

AI Practitioner

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Appreciative Inquiry in Coaching: Exploration and Learnings

Barbara Sloan and Trudy Canine

barbara@sloandialogs.com and trudy@pathfinderplus.com

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) Coaching is the practical application of AI Principles to the process in which a trained Coach is engaged by a person (or by an organization on behalf of a person) to function as a counselor and advisor. In fact, AI Coaching describes this process as a co-creative partnership between the client, the Coach and the clients' relevant social system.

Over the last decade this practice of using Coaches has become perhaps the fastest growing innovation in the behavioral science field of Organization Development. There is a growing demand for skilled Coaches and a comparable growth of methods and training institutions that prepare people to act as Coaches. While many of these methods are both innovative and effective, it is our conviction that the Appreciative Inquiry philosophy and practice is in and of itself the ideal process for both enabling people in organizations to become more aware of their own strengths and abilities in ways that increase their effectiveness in all parts of their life and to create robust support for change in the client's social system.

AI Coaching is highly effective for a variety of specific coaching purposes, including leadership, transition, development, working relationships and life planning. The principles of AI influence all stages of AI Coaching, from the initial contact through the final follow-up sessions. The phases of AI guide the general sequence of activities. Both the principles and phases provide guidance in the improvisational dance of the coaching process.

The hallmark of AI Coaching is robust awareness and appropriate engagement of the social network of which the client is a part and which is relevant to the objectives of the coaching. The following describes the impact of the principles of AI in AI Coaching, adding

Wholeness to the well recognized five Principles of Constructionist, Positive, Anticipatory, Simultaneity and Poetic.

Constructionist Principle

The principle of Social Construction recognizes that meaning is made and futures are created through conversations; that our perceptions of reality itself are the product of these conversations; and that our perceived reality defines what we see or do not see (Discover Phase). The stories that are told and retold both formally and informally create and perpetuate the reality of our perceptions. These stories have the power to limit our options as well as to expand the possibilities we can imagine and create. Social construction is happening all the time, everywhere. In organizations, we refer to the socially constructed environment and belief system as the organization's culture.

In AI Coaching, we intentionally engage the social system in support of the desired outcomes of the coaching. We use a wide angle lens, if you will, to engage significant others in conversations specifically designed to:

- Deepen the client's appreciation of her/his unique contributions and accomplishments (Discover)
- Contribute to energizing dreams for his/her future and the future of the social system to which they all belong (Dream)
- Contribute to ideas for practical actions to realize the dream (Design)
- Actively support the client in the destiny/delivery phase of his/her development, forming the social architecture to sustain energy for change (Destiny/Deliver)

Positive Principle

At any moment we can choose to focus on deficits or strengths. From the first contact, including a request for coaching and what might be considered a contracting (Define Phase)ⁱ conversation, AI Coaching unabashedly focuses on the positive and the strengths, even in the midst of challenges or “problems” that may have led to the request for coaching. Recognizing that each conversation has the capacity to either further cement existing perceptions or to open awareness to strengths and new possibilities, each interaction in AI Coaching is guided by the appreciative principle. Since “we find what we look for,” the AI Coach looks for what is appreciative.

We are learning much more about the impact of this positive principle through the work of Barbara Fredrickson. Her innovative experiments have led to the “broaden and build” theory of positive emotion, that positive emotions are not only markers of well-being but creators of well-being. She has shown that positive emotions lead to expanded awareness and thinking, greater creativity and enhanced capabilities. Positive emotions create a shift from an “I” to a “we” perspective and so develop robust networks of social support. So positive emotions and the results they create form a self-reinforcing spiral in which individuals flourish and continually grow towards optimal functioning. In the authors' experience, when a community of people collectively experiences positive emotion,

appreciates strengths and imagines an energizing future, positive change is accelerated and momentum sustained. ⁱⁱ

In a related hypothesis, Fredrickson holds that positive emotions should be antidotes to any lingering effects of negative emotions. The authors have also experienced this not only at the individual level in coaching but in transformation of the social system by being engaged in the AI Coaching process.

In AI Coaching, when a positive, appreciative context is well established, it is sometimes important to also appreciate a problem or challenge. This can be done with questions to call up strengths that have helped in past difficult situations and lessons learned then that are relevant in the present challenge. Questions can also help the client (and others) to broaden their choices of interpretation and action, to assess what they can and cannot control, what they can influence, and to what they may choose to adapt. What AI Coaching does not do is dig up problems. Rather AI Coaching works with the problem when and if it arises.

Anticipatory Principle

We create what we imagine. As Marv Weisbord says, “If you're going to have a fantasy, why not go first class?” AI Coaching enables the client to create her/his first class fantasy (Dream Phase), with the support of others whose input and support are important to the client's future. To quote Peter Drucker, great “guru” of the management sciences, “The best way to predict the future is to create it!”

Principle of Simultaneity

Change begins with the first question we ask. So AI Coaching begins by asking questions about the best of times and wishes for the future, even in the face of the habitual inclination in our culture to focus on what's wrong and what's missing – to focus on problems. As Barbara Carpenter, a psychotherapist, says, “It's a new now!” And it is in every moment that we are changing and influencing change. AI Coaching is mindful that moment to moment, in every question we ask or statement we make, we are creating the future for good or ill.

Poetic Principle

With the daily demands for productivity in life and work, the poetic, the artistic, the inspirational can easily be lost. In AI Coaching, we begin by asking for stories rather than for lists or ideas. Thus, the poetic principle seeks to give voice to the poetic impulse, to illuminate aspirations and dreams and to create opportunities for deeper connections between people – all toward the creation of a valued, shared future.

Another view of the poetic principle is that of multiple interpretations. Just as a poem can have different meanings for each reader, the poetic principle in AI Coaching legitimizes differing views, expanding the awareness of the coaching client and creating opportunities to deepen understanding and appreciation of those differing views.

Principle of Wholenessⁱⁱⁱ

Wholeness acknowledges interconnectedness rather than divisions. Wholeness has a permeable or flexible boundary and is defined and redefined by the focus on inquiry. So in

AI Coaching, a client may engage his/her manager and his/her staff in inquiry, later expanding this to include colleagues and clients. By engaging the most appropriate and most whole group of people (rather than a sample) in generative conversations, AI Coaching creates widely shared awareness and appreciation of differing views, shared dreams for the future and greater support for meaningful change.

If coaching doesn't include an active interaction between the person being coached and the environment in which the client lives or works, it's not AI Coaching.

The introduction of any new philosophy in organization development processes involves a transitional period when people learn to apply the new philosophy to existing practices; when practitioners walk with one foot in each paradigm. Several articles in this special edition do just this, comparing AI with other schools of coaching and describing how AI and another approach to coaching can be mutually enriching. You will hear how several authors have adapted their approaches to incorporate AI in different ways. At this stage we hear about AI *in* coaching.

Our aim in this special edition of the AIP is to introduce AI Coaching as a full application of AI in its own right. We also aim to illuminate the many ways in which AI Coach practitioners are using AI in their work and combining it with other schools of coaching or using it to support larger change initiatives.

Overview of Articles

Section 1: Foundations – Social Construction in AI Coaching & Overview of Inquiry about AI Coaching

Our lead article by Barbara Sloan, guest co-editor, explores how mindfulness of Social Construction can enhance coaching and the results it achieves. She suggests that it is the primary differentiator between an AI Coaching initiative and other coaching frameworks. Barbara presents guidelines for effectively engaging others within the client's social system in generative conversations that support both the client and the wider organization or social system of which s/he is a part. Using this wholistic approach, individuals and their systems are able to create and sustain meaningful and productive change.

Next, Trudy Canine, guest co-editor, presents highlights from her interviews of 35 coaching practitioners, blended with some of her own coaching practices. When specifically asking coaches about their use of social construction in coaching, she found very few who consciously apply social construction theory to their work. Thus, her article also features some brief comments on how she applies social construction theory in AI Coaching.

Section 2: AI & Other Coaching Approaches: Similarities, Impact on Practice, Innovations and Two-Way Enhancement

It is no surprise that the five principles of AI play a significant role in coaching, as practiced by all of our authors and described in their articles. For most of us, these principles influence every stage of our coaching. Our next article by Bob Tschannen-Moran illustrates how he has applied the AI principles to his “5PC Coaching” in a more linear fashion offering yet another perspective on the significance of AI principles in coaching.

Each of the next four articles explores how a coach trained in both AI and another well-

developed coaching model combines the two. They share with us the similarities between the approaches and how they have combined them to enhance their coaching methodology. They also note questions that arise as they blend the approaches to coaching. Carol Napolitano is trained in Newfeld Ontological Coaching; Diane Newell's eclectic work blends AI, Gestalt and Spiral Dynamics in her Renewal Model of Coaching; Roz Kay and Robyn McCulloch are trained Somatic Coaches with the Strozzi method; and Susan Donnan uses a blend of Co-Active Coaching and AI.

Section 3: Applications & Case Stories

In our last two articles, we focus on AI applications in client organizations. Gloria Henry, an internal practitioner at National Public Radio describes her work in relationship coaching and her work with a senior executive who now uses AI in his own work. We also hear from the senior executive how AI has influenced his work and enables him to coach others more effectively. He feels that his work with Gloria and AI revolutionized his leadership, enabling him to build strong support for a major change initiative. And our final article, by Tom Osborn, is a great story about using AI in Coaching as a part of a change initiative that transformed a hospital department, taking it from “near death” to a thriving, respected internal operation.

In this special edition we hope to help coaches feel comfortable blending AI with all that they already know and, at the same time, recognize the power of full or fuller use of AI principles and practices in coaching. We hope our colleagues will join us in continuing to expand our intentional use of social construction theory in our coaching work. We hope to stimulate dialogue and continued innovation based on a solid understanding of the principles of AI, and in doing so, to enable our clients to realize their fullest potential.

Footnotes

- i. In *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*, Watkins and Mohr added the Definition Phase to the original 4-D Model of AI, which included Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny/Deliver.
- ii. *Broadening and Building Through Positive Emotions*, Barbara Fredrickson. Transcript from voice recording. 2002, Positive Psychology Summit
- iii. Ken Wilbur describes wholeness in his notion of *nested holons*, in which one level of consciousness is included and transcended in the next level of consciousness, in his book, *A Theory of Everything*, Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2000.