


May 2021

Volume 23 Number 2

ISBN 978-1-907549-47-2

 [dx.doi.org/10.12781/978-1-907549-47-2](https://doi.org/10.12781/978-1-907549-47-2)

# AI Practitioner

International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry



## The Open Issue, 2021

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Photo by Karl Egger from Pixaby

Co-publishers

**The David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry and  
Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company**



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# Strength-based Versus Deficit-based Action Learning for Developing Leaders, Teams, and Organizations in Asia: A Field Report of an Appreciative Inquiry and Action Learning Practitioner

**Formal learning that equips learners with programmed knowledge extracted from the past is no longer sufficient. Action learning was founded to help managers deal with new unknowns. The author of this article poses the question 'is it possible to run a deficit-based method positively using an Appreciative Inquiry model?' using a case study from Asia to support her conclusions.**

Action learning, founded by Reg Revans in the 1940s, has become a popular method for supporting leaders to tackle complex issues in organizations and develop themselves simultaneously. The method encourages leaders and teams to ask questions to stimulate critical reflections and make better decisions.

The World Institute for Action Learning (WIAL) approach, founded by Dr Michael Marquart, mostly emphasizes problem-solving. As an experienced practitioner of both Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and action learning, I formulated an action learning process aligned with the essential strength-based principles to support clients in the development of leaders and young talents to build organizational strengths. This field report critically compares both the strength-based (AI) and deficit-based (mainly WIAL) action learning approaches.

## Why action learning?

In the VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) world, formal learning that equips learners with programmed knowledge extracted from the past is no longer sufficient. Action learning was founded to help managers deal with new unknowns. Revans formulated the equation  $L = P + Q$  to illustrate the relationship between learning, programmed knowledge, and questioning insight: learning = programmed knowledge plus questioning insight. Insightful questions uncover new learning while taking actions and applying programmed knowledge.

*People tend to pay more attention to things that trigger negative emotion ... This mechanism helps generate a sense of urgency that helps engage learners in action learning.*

### Problems versus opportunities – Who takes side?

Although both pressing problems and exciting opportunities reinforce a desire to learn, why do most action learning approaches focus more on problems? Research shows that things of a negative nature significantly affect one's emotion, cognition, and behavior, even when neutral or positive natures are presented in equal intensity. This negative bias effect shows a significant impact on a wide range of aspects such as learning, memory, judgments, attention, decision-making, and risk considerations. In short, people tend to pay more attention to things that trigger negative emotions, such as problems and risks. This mechanism helps generate a sense of urgency that helps engage learners in action learning.

### Action Learning in practice

According to Marquardt, action learning is:

a powerful problem-solving tool that has the amazing capacity to simultaneously build successful leaders, teams, and organizations. It is a process that involves a small group working on real problems, taking action, and learning as individuals, as a team, and as an organization while doing so. (Marquardt, p. 4)

Based on my experience and feedback from my clients, the WIAL process creates magical moments of personal and group inspiration. It consists of six components and two ground rules:

#### The six components of WIAL action learning

- *A problem:* It can be a problem, project, challenge, opportunity, issue, or task, which is real, significant, and urgent to engage learners in the process.
- *An action learning group or team:* It comprises four to eight members with diverse backgrounds to bring in new perspectives.
- *Insightful questioning and reflective listening:* The process is driven by questions, from defining to solving a problem. Instead of giving statements and sharing opinions, the insightful questions inspire deep reflections and learning.

- *Actions taken on the problem:* Taking actions on solving the problem allows the group to practice what they decided and extract deeper learning from their experience.
- *A commitment to learning:* Solutions to immediate pressing issues may easily lead to a quick fix. Cultivating system-wide learning culture and organizational change will require a long-term commitment.
- *An action learning coach:* This role is essential in the WIAL action learning process to achieve learning and performance through the process and insightful questions.

#### The two ground rules of WIAL action learning:

The process only has two straightforward ground rules to allow the group to function with the least restrictions:

1. *Statements are made only in response to questions:* The magic happens when members ask each other multi-dimensional questions to inspire new thoughts. Members are trained to think of questions first to engage others instead of just elaborating what is in their minds.
2. *Action learning coaches have the power to intervene when they sees an opportunity to improve the performance and learning of the group:* This inspires the group to reflect and make better decisions. The action learning coach is not involved in problem-solving and focuses on learning.

*The free flow of questions among group members generates heat and dynamic, especially in an organizational setting.*

The free flow of questions among group members generates heat and dynamic, especially in an organizational setting. The process challenges hidden group norms and underlying assumptions. A skillful coach can turn those into learning opportunities and give room for reflection before the group moves on. The process also requires the members to demonstrate and practice particular skills through questioning. This also inspires others to practice the same skill by responding to the question.

Although the approach handles problems and opportunities, its standard process and language mostly focus on problem-solving. For instance, one essential step is to define the problem statement, even if the group begins with an opportunity.

*The process has a step to review what works well in the group, which was incorporated with the notion of Appreciative Inquiry.*

### How about running a deficit-based process positively?

The process has a step to review what works well in the group, which was incorporated with the notion of Appreciative Inquiry. It lets the group reflect on what went well before exploring what could be done better. Some coaches tried to use strengths-based tools to identify individual members' strengths to practice and encourage more positive questions during the process.

Change in the language and questions may help run a deficit-based process more positively but will not eliminate the impact. To quote from one of the my clients, a senior executive of a major bank in Hong Kong, who hired me to offer practitioner training in both WIAL action learning and Appreciative Inquiry. His observation, when his team was going through the problem-solving process, that the team knitted their brows while struggling with the problem. On the contrary, he saw a glow on people's faces and hopes for a brighter future during the Appreciative Inquiry process.

### A case study in developing young talent in Asia through Strength-based Action

Inspired by the WIAL process and AI, I structured a strengths-based action learning framework as illustrated in this case study:

#### Background

A major bank in Hong Kong hired me to develop its future leaders in 2015. The program aimed at building its management trainees' capability to lead a project team of summer interns to conduct systematic organizational research and propose innovative projects to the top management. Eight management trainees and thirty-five summer interns participated in this one-and-a-half-month-long program. Each pair of management trainees co-led a team of around nine summer interns to complete a project. Each summer intern was assigned with a senior executive as his/her mentor.

#### Pre-engagement with major project stakeholders

Before initiating the program, the major stakeholders and their roles and responsibilities were defined with the client:

**1. Project sponsors:**

- *HR & Training function:* to co-design the program, engage stakeholders, offer support and review project progress
- *Involved functions and divisions:* to offer support to research teams to collect data through observations, hands-on work experience, non-structured interviews, etc.
- *Interns' mentors:* to serve as subject-matter-experts to provide necessary data through structured interviews and offer guidance to their mentees
- *Senior management:* to assess research teams' proposals and offer feedback

**2. Management trainees – Project team leaders & learning coach to:**

- Lead a project team with another management trainee
- Offer guidance and support on completing project to team and individual interns
- Hold accountability for their team's performance and quality of the final presentation
- Develop their team and individual members through reflective learning
- Review their own performance and be devoted to self-development
- Complete reports on learning for themselves, individuals and the team

**3. Summer interns – Project team members and research fellows to:**

- Implement research on the organization's strengths and good practices
- Record interview data and research findings
- Implement narrative analysis and co-create innovative ideas in a self-managed team based on research findings
- Structure and deliver a final presentation to the top management
- Review work progress and report to their team leaders



- Reflect and learn from their experience and contribute to team learning

**Tips:**

*The main focus was to leverage strengths instead of improving weaknesses.*

**The rationale of people and team development**

The main focus was to leverage strengths instead of improving weaknesses. One of the learning points was to identify measures to bring out the best in individuals and the team as a whole

**Roles for upholding learning and project**

Each small team had a learning coach and a project leader to hold the team accountable for their learning and action. The coach could be involved in the project. The process developed a self-managed team that could ultimately manage their learning and projects.

## The Engagement Process

**Tips:**

*If a problem or challenge was involved, the team reframed it into a topic they were eager to explore and achieve.*

**Project focus and topic**

Instead of focusing on a problem, the team defined an affirmative topic for an opportunity, a task or a project. If a problem or challenge was involved, the team reframed it into a topic they were eager to explore and achieve.

**The 4D Action Learning Process**

The team went through multiple AI 4D processes simultaneously to excel in learning and teamwork:

- Discovery: To explore individual strengths to contribute to the team, success stories related to the topic, and resources to be leveraged.
- Dream: To envision the future of both the team and project.
- Design: To determine team roles and responsibilities as well as the structural design elements of the project.
- Destiny: To identify action plans and milestones for learning and teamwork.

### Onsite engagements:

1. A one-and-a-half-day training workshop for all project leaders facilitated by our consulting team on:
  - Project management: applying Appreciative Inquiry as an organizational research method and innovative project management tool.
  - People and team development with Appreciative Leadership.
2. Four three-hour sessions with all participants every two weeks
  - Large group creative work and learning were facilitated by our consulting team; individual small teams were led and coached by the project leaders.
  - The sessions covered:
    - (1) Project teambuilding with Appreciative Inquiry 4Ds
    - (2) Project requirements and appreciative interviewing skills
    - (3) Value-based design of innovative products through 4Ds and Design Thinking
    - (4) Learning reflection on team progress and individual performance.

### Tips:

#### Dialogue flow and use of questions

All dialogue was driven by questions that supported the team to:

- Specify and examine major focuses and top priorities
- Explore and leverage individual and collective strengths
- Identify measures to bring out the best in people and make the best use of resources
- Develop an inventory of resources and success factors
- Explore possibilities and induce hope to generate momentum for learning and a positive future
- Engage others in co-creation and mutual support



*A strengths survey helped the team and leaders practice strengths appreciation and application.*

**Dialogue flow and use of questions**

- Build value-based design and put that into a trial
- Establish milestones and evaluate outcome
- Appreciate efforts and celebrate success
- Build a self-managed team accountable for its learning and performance.

**Application of strength-based survey**

A strengths survey helped the team and leaders practice strengths appreciation and application. All participants took the VIA survey to identify their character strengths and learned to apply the results in diverse life and work situations.

### Program Deliverables and Outcome:

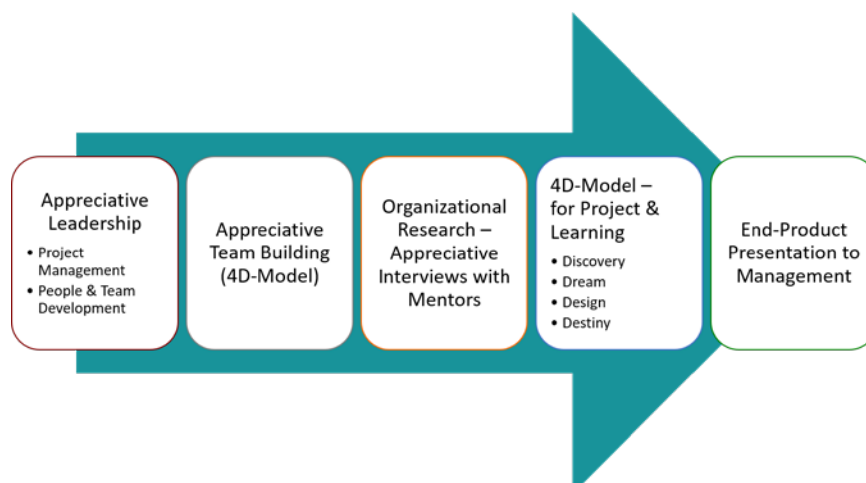
- Four innovative proposals were proposed to the top management, covering (1) a new credit card product targeting the younger generation, (2) a mobile app with social community functions, (3) a membership club targeting new parents, and (4) a promotion strategy for the South East Asian market.
- Quantitative and qualitative feedback collected from all participants:
  - In addition to learning Appreciative Inquiry and action learning applications in personal development, people engagement, team building and project management, the management trainees were offered a valuable opportunity to lead a project team. Some of them were first-time leaders, and the program supported their development of becoming future leaders.
  - A 30-item quantitative survey was developed to measure the awareness and performance in four major areas of the organization's leadership competency model of junior leader positions (i.e., self-management, team leadership, planning and execution). The management trainees completed the survey before, during and after the program; summer interns also filled out the survey that measured their project leaders' performance. Significant enhancement was recorded in all aspects.
  - The summer interns treasured the opportunity to conduct a structured interview with mentors and learn about the organization's strengths. They were also excited to use AI and Design Thinking principles to create new products and services.

*Cultivating the spirit of exploring possibilities of practical applications was key to reinforcing positive impacts.*

#### Tips:

##### Measures for long-lasting positive impacts

Cultivating the spirit of exploring possibilities of practical applications was key to reinforcing positive impacts. Applications could be as simple as incorporating the practice into thinking processes and daily dialogues, and to engaging people in reinventing work processes and initiatives on a large scale. Collecting and sharing success stories of such practices helped integrate it into the organizational culture while demonstrating positive outcome



#### Other cases in Asia

A similar strength-based action learning design of engagements has been implemented for clients which varied in duration, targeting leaders and young talent from the Southeast Asian region. Programs of longer duration allowed project teams time to pilot designs for testing and fine-tuning. A combination of onsite and virtual engagement was used in consideration of the participants' travel distance. In addition to VIA, other strengths-based surveys such as StrengthsFinder and Strength Profile were applied. (See Appendix A for comparative flow charts illustrating two program models held in over 6 week and 8.5-month periods).

*No matter which approaches a practitioner chooses to use, a full understanding and respect of the spirit is crucial.*

### Reflection: Which approach is better?

I have a strong personal preference towards the strengths-based approach based on my life and professional experience. The clients I have encountered who clearly expressed their preference for the deficit-based process did so because it aligned with their organizational culture and top management's leadership style. No matter which approaches a practitioner chooses to use, a full understanding and respect of the spirit is crucial to bring out the essence of the approach and achieve a congruent flow of engagement. A random blend of incompatible approaches (e.g., using strengths-based tools in a deficit-based process or vice versa) will create confusion and conflict.

### FURTHER READING

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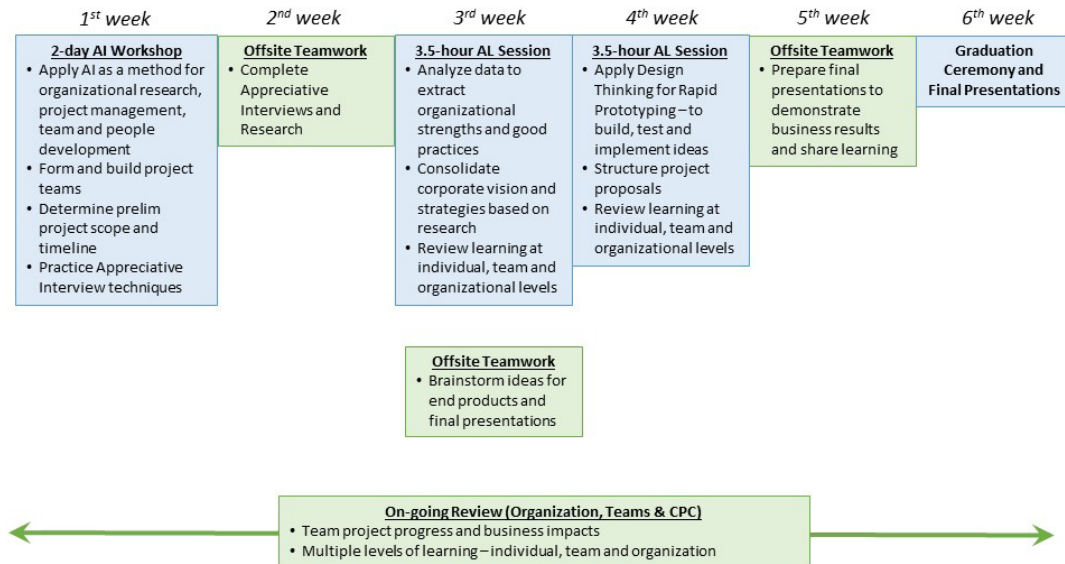
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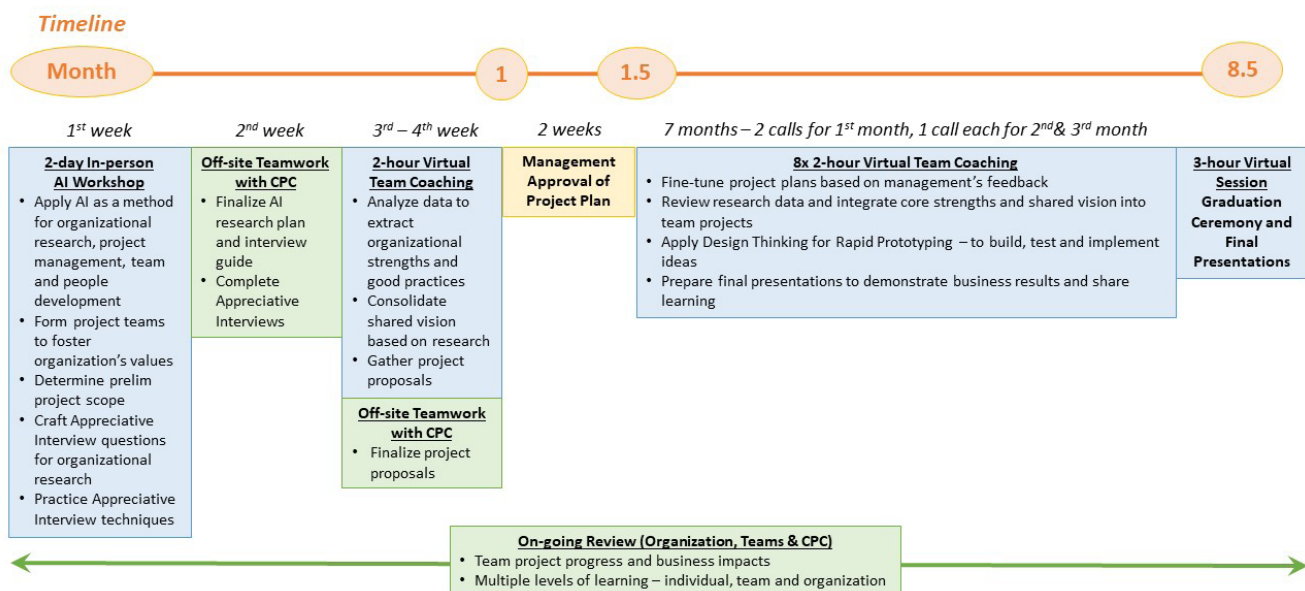
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## APPENDIX A: COMPARATIVE FLOW CHARTS ILLUSTRATING TWO PROGRAM MODELS HELD IN OVER 6 WEEK AND 8.5-MONTH PERIODS



### A 6-week Action Learning program with AI – with limited time for rapid prototyping and idea testing



### An 8.5-month Action Learning program with AI – with more time for rapid prototyping, product trial and fine-tuning

[Back to Table of Contents](#)