Guidance for Successful Appreciative Interviews

Elements of appreciative inquiry (AI) can be integrated into the daily and weekly meetings of clinical teams (see AI module). In addition, an organization may choose to do a more formal and in-depth AI exercise, or appreciative interview, to understand more fully the strengths of the organization through the eyes of its workforce. This more in-depth AI exercise can also be used as a team-building activity, with members pairing off and taking turns at subsequent meetings being the interviewer and the interviewee.

*This document provides an example interview script, a sample interview template, and an example of interviewer documentation to help you get started.*

Example Interview Script

*This script will guide you through conducting an appreciative interview. It includes an explanation of the purpose of the interview and questions about the interviewee’s personal background, strengths, gifts and values. The script includes space for documenting the interviewee’s responses if the interview will not be recorded.*

**Introduce the purpose**

*Introduce yourself and describe your role in the project, your job or whatever other identifying information you wish to offer.*

Thanks for meeting with me.

I’d like to briefly summarize why we’re having this conversation today. We’re trying to learn about moments when things went right. This will help us at [insert organization name] live by our values in our everyday work and be our best.

Before we start, I would like to explain a little bit about what we are going to do because it may be a little different from what you are used to. This is going to be what we call an appreciative interview. I am going to ask you questions about times when you experienced things working at their best here at [insert organization name]. Many times, we try to ask questions about things that aren’t working well—the problems—so that we can fix them. In this case, we are trying to find out about the things at their best—the successes—so that we can find out what works and why, and find ways to infuse more of it into our [practice/hospital/health] system.

I want to be sure you understand that what I hear from you will remain anonymous; your name will not be used, but your stories and quotes will be included as part of the collection of interviews from across our [practice/hospital/health] system to help guide our work. And it’s possible that your anonymous stories and quotes may be used in public presentations and publications. Is that okay with you?

**Gather personal background**

As we get started, I’d like to know a little bit about you. What’s your role here at [insert organization name] and how long have you been here? (*Note: Take care not to record information that would reveal the identity of the person you are interviewing.*)

**Tips for conducting the interview:**

* Let the person you are interviewing tell his or her story; don’t tell your stories or offer your own comments or opinions about their experiences.
* Be genuinely curious about their experiences, thoughts and feelings.
* Some people will take longer to think about their answers—allow for silence.
* If somebody doesn’t want to or can’t answer any of the interview questions, or if you run out of time, that’s okay.

Here are some suggested responses to explore what the interviewee is telling you in more detail.

* Tell me more.
* Why do you feel that way?
* Why was that important to you?
* How did that affect you?
* What do you think was really making it work?
* How has it changed you?

Dealing with negative statements

Sometimes, people have difficulty staying on track with the interview’s focus on appreciating what is positive. Instead, they are drawn to express very strong feelings about things they don’t like. This is important information, and we do not want to exclude it in any way. As complaining usually leads to hopelessness and exhaustion, try to re-channel their energy down a more constructive path to uncover a hope or wish hidden inside the complaint that might hold the key to creative solutions, new ideas and new possibilities.

Here are several ways to handle an interview that is moving towards negative stories and comments.

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| **Strategy** | **Tactic** |
| Postponing | You can tell the other person that you would like to make a note of what he or she has said and come back to it later (and be sure that you do!). The concluding questions about two wishes and any other comments are particularly good places to collect these “negative” data. |
| Empathic listening | Sometimes people may have such a strong feeling about something that they are unable to think about anything else until they have had a chance to vent. In that situation, listen empathically as they tell their story. Rather than inviting the interviewee to provide a lot of detail, simply reflect back to them your sense of what they are feeling so they know you have heard and understood them (for example, “it sounds like that was very frustrating for you”). The biggest risk to the interview is that you will get caught in their negativity and lose your capacity to be appreciative. Try to avoid this by keeping a caring and affirmative spirit, and trying to bring out the wish inside the complaint. |
| Redirecting | If the negative experience does not seem that serious, or if they have had the chance to express the drama of the situation and their negative energy is abating, find a way to guide them back to the interview questions. You might say something like “I think I understand a little bit about some of the problems you see (paraphrase a few that you’ve heard), but I would like to guide us back to looking at what is happening when things are working at their best. Can you think of a time, even the smallest moment, when you saw something at its best?” If they can’t think of a time they experienced this at your organization, find out if they ever had the experience in ANY organization, and if that still doesn’t work, that’s okay. |

Assuring anonymity

For some purposes, such as an organization-wide initiative to understand organizational strengths and assets, it will be appropriate to assure interviewees of the anonymity of their responses*.* If you will be recording and transcribing the interviews, take steps to ensure the privacy and the secure storage of the digital files.

Adapted from a guide originally developed by Penelope Williamson, ScD, and Anthony Suchman, MD, MA, and published as Appendix A in: Taylor AC, Karnieli-Miller O, Inui TS, Ivy SS, Frankel RM. Appreciating the power of narratives in healthcare: a tool for understanding organizational complexity and values. In: Caudlin CN, Sarangi SS, eds. *Handbook of Communication in Organizations and Professions.* Berlin, Germany: DeGruyter Mouton; 2011.

Sample Interview Template

**Discuss personal meaning and commitment**

People do their best work when they are doing things that they find personally meaningful, and when they feel that their work makes a difference. During your time at [insert organization name], there have no doubt been high points and low points, peaks and valleys. For now, I’d invite you to think of a time that meant a lot to you, when things went right, a time that brought out the best in you. Maybe a patient thanked you or something you did made a small difference, like looking at a photo of his new grandchild or hanging up his coat for him.

Please tell the story of that time.

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Without worrying about being modest, please tell me what it was about you—your unique qualities, gifts or capacities; decisions you made; or actions you took—that contributed to this experience?

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What did others contribute or do?

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What aspects of the situation made a difference (for example, the place, the time of day or year, recent events)?

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Now, think of a time at [insert organization name] when you or your values or beliefs were challenged. Please tell me a story about that time.

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**Talk about strengths and gifts**

We each have different qualities, gifts and skills we bring to the world and to our work. Think about the things you value about yourself, the nature of your work and [insert organization name]. At work, we’re always dealing with challenges and change. How have your strengths and values helped you deal with challenges and change?

a) Yourself: Without being humble, what do you most value about yourself, your special gifts and talents as a person, a friend, a son or daughter, a parent, a spouse, a citizen or a professional? What would your best friend say they like most about you (for example, “I’m funny,” “I like to troubleshoot” or “I volunteer in my community”)?

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b) Your work: When you are feeling good about your work, what do you like about the work itself?

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**Describe personal values**

How do your personal values match those of [insert organization name] (for example, honesty, compassion, teamwork)?

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Where you have seen examples of these values at [insert organization name]?

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Name two or three other people that you believe truly live these values at [insert organization name], who you consider to be role models.

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If you had a camera in hand, where would you take pictures of places or people that reflect our best, where people went above and beyond their job and deserve a pat on the back?

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Example Interviewer Documentation

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| **Interviewer Identifying Information**  Please submit this information each time a recording is downloaded. |
| Name of interviewer: |
| Date and location of interview: |
| Record number/file number: |
| Job title of interviewee: |
| Key takeaways from the interview: |

Source: *AMA. Practice transformation series: using appreciative inquiry to foster a positive organizational culture. 2016.*