

POSITIVE GOVERNING: BUILDING UPON YOUR BEST

IMAGINE YOUR COMMUNITY 15 years from today. It is a vibrant, freestanding community where prosperity has continued, even blossomed. The community is everything you had hoped and wished for, and there is enough money in the municipal coffers to pay for it. What do you see?

In 2005, municipal staff members from Longmont invited community members from all walks of life to engage their imaginations around this question. Hosting a process that involved listening, appreciation, and discernment, they forged strategic directions that still guide the City today.

In the past decade, local governments in Colorado have pioneered a new way of governing — positive governing — in which municipal

and community members partner to appreciate what works and build their future on today's strengths. Using an approach called appreciative inquiry (AI), they have flipped problems into opportunities and complaints into shared responsibility. This process has enabled people of radically diverse — even conflicting — backgrounds to co-create new opportunities by focusing on, understanding, and leveraging what fuels success.

The Path to Positive Engagement

AI is based on the simple idea that organizations move in the direction of what they study. When we ask questions about and focus on problems, we get more problems; when we ask questions about and focus on future hopes and possibilities, we get new opportunities.

AI traces its roots to the 1980s when David Cooperrider, then a doctoral

research student at Case Western Reserve University, explored the simple question: "Could it be that the questions we ask determine what we find?" He and his partners determined that the questions we ask do indeed matter and that traditional problem-solving processes often lead us to discover and create more problems. In other words, if we want innovation and opportunity, we need to study times when these qualities have been fully present in our organizations. In doing so, we gain insights into what factors produced those outcomes.

Athletes know this. What happens when someone advises the golfer or a skier to watch out for the woods? Where does the ball go? Where do the skier's head? They go where we put our attention.

AI invites communities to focus their attention on the conditions under which the community thrives. This methodology has a long history of producing stunning results in

small and large corporations and nongovernmental organizations around the globe, but it is just entering local governments as a new, positive way to govern.

Cities Leading the Way

In his Global TED talk, “Why Mayors Should Rule the World,” political theorist Benjamin Barber suggests that cities and towns hold the promise for effective governing in this 21st century, a time of ever greater social interdependence (www.ted.com/talks/benjamin_barber_why_mayors_should_rule_the_world.html). Most governments continue to operate within the same archaic forms of governance established hundreds of years ago, making it difficult for

political institutions to address the complex challenges people have today. Cities and towns, on the other hand, more closely connect to the people and communities they serve. This enables them to establish and maintain trust and, ultimately, to get things done.

The challenge in these days of polarized politics is to help people focus on what they want (rather than what they do not want) and to give them a constructive way to take responsibility for the betterment of their community. AI builds trust by recognizing that, in every complaint, there is a wish waiting to be fulfilled. AI is also radically inclusive, seeking out all perspectives, including those that often go unheard.

It Begins with “The Flip”

The AI process begins by shifting the focus from identifying problems to being clear on what the organization wants to accomplish. AI pioneer Diana Whitney calls this shift “The Flip.” The Flip recognizes that behind every complaint is a dream or aspiration for something better.

The City and County of Denver practiced “The Flip” when addressing a \$70 million budget shortfall years ago. Instead of studying budget crises, or even “doing more with less,” it focused on discovering what it takes to “thrive in challenging times.” Denver learned about financial best practices and revenue-generating opportunities through interviews with municipal employees, local

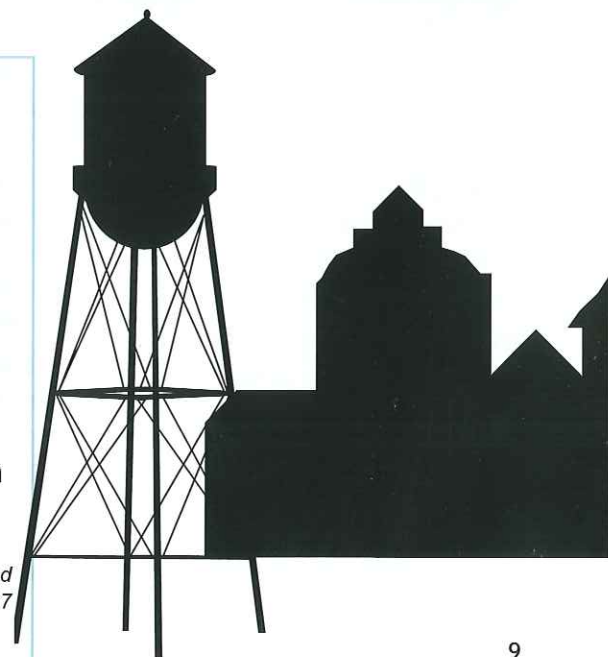
“THE FLIP”

When presented with a complaint or a problem, begin by **listening carefully and affirming your understanding** of the concern.

Ask, “What is it that you really want?” Keep asking until you **understand the vision of a better way.**

Reflect on what you heard, and **describe** what the person really wants in a brief phrase.

Adapted from Appreciative Leadership: Focus on what works to drive winning performance and build thriving organizations, Whitney, Trosten-Bloom and Raeder, p. 37





businesses, and community members, and then used what was learned to articulate best practices, envision a stable financial future, and design and initiate cost-saving initiatives and new revenue-generating programs.

From Positive Direction to Inspired Action

Once the positive direction is clear, the AI process follows four phases known as the 4-D Cycle: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny.

Discovery — Appreciate What Is.

This first phase involves appreciating the best of what is and has been. Discovery begins with one-on-one interviews in which participants interview others from the organization who they typically would not know. In 2001, the City of Denver used an AI process to help two departments that recently had been merged to experience how to function as one, with a common identity, focus, structures, and internal processes.

The process began with interviews with a broad range of staff, partner agencies, local businesses, citizens, and transportation groups. This was done to ensure that a variety of internal and external stakeholders would reflect the different perspectives

of those traveling within Denver and would have a voice in the future of the new organization. Interview questions included:

- When we and other traffic engineering and operations organizations have been at our best, how do the structures and work processes help to deliver hassle-free travel on Denver streets?
- What best practices have been developed — perhaps unintentionally — that we can transport and build upon as we work to provide higher and higher levels of customer service?
- If we could create anything that we wanted in this department, what would it be?
- How can we leverage our strengths to bring us closer to that dream? How will we clear out organizational obstacles? (Lewis, Trosten-Bloom and Pollard, *Appreciative Inquiry Practitioner*, November 2013, page 40)

The AI process gave the disparate agencies an experience of working collaboratively in service of the common good. At the same time, it established a common vision, values, and goals across the newly merged organization.

The magic of appreciative interviews is that everyone has a story to share. In so many planning processes, participants need to learn new technical or policy information to make a useful contribution. With the right interview questions, everyone connects to the process — in essence, everyone is an expert. By sharing individual stories, people connect personally to one another and to the topic.

The Fort Collins Downtown Development Authority and its partners convened an AI process to explore the feasibility of a year-round community marketplace. In interviews, people from agricultural and urban areas with different interests (food production, retail sales, education, environmental protection, economic vitality, government, and healthy communities) found common ground when they shared their stories and insights about their experiences in places that matter and at times when partnering created new possibilities.

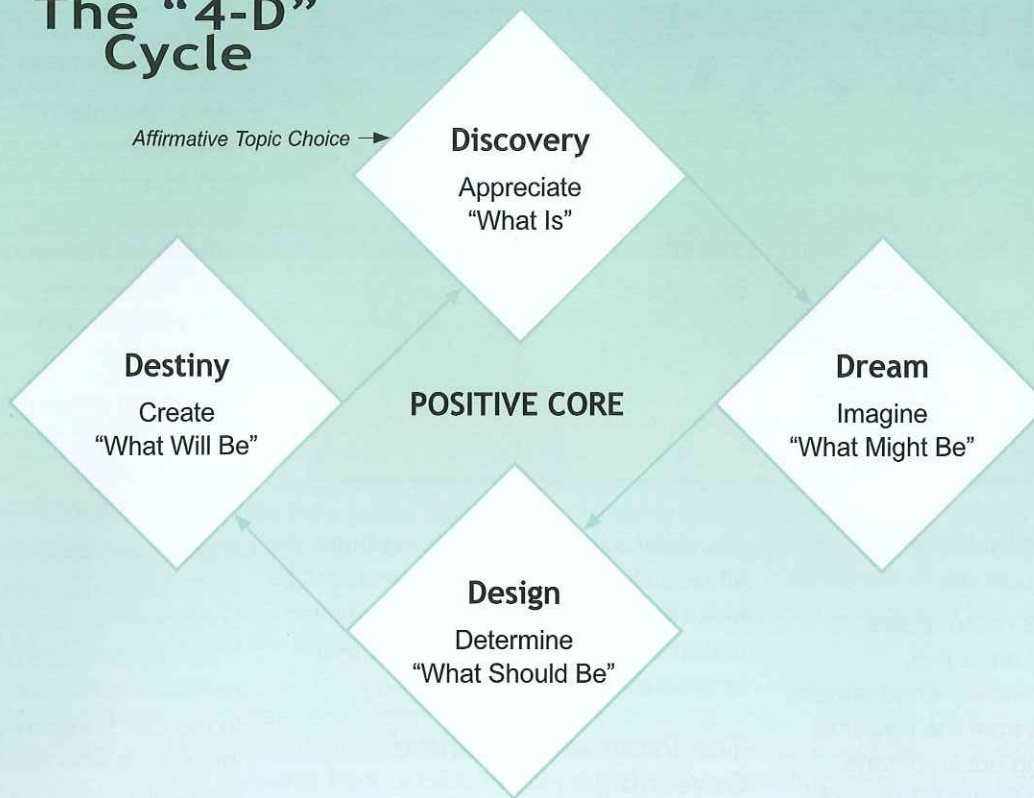
Dream — Imagine What Might Be.

The dreaming phase invites people to indulge in big picture, “out-of-the-box” thinking. At the same time, the process builds on past and present strengths so the future vision fits the community. Participants feel confident in their ability to achieve what they have imagined. Dreaming validates what Albert Einstein stated, “Imagination is more important than knowledge.”

While the City of Longmont’s first foray into AI occurred nearly 10 years ago, it still is having a positive impact on the community today. The process, known as the “Focus on Longmont” citywide strategic plan, produced a shared vision built on community pride, energy for action, and a belief in the community’s collective capacity to create a bright future. In the article “Democracy is not a spectator’s sport,” the *Longmont Times-Call* described the AI Summit as follows:

Democracy is not a spectator sport!

The “4-D” Cycle



In a party-like atmosphere, over 150 Longmont residents gathered Saturday to learn about each other and discuss ideas for the future of their City. Passing up golf or gardening on a beautiful spring day, tables of eight randomly selected participants began introducing themselves promptly at 9 a.m.

It was fast-paced from then on. Driven by a cadre of consultants keeping us to a tight time schedule, our original groups of eight were repeatedly shuffled as we moved among meeting rooms and discussion topics. What was truly unique was bringing together senior and junior citizens, past and present City councilors, City staff, civic activists, City advisory board volunteers, and members of Longmont's power structure. An inspiring camaraderie developed by 5 p.m. adjournment, which bodes well for the future of Longmont. Citizens agree far more than they disagree in what they want for Longmont.

Focus on Longmont has proven to be a legacy project. Karen Roney, community services director, explains, "Focus on Longmont exceeded all of our expectations. We could not have imagined the ways in which the initiative galvanized energy around Longmont's future. By having a very clear, focused strategic direction, every segment of our community could get its arms around at least one of the policy directions." In 2006, Focus on Longmont received the International Association for Public Participation's Project of the Year award.

Design — Determine What Should Be. During Design, participants describe their desired future. Their descriptions are evocative and draw people toward the future, inviting the community or organization to redirect policies and operations toward them.

Greeting our Future: A New Approach to Aging, an award-winning AI process used in Boulder County, engaged an intergenerational cross section of residents to create the countywide Aging Services plan in just three months. The shared strategic vision and design principles charted a bold

future for aging well in Boulder County and the Cities of Boulder, Erie, Lafayette, Longmont, and Louisville. The AI process also transformed relationships, connecting rural residents with city dwellers and community members to their government. "The plan has transformed every aspect of our work, from funding to grant-making to staffing and more," reports Aging Services Division Director Sherry Leach. "Our inclusive process brought the plan to life — made it the real and powerful force for change that we'd hoped it would be" (Adapted from *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*, Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, p. 259).

Destiny — Creating What Will Be. In Destiny, you organize to get the job done. Destiny is about putting ideas into action and matching personal responsibility with passion. Typically, participants are asked to consider both what the municipality (or department) *and* community members or employees can and will do to give form to their intentions. In this way, what emerges are both ideas for collective action and volunteers —



rather than a wish list for what someone else should do.

While the projects noted above emphasize highly engaging, broad-based community engagement, cities also benefit from the power of AI in strengthening public-private partnerships. The Eagle P3 Project, a major part of the FasTracks passenger rail expansion linking Denver International Airport to the center of the city, is the first major transit project in the United States to include a private party that builds, finances, and operates the system. Recognizing the project's complexity and significance, Denver launched an AI process in 2012 to create an efficient collaborative partnership between the City, the Regional Transportation District (RTD), and the construction company, Denver Transit Partners. In this AI process, the Destiny phase focused on streamlining decision-making processes. Specifically, the project partners refined the review and approval processes for specific segments of the commuter rail line and created a more comprehensive and functional executive oversight structure. In addition, the process improved the relationships between RTD, Denver Transit Partners, and the City of Denver, and restored the partners' commitment to working together to get the job done right. According to Lesley Thomas, Denver Department of Public Works engineer and deputy manager, the process

"provided a framework to bring three already skilled groups together and make them even better ... with a better understanding of their strengths and defined roles."

The Promise of Positive Governing

What benefits can cities and towns expect from a well-conceived and managed AI process?

- **A more engaged community.** Following Focus on Longmont, the residents are more engaged than ever in City projects, in part because of the positive connections they made during the strategic planning process. Recalling how Focus on Longmont connected the community, Sandra Seader, Longmont assistant city manager, remarked, "One interview gathering included people from a soccer club, the finance department, the senior center, and a fishing club. These people would almost never talk to each other. By the end, the soccer guys were trading cards with the fishermen, saying 'My kids would like to try this.' It was so cool. People who would never otherwise meet now had someone new from the community that they could call a friend."
- **Strengthened internal capacity.** The process of developing the plan made Longmont a leader in community engagement. Seader noted that the City has saved significant resources by building

internal capabilities, reducing its need to hire outside consultants.

- **Improved internal and external relationships.** Boulder County participants were especially appreciative of how the process connected more rural residents with city dwellers, and smaller communities with county and city government.
- **Energized employees with new ideas.** Denver discovered how the process helps employees become a part of solutions-focused thinking.
- **A positive community identity.** As Cindy Hoge, a participant in the Longmont discussions, expressed, "This process has been such a positive experience. It has reaffirmed to me that Longmont is full of caring individuals who appreciate our City leadership and look forward to our vibrant future."

- **More productive regional and public-private partnership.** On the Eagle P3 Project, Denver saw the parties learn to appreciate each other's roles and become fully committed to new approaches and solutions.

AI's unconditionally positive stance invites people who might not otherwise engage to join in. The process of sharing stories and focusing on strengths is energizing, and reacquaints people with what they most value in their city, town, or department. Appreciating strengths also builds community confidence in the bold future they co-create. AI lifts up and connects all voices — the public (including those who often go unheard), the formal leadership, and the informal leadership. It fosters a willingness to meet "the other," and a capacity to create life-affirming ways of moving forward together.

For more information on how municipalities are using AI, see the November 2013 edition of the Appreciative Inquiry Practitioner and Chapter 11: Appreciative Inquiry: A Process for Community Planning in The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change.

ON BECOMING AN APPRECIATIVE CITY

By Karen Roney, Longmont human & cultural services director, and Sandra Seader, Longmont assistant city manager

WHILE LONGMONT BEGAN USING APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY (AI) TO SET DIRECTION IN A LARGE, HIGHLY engaging citywide strategic plan (Focus on Longmont), it now weaves AI and AI-based practices into everything from policing to branding. Longmont has discovered that AI energizes City employees and creates empathetic relationships between public servants and those they serve. AI is not an event or a process but a way of governing.

Longmont, a community of nearly 90,000, is on the path to becoming an appreciative city. Not only is AI an invaluable tool that the City uses in its municipal role of service provider, but also in its broader leadership roles as facilitator and convener of collective community action.

Several years ago, the City of Longmont combined its fire and police operations into a single department to achieve administrative, communications, and support services efficiencies; promote leadership development; and maximize its collective resources in serving the community. The fire department historically had operated within a fairly traditional service delivery system. The new public safety chief (formerly the police chief) set in motion a process to transform the fire service culture into one that inspires innovation and encourages silo-busting to create new partnerships, while honoring its rich traditions and special expertise. During the most recent strategic planning processes, staff introduced AI so that the community shares responsibility for its own safety, and has realistic expectations of what the police and fire departments can deliver.

In the fire strategic planning process, the chief brought together a cross section of fire personnel, other members of the Public Safety Department, City staff, and community members. Working side by side with people from outside the organization, and seeing how fire personnel could form productive relationships, is one of the most worthy results. The enthusiasm generated by participants from outside the department about the opportunity to be part of the planning process was contagious. But when fire staff saw the genuine interest in and appreciation for their profession, and the gratitude of the community for being included in the process, they felt supported and fully engaged in the planning process.

AI worked because it emphasizes the development of relationships, which other types of facilitation do not. It created a common vision built on strengths, opened up new opportunities that had never before been considered, and has been very effective in getting people moving forward on the same path.

In 2011, the Longmont Downtown Development Authority (LDDA) concluded a visioning process to create an arts and entertainment district. It involved key informant interviews and community stakeholder meetings that generated numerous ideas and dreams about downtown's future as a destination for arts, entertainment, and cultural activities.

To make sure that the vision of an arts and entertainment district did not become just another plan that sat on a shelf gathering dust, never to be implemented, the LDDA asked the City of Longmont to facilitate a process to incorporate the arts and entertainment plan into LDDA's overall strategic plan. After "Discovery" on what is great about downtown, and asking "If downtown were perfect, what would it look like?", "Dream" led to a very deep and engaging conversation among the board members in a positive, nonthreatening atmosphere that made it comfortable for people to share their thoughts and opinions. Board members added their ideas on what would make downtown perfect to a large chart that also contained the top priorities from the arts-and-entertainment plan. They then categorized and dot-voted on all the items — "Design." The goals that were most important for the arts and entertainment district became incorporated into the organization's larger strategic plan, or "Destiny." Now, all of LDDA's efforts focus in the same direction.

In this case, the City was a neutral facilitator and did not have an agenda — it was the LDDA board's dream. But being part of the process increased the trust between the LDDA and the City, and helped both entities achieve mutual goals.

In 2010, the City acted as a catalyst to bring together the entire community to develop a consistent and authentic branding campaign that promotes Longmont as an ideal place for commerce and as a destination location. City staff, in conjunction with their economic development partners, utilized AI to conduct the branding research and development, rather than engage an outside consultant to determine what was special about Longmont.

Across all the focus groups and individual interviews, a few key questions were used to discover what people love about Longmont. Those interviewed universally expressed their appreciation not only for Longmont, but that when they were in Longmont, no matter how or when they arrived, they found a place where they belong.

The AI process also enabled the City to get the information it needed to create its own branding campaign, You Belong in Longmont, at a tiny fraction of the cost of a consultant. The money that was available for branding was used, instead, to hire professional photography and design services to implement the campaign. And doing the majority of the work in-house for just a few hundred dollars — and with a broad spectrum of the community — helped provide insulation from criticism of the campaign. There is, after all, no one better positioned to create an authentic community brand than the community itself.