



Mobius, Inc.

Complimentary Guides for Positive Futures

The Mobius Model™ and Appreciative Inquiry

A shared vision of a positive future is a critical requirement for healthy groups, organizations and communities. Two approaches – Appreciative Inquiry and the Mobius Model™ -- provide complementary principles and practices for guiding small and large-scale visioning processes. Two key, complementary principles and practices are outlined to clarify how the integration of these two approaches can guide community-wide conversations that result in a compelling, shared vision and collaborative action. No attempt is made here to present a full account of either the Mobius Model or the AI process.¹

Both the Mobius Model and AI call attention to the role of conversation in the process of relationship change and development at all levels – between individuals, among group members, and in organizations and communities. Of course, not all conversations lead to positive outcomes. Appreciative Inquiry and the Mobius Model are both guides to conversations that produce creative results. Two outcomes of creative conversations can powerfully contribute to the capacity of a community to shape its own future:

A shared vision of possible futures that elicits real commitment, and
Collaborative action to make that vision real

A key premise of *Appreciative Inquiry* is that communities and organizations grow toward the questions they ask. If we inquire about “problems”, our problems will grow. If we inquire about what’s working that we want to build on, we will grow our capacity to be even better. AI proposes that conversation can be designed to include hundreds, even thousands, of individuals in ways that result in a compelling, positive vision of the future for the organization or community.

AI outlines an inquiry process that begins with the identification of 3-5 key *Topics of Inquiry* to guide the conversation of participants through 4 phases – *Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny*. Once the topics are identified, the inquiry focuses on questions related to discovering the best that members of the community have already experienced. Sharing the stories about their most extraordinary experiences provides a basis for dreaming together; what more could be possible if the extraordinary became ordinary. The *Design* questions are about how to build on what already works to imagine and create even more extraordinary results, e.g., places to live and work. *Destiny*, the last phase, is named to suggest the open-ended nature of the process. AI practitioners believe that an appreciative inquiry, once begun, need never stop. The energy generated by the

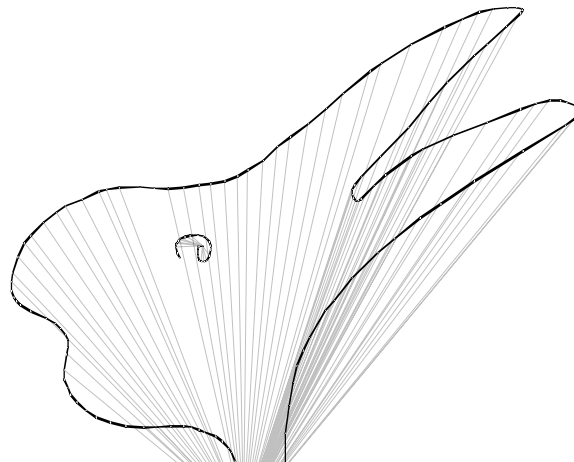
shared appreciation of what is already working in a community can fuel an endless round of discovery, dreaming, and designing that builds on strength. The questions that guide the *Destiny* phase are about how to support actions that realize the current vision and enable it to continue. How can the inquiry be, as Frost describes a poem; “like a piece of ice on a hot stove [that] must ride on its own melting”?ⁱⁱ

As noted one implication of the AI premise – that systems grow towards the questions asked – is that “problem-focused” questions tend to result in even more problems. Participants new to Appreciative Inquiry often see an apparent dilemma in this premise. While the prescription to focus on the best of what is makes immediate sense to most people, it can be taken to mean that problems should be avoided. “But if I look only at what is working in my community, what will happen to the things I know are not working!?” Skillful practitioners of AI can fold questions about problems into the appreciative inquiry, but the language of Appreciative Inquiry can often make problem statements seem wrong, something to be avoided.

The ***Mobius Model*** offers a clear approach for honoring the inevitable “negative” statements and collaboratively transforming them into positive outcomes. The Mobius Model provides an explicit guide for transforming “negative”, problem-focused, conversations into shared images of desirable possibilities. Mobius theory and practice illuminates how the “negative” images that point directly to what we “don’t want” (problems) also point indirectly to what we “do want” (positive outcomes). “Problems” can provide a key to discovering a positive, shared vision hidden by “problem-saturated” conversations.

Understanding the distinction between monologue and dialogue guides Mobius theory and practice for transforming “problem” focused conversations. Dialogue is a conversation in which participants add the viewpoints of others to their own, even when the viewpoints seem to contradict. By listening to understand each other, participants in a dialogue begin to perceive possibilities not visible from their own viewpoint alone.

What do you see in the image below?



The image will be seen by some as a “duck” and by others as a “rabbit”. Of course, once the other interpretation of the image is pointed out, it is possible to recognize how it can be seen either way. It is also possible to refuse to acknowledge the validity of other points of view and to argue for your view that it is either a duck or a rabbit.

Monologues (as defined by the Mobius Model) are conversations in which participants strategically communicate to defend their own viewpoint. They share only the thoughts, feelings and proposals for action that they think will persuade others to agree with their viewpoint. I learned from my country cousins that, when you show your hog at the county fair, you try to maneuver so that only the best features are visible to the judges and the defects remain hidden. Likewise, in a debate, the speaker calls attention to the “positive” features of her own argument and to the “negative/problem” features of other viewpoints. The aim of monologue is agreement, not mutual understanding.

Dialogue develops a shared vision among a diversity of viewpoints within a community by welcoming the respectful sharing of the content of monologues. This means that participants must listen to understand each other especially when they disagree. By listening to understand the best that each has experienced, even (or especially) when their experiences are very different, new, shared possibilities can come into view. From the perspective of the Mobius Model, Appreciative Inquiry provides an approach for bringing the differing, positive qualities of a community and its members into dialogue, but little guidance for including “negative” monologues, when they show up, in a creative way.

While Mobius practice agrees that the way to development a positive and compelling vision of the future is to begin with what is already working, what we want to celebrate and grow, it is inevitable that some negative statements will be expressed when all stakeholders are invited to participate. A key Mobius practice for including negative monologues into the dialogue in groups, organizations and communities is facilitating the transformation of “what’s wrong” statements and images (what speakers say they *don’t want*) into what is “missing that would be desirable” (What the same speaker would say they *do want*. A currently missing, but desirable possibility is an important step toward the definition of a positive future.) It is crucial that the speaker develop the positive vision of the future in their own words, e.g., “I don’t like my boss,” becomes “What’s missing is real respectful listening to my point of view,” not, “Fire my boss.”

Any written records from the appreciative inquiry must include only transformed “problem talk”; the positive outcome statements. Long practice in facilitating dialogue among members of groups, organizations, or communities in conflict has demonstrated that this powerful technique usually, brings the hidden positive common ground into view for all participants.

EXAMPLE: After decades of adversarial, sometimes bitter, negotiations, the national organizations for the IBEW (electrical union) and NECA (contractors) mandated that local unions and contractors find ways to “partner”; otherwise both organizations would continue to lose vital market share. The Orange County, CA union and their contractor

bosses agreed reluctantly to meet with Mobius consultants to explore next steps. They laughed at any notion of focusing on the positive. In separate conversations the leaders of each group were asked to translate their loud and passionate monologues, about what is “wrong” (what they *don’t want*) into a description of what they *do want*. They answered the question, “What is missing now that you would need to see to say that working with Mobius consultants had been worth your time and resources?” Their answers could not require a change in the other side, like “They would stop being such jerks, and would...” The question required the leaders to change the familiar way they talked (and thought) about the situation – from what is “wrong” (that usually required “them” to change) to what is missing that they *do want*. Below are the lists from the two leadership groups of what they said they wanted (positive statements).

IBEW Viewpoint From All Union Conference July 19-20	NECA Viewpoint From NECA Conference July 22
1. Training to anticipate changes in the Industry	4. Respond to changing technologies which require new skills and sometime less skills
2. Develop new approaches to recovery of market share	1. New, flexible rules for new approaches to market recovery
3. Improve public reputation of IBEW and NECA	2. Improve public reputation of unions
4. Better communication to develop trust and respect workers \diamond contractors workers \diamond workers	4. New ways of union & contractors working together (given the limitations of everyone’s schedules)
5. Organize & educate the labor force	4. Respond to the declining union market share
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop political support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respond to the changing national and local market conditions, i.e.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve moral of workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift from local to regional markets
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce the competition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Downsizing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase profit and productivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dollar driven competition

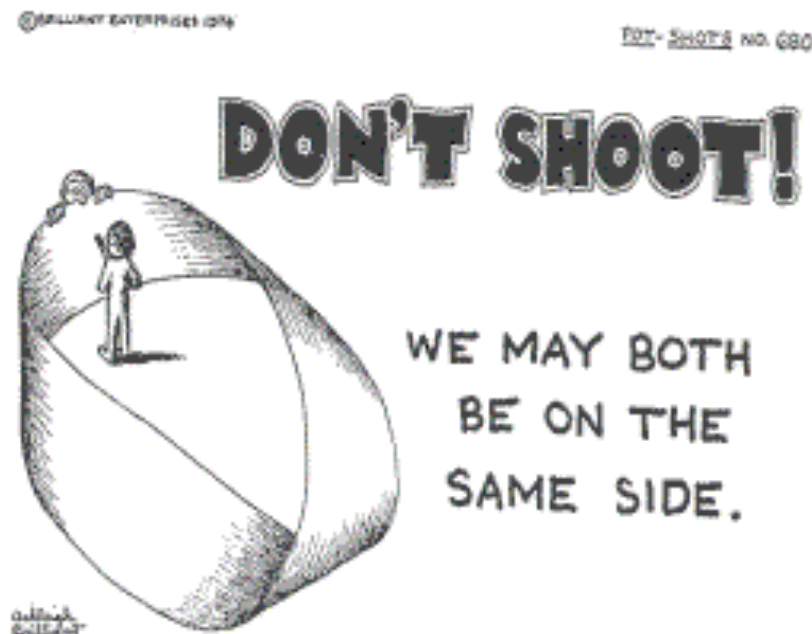
Members of both groups were amazed and skeptical at first. They found it hard to believe that both sides wanted the same (positive) things even though their lists, which they

acknowledged were accurate, clearly seemed to agree. But, when the shared “missing” items were added to other, already established points of agreement, it was clear that the current situation provided plenty of compelling possibilities for collaborative action. These possibilities for partnership had just been hidden from view by the old, negative monologues. They began a year long process of dialogue and collaboration that brought national attention and accomplished all of their shared commitments.

The practice of transforming apparently “negative” statements into to positive possibilities is one important way that the Mobius Model brings a complementary perspective and practice to Appreciative Inquiry. Using both approaches, the possibilities for the future can emerge from either positive or negative monologues. When the members of a community come together to share their vision of what could be, everything mentioned, extraordinary success or persisting problems can be used in the development of an exciting positive vision that provides common ground for action.

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In summary, both Appreciative Inquiry and the Mobius Model practice provide a guide for conversations that result in inspiring, shared visions that lead to commitment and collaborative action. The power of the vision is increased by the diversity of viewpoints that inform that vision; the greater the diversity of viewpoints the more powerful the vision. The more powerful the vision the more commitment and collaboration will result.



The Mobius strip is the central image for theory and practice associated with the Mobius Model. Although the strip in the cartoon above appears to have two sides, careful

inspection shows that it is one continuous surface (there is no *inside* and no *outside*). Good listening on the part of these two characters would lead them to discover that they are both on the same side! The two characters represent the two responses we can make to differences in perspective that we bring to all relationships – dialogue and debate (monologue).

The mobius image is a reminder that our differences (both “positive” and “negative”) always offer complementary perspectives. Like two eyes set apart to see the same situation from different perspectives, differences add a depth dimension to perception and understanding from which new possibilities emerge. Skills are needed to include viewpoints that seem to contradict or to negate the positive. First, listen to understand, not agree or disagree, then inquire into what is positive and missing that will result in a positive future for all; this is the path to shared compelling vision and action.

ⁱ For a fuller account of the Mobius Model™ and Appreciative inquiry:

Demarest, L., M. Herdes, et al. (2004). The Mobius Model: A guide for Developing Effective Relationships in Groups, Teams, and Organizations, Published for the MMI Group, LLC by Farrar & Associates.

Cooperrider, D. L., D. Whitney, et al. (2003). Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: The First in a Series of AI Workbooks for Leaders of Change. Bedford Heights, Ohio, Lakeshore

Hammond, A. A. (1998). The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry. Bend, OR, Thin Book Publishing Co.

Watkins, J. M. and B. J. Mohr (2001). Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination. San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.

ⁱⁱ Frost, R. (1949). Complete poems of Robert Frost. New York. Holt Rinehart and Winston (p. viii)