of their potential, however, when practitioners fail to connect the dots between inquiry and empathy. Strengths-based and possibility-oriented questions will not sit right with people if we step over the very real feelings and needs that they so often show up with in life and work. Indeed, inquiry without empathy – even an appreciative inquiry – is interrogation. What is called for, then, is a companion practice that may well be described as appreciative empathy.

It is appreciative in that we are seeking to see the beauty of those feelings and needs, even when they may be unpleasant and unmet. It is empathy in that we are seeking to understand the fullness of another person's experience, with acceptance as well as openness to possibility. When we appreciate people in this way, both as we initiate and navigate conversations, the full potential of AI and coaching stands a much higher chance of being realized.

What is alive right now?
To this end, it is helpful to start every new round of conversation with a basic and yet creative check in as to how people are showing up in the moment (Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran, 2010). This is quite different from asking people to reflect on and describe how things are going. Such reflections often generate the downward spiral as people seek to make sense of the

Appreciative empathy starts with creative temperature-taking inquiries.

shortcomings and deficits in life (Zander and Zander, 2000). Instead of sense-making, appreciative empathy starts off conversations with temperature-taking: 'What is alive right now?' is the operative interest of those who seek to establish trust and rapport through appreciative empathy.

Although the standard English greeting, 'Hi! How are you?', is technically a temperature-taking question, it is often heard as either a perfunctory greeting looking for a perfunctory response (Fine. How are you?), or as a disguised invitation to talk about anything a person wants to talk about, including whatever terrible or wonderful thing they may have recently experienced.

That's why appreciative empathy often starts with more creative temperature-taking inquiries that enable people to express themselves fully, that communicate an authentic, supportive interest in their emotional well-being, and that make it clear that these are not to be ordinary conversations. After starting with a question opener such as, 'Before we get started, I'd like to check in on how you are showing up today', asking one of the following questions is often evocative of deep connection and reorientation:

1. On a scale of 0-10, with 10 high, how would you describe your energy right now?

2. If you were a color, what color would you be right now?

3. What three adjectives would you use to describe how you are feeling right now?

4. What is especially present for you in this moment?

5. If you were a weather system, what would be your personal weather report?

6. What song, movie or TV show captures the gist of your emotions right now?

Those six questions are representative samples of initiating appreciative empathy questions that make clear our interest in people as people rather than as projects (Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran, 2010). By checking-in on and communicating respect for the emotional well-being of people at the outset of conversation, practitioners establish trust and rapport and set up the context for the more expansive appreciative inquiries that are soon to follow. If we want people to reach for the stars, we must first be willing and able to go with them into the depths.

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Seeing the beauty of the needs

Some AI practitioners may be leery of inviting this journey into the depths out of the mistaken thought that evoking negative emotions and unmet needs is a risky proposition. What's to keep us from spiraling downward into deficit-based problem solving once those deficits and problems are so painfully called forth and brought to the surface? The answer, in a word, is appreciative empathy. If people are showing up in a place of pain, pretending otherwise will not only come across as insensitive and inauthentic, it will also undermine the very transformation we seek to generate. Appreciative empathy enables practitioners to be with people in that place of pain without viewing the pain as a problem

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to be solved. It is rather viewed as a portal to be entered through which we can come to more fully appreciate the beauty of the underlying needs.

Beauty is always there, regardless of how well or poorly those needs are being met. Too often, in our attempt to elicit best-experience stories, AI practitioners and coaches stay on the surface level of successful, or apparently successful, strategies. Those are certainly stories worth telling and celebrating, but the power behind the story lies in the needs that are being served rather than in the approach that is being taken. A successful approach today, under one set of circumstances, may or may not be successful tomorrow, under a different set of circumstances. But the needs that are being served by those strategies will always be prized, valued and important. Getting to know those needs, then, is a key work of AI because needs have generative, life-giving power.

This represents the second, and perhaps, most important sense of the verb 'to meet.' On the one hand, 'to meet' needs means to satisfy or fulfil needs. When we need nourishment, for example, we feel hungry and we may meet that need by eating. On the other hand, 'to meet' needs can mean to encounter, get to know and become acquainted with our needs. In this sense, when we need nourishment we may meet that need by appreciating, for example, its character, intensity, duration, trajectory and significance.

That is the beauty of the need, regardless of whether or not it is being fulfilled. And the more we come to appreciate that beauty the more freedom and creativity we experience as to what we might choose to do with that need. We might or might not choose to eat, for instance, depending upon how our now-expanded relationship with the need for nourishment as well as other needs (like maintaining a healthy weight or pursuing an exercise commitment) comes into play.

Appreciative empathy, then, is not just a set of questions to be asked at the start of conversations. It is, more profoundly, a set of responses that communicate respect for, caring about and understanding of the needs people want to meet. This can be done profitably at any point during AI or coaching conversations, whether in response to what people have to say about their presenting energy or about their best experiences and heartfelt wishes in regard to a particular area of interest or concern. Indeed, any story can benefit from a more robust and appreciative understanding of the needs that are prompting people to tell those stories at all.

Leveraging the energy of the needs

AI begins to plumb these depths when we inquire into those things that people value most about themselves, their work and their organizations or settings in life. When needs evoke feelings at any given point and time, those needs are experienced as core values. They enliven us, fill us with energy, arouse emotions and feel important. When those values are being honored and met, they arouse positive emotions. When they are not being honored and met, they arouse negative emotions. Either way, the fact that we can articulate, claim and celebrate those values is a clue that something vital is bubbling up. And this is when appreciative empathy has a special role to play in facilitating the transitions through the 4I cycle of AI.

Needs are what we value most; strategies are ways to honor and meet those needs.

It is tempting for AI practitioners and coaches to feel a sense of urgency about getting to the last two phases (Imagine and Implement), since that is when all the new stuff starts getting cooked up and acted upon. But rushing through the Initiate and Inquire phases of the cycle, or treating them as preliminaries to the good stuff that comes later, shortchanges their power, relevance and value. Until and unless people feel heard at the level of the needs that have some emotional charge and energy for them, they will not participate wholeheartedly in the process and they will not aspire boldly in the dream and design work that follows.

Understanding the value and learning the language of appreciative empathy avoids this unfortunate eventuality. There is no point in moving forward until people are ready, willing and able to distinguish between needs and strategies. Needs are what we value most; strategies are ways to honor and meet those needs. Through appreciative empathy people come to understand that distinction in ways that unleash their consciousness, creativity and courage. Once people know what they want and are freed from all manner of attachment from any particular way of getting there, all kinds of things become possible, including many things that may have once been viewed as impossible.
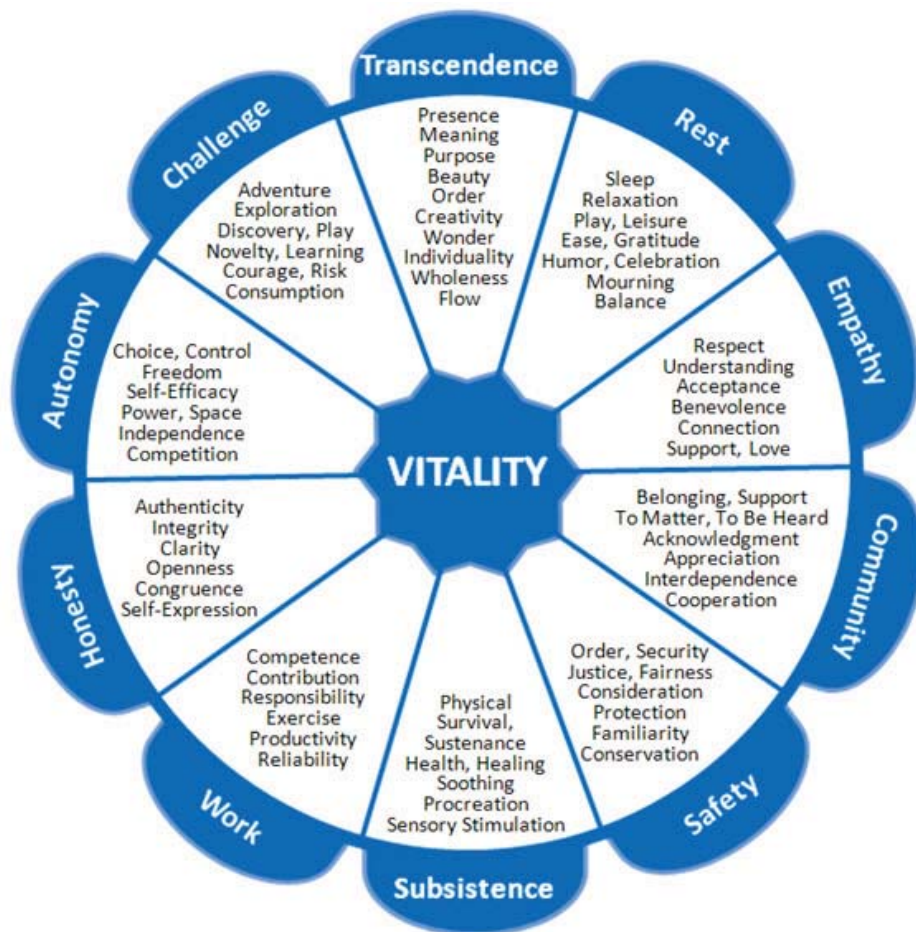
The language of appreciative empathy takes that distinction into account by inviting people to articulate what they want in the language of universal human needs. Since the early 1950s, with the publication of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, people have sought to find ways to frame those needs (Maslow, 1954, 1987). Maslow identified five large groups of needs and organized them into a pyramid. The most basic, physiological needs were at the bottom, followed by the needs for safety, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualization. It was thought that the higher-level needs would not be cathected until lower-level needs had been met. This part of Maslow's understanding has long been challenged and largely discredited. Any need can come into play at any time, regardless of the circumstances or conditions in which people may find themselves.

Psychologists are not the only ones who have been concerned with and sought to find a language for describing universal human needs. Economists such as the Chilean, Manfred Max-Neef, have also worked with this concept, distinguishing between needs (which are universal in scope and finite in number) and satisfiers (which are particular to situations and infinite in number). Through this lens, Max-Neef and other economists have come to view and value societies vis-à-vis their contribution to life-giving, human scale development, rather than GDP (Max-Neef, 1989).

In my own work as a coach, I have created a wheel diagram of ten needs organized along five spectrums (see Figure 1 on page 54): Subsistence–Transcendence; Work–Rest; Safety–Challenge; Honesty–Empathy and Community–Autonomy (Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran, 2010). There is no hierarchy: a wheel can be looked at from any angle. More importantly, the spectrums capture the rhythms of needs, since it is neither possible nor desirable to satisfy all needs at all times. There is an ebb and flow to the satisfaction of needs which can be clearly discerned from the way the needs are arranged on the diagram.

Vitality is positioned in the center of the Wheel because that is what gets generated when needs are met, in both the sense of satisfaction and of
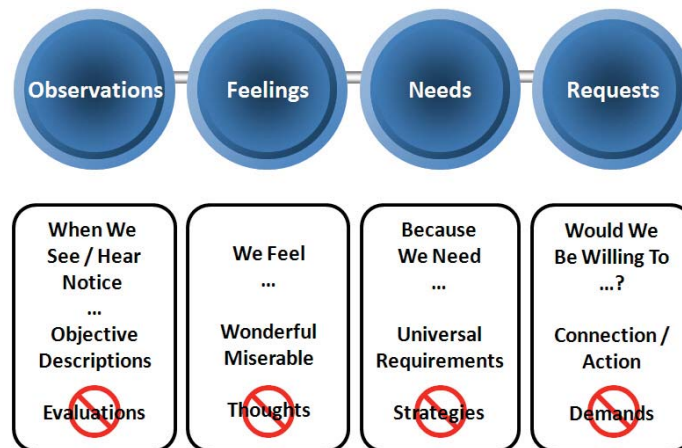
Figure 1: The wheel of needs

appreciation. Although it is not always possible to satisfy every need, it is always possible to appreciate every need. And the more we come to appreciate the needs that are alive in us, the needs that we value most and that are clamoring for attention, the more we will experience a sense of relief, ease, excitement, recognition, willingness and engagement.

That is the transformational potential of appreciative empathy in the context of Appreciative Inquiry. The more we understand and reflect what someone is trying to communicate in the language of universal human needs, rather than in terms of particular satisfiers or strategies, the more people will come to themselves, find their voices, release enemy images and open up to heretofore unimagined possibilities. Such is the nature of transformation: it is about changing the form of our attachments and understandings. The French philosopher, Émile Chartier, once quipped, 'Nothing is as dangerous as an idea when it is the only one you have' (in O'Hanlon and Beadle, 1997, p. 31). Leveraging the energy of needs through appreciative empathy transforms that danger into opportunity.

To that end, it can be helpful to learn and practice the grammar for empathy developed by Marshall Rosenberg in his work on Nonviolent Communication (Rosenberg, 2005; see Figure 2 on page 56). When we invite people to share the things they value most about themselves, their work and their organizations or settings in life, having the right language helps us to listen for those underlying

Figure 2: The Nonviolent
Communication Model

> Whereas inquiry is more about asking questions, empathy is more about making reflections.

feelings and needs. Even when people express themselves with a lot of evaluative judgments about the satisfiers or strategies that they value most, we can make an empathetic guess as to the feelings and needs that lie behind their thinking. If we guess right, there will be an immediate sigh of recognition and a sense of wholeness as new possibilities come into view. If we guess wrong, there will be an immediate shift in the conversation to new levels of reflection, soul-searching and connection. Either way, the journey of transformation has begun.

Implications

AI practitioners and coaches would do well to incorporate appreciate empathy in our repertoires. Whereas inquiry is more about asking questions, empathy is more about making reflections. Too often our focus has been on asking the right questions without giving much thought to what comes next.

If we jump too quickly from questions to innovations, without taking time to appreciate the underlying feelings and needs, it is likely that our work will generate incremental rather than transformational change. It is only by appreciating the fullness of how people are showing up in the moment, and of what they value most, that people open up to imagining new stories and implementing new strategies for getting things done. By rounding out Appreciative Inquiry with appreciative empathy, the process of transformation becomes both more likely and more sustainable. It is a gift that AI practitioners would do well to offer both to our clients and to ourselves.

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Back to Table of Contents