

# **Strategic Planning with Appreciative Inquiry: Unleashing the Positive Potential to SOAR**

Catherine McKenna, Joanne Daykin, Bernard J Mohr, and Tony Silbert

## Strategic Planning with Appreciative Inquiry: Unleashing the Positive Potential to Soar

[Catherine McKenna](#), [Joanne Daykin](#), [Bernard J Mohr](#) and [Tony Silbert](#)

***“The times of greatest change are also the times of greatest potential.”  
- Dewitt Jones***

*Joanne Daykin, Catherine McKenna, Bernard J. Mohr and Tony Silbert are founding Partners of Innovation Partners International (IPI). IPI specializes in the organizational change approach known as Appreciative Inquiry—a strengths based approach to organization transformation.*

In his well loved video “Celebrate What’s Right with the World”, photographer Dewitt Jones observes that “The times of greatest change are also the times of greatest potential”. Markets change, cultures change, technologies change, and legislative environments change...the list goes on. Whether our organizations are responding to change or driving it, leaders continually ask “where should we go next? How will we get there? What do we need to do now?”

At its best, strategic planning has the power to unleash your organization’s potential in times of change. It can clarify vision and direction, prioritize strategic goals and inspire people throughout the organization to work together to create their ideal future. The traditional process of planning typically involves internal and external environmental scans, analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats and the identification of strategies and changes required to deal with them.

As a high engagement, strengths based approach to organizational change, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) represents an exciting alternative to traditional strategic planning. When the planning process engages everyone from the CEO to the newest recruit in aligning strengths of the organization with opportunities, aspirations and desired results, resistance to change is minimized and the energy and commitment required to turn goals into action is generated.

The following chart outlines the differences between traditional approaches to strategic planning and the appreciative inquiry approach.

\*We want to acknowledge the seminal work of Jackie Stavros, in association with David Cooperrider, John Sutherland, Joe Sprangel and D. Lynn Kelley, and others, in developing the SOAR framework

<i><b>Assumptions in Traditional Strategic Planning</b></i>	<i><b>Assumptions in Appreciative Strategic Planning</b></i>
<b>Who Does It?</b>	<b>Who Does It?</b>
Strategic planning is the job of senior leadership or board of directors. They set the direction, provide the plan and then “roll it out” to be executed by the rest of the organization.	Strategic planning is an invitation to bring the best forward in the service of building something important. Every voice participates and influences the agreements we make about the future.
<b>Approach</b>	<b>Approach</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SWOT (Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats). Avoiding threats and solving problems to overcome weaknesses is the focus.</li> <li>• The implementation “cascades” through the organization from top to bottom in the form of goals &amp; objectives.</li> <li>• A “Plan” is the starting focus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results). Aligning strengths with opportunities is the focus.</li> <li>• Using an AI summit, the whole system can be brought together to move from inquiry to vision to inspired action very quickly. The inquiry itself creates change, and people are more likely to commit to goals and objectives they helped to create.</li> <li>• “Commitment to Implementation” is the starting focus</li> </ul>
<b>Results</b>	<b>Results</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resistance to top down change reduces goal achievement</li> <li>• Through each cascade, clarity and meaning are lost</li> <li>• The ‘plan’ is more static — when the external or internal environment changes, the plan becomes obsolete.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Direct participation increase quality and speed of goal achievement.</li> <li>• Resistance is minimal. With increased connectivity, innovation and energy people feel clear and empowered about what they can individually do to move toward the best future.</li> <li>• The ‘plan’ is more dynamic — As the environment changes the organization is more resilient and adaptive because the strengths, resources, skills and assets are clear.</li> </ul>

**The 5-D  
Process of  
Definition,  
Discovery,  
Dream and  
Design allow  
organizations  
to focus on  
their Strengths,  
Opportunities,  
Aspirations and  
Results  
(SOAR).**

While there is no single prescription for creating or executing a strategic planning process, below is an example of what one appreciative strategic planning process might look like, based on a 5-D process of Definition, Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny to focus on Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results. The boxes after each step follow the case story of one of Innovation Partners International's (IPI) strategic planning clients.

**Step 1 → Definition: Decide who to invite and how**

1. Establish a planning team to co-design and guide the strategic planning process.
2. Identify all the stakeholders and how best to engage them. Will you hold a summit, several small summits or a series of meetings? If you choose a form of engagement other than a summit, how will you communicate and connect each part with the whole system?
3. Create interview guide to gather information about the strengths, resources, perspectives and aspirations of employees and other important stakeholders.

*Our client wanted to engage as many parts of the system as possible. A core planning team representing a cross-section of the organization was pulled together. They were trained in AI and co-created the engagement strategy and inquiry design together with the consultants.*

**Step 2 → Discovery: Inquiry into Strengths and Opportunities**

1. Engage employees and other stakeholders throughout the system (including customers, suppliers, partners,) in an inquiry to:
  - Discover the conditions that created the organization's greatest moments of success
  - Scan the internal and external environment for strengths and opportunities.
  - Ask powerful positive questions that generate images of possibility. Threats and problems are not ignored, but rather are reframed and viewed through a lens of possibility. Solutions emerge from a conversation about what we *do* want rather than from a conversation about what we *don't* want. For example, the problem of declining market share becomes an inquiry into a "Strong Market Presence" and an exploration of the opportunities for innovation that would result in a gain in market share.
2. Identify the organization's positive core – the sum total of its unique strengths, assets, resources, networks, capabilities, and creative thought that will carry the organization into the future.

*A series of focus groups was conducted with a variety of stakeholder groups including partners and customers. The data collected here was brought into the summit meeting. Further inquiry was conducted at the summit with the participants and the positive core was mapped. Rich dialogue deepened the understanding of the organization's strengths, values and opportunities.*

***They used images and ideas from the skits to write possibility statements that would act as a “North Star” for their strategic plan.***

### Step 3 → Dream: Identify Aspirations and Results

1. Create a compelling vision of the future that has the commitment of members of the organization – one that carries forward the very best of the past, but also inspires and challenges the status quo.
2. Create possibility statements, capturing people's highest aspirations that describe (in narrative form) the compelling vision of the future

*During the summit, participant groups prepared skits expressing compelling images of their ideal future—an image of what their organization could look like if all the strengths and root causes of success became the norm. They used images and ideas from the skits to write a possibility statement that would act as a “north star” for their strategic plan. Linking to customer and community needs was important when envisioning the impact and positive results the organization aspired to achieve.*

2. Write goal statements for each strategic opportunity and identify measures that will help track the organization's success.
3. Identify the strategies, innovations, and projects that will be required to pursue each of the strategic opportunities.

*Through a prioritizing process, the participants were able to converge and identify their highest strategic opportunities called goal areas. Participants self-selected into groups around each goal area where they dialogued about what possibilities existed. Mini ‘vision statements’ were written for each goal area and some initial strategies were identified.*

### Step 5 → Delivery: Implement and Measure Success

1. Self-organize around each goal area. Plan actions and gain individual and collaborative commitments.
2. Capacity development--Provide support, resources, training, etc. and identify integration linkages between the goal areas.
3. Monitor, improvise, innovate and re-inquiry. Connection to the organization's positive core serves as a constant well of possibility as internal and external environments change. Rather than being a document that sits on a shelf until the next planning cycle begins, the strategic plan is a living process of inquiry, continually aligning strength with opportunity in service of the future we most want to create.

### Step 4 → Design: Decide which opportunities have the most potential

1. Identify the highest strategic opportunities to move the organization toward the desired future. Opportunities may lie outside the organization (e.g. in new markets, products, or partnerships) or inside the organization (e.g. in the redesign of structures, processes and relationships). When strategic opportunities are aligned with a shared, exciting vision of the future, attention shifts dramatically from solving a list of problems to “how can we work together to make this happen?”

***“It is a nice change in approach that brings people on board rather than putting them off.”  
--David Kramer***

*While most of the planning took place during a summit planning event, implementation activities occurred post-summit. During this phase, goal/innovation teams were created, metrics were finalized, and capacity development support to the teams was provided (facilitation, AI, project management, etc.). Teams also received coaching support from senior management, and integration activities between the goal areas were identified and implemented.*

In summary, Appreciative Inquiry offers a fresh perspective to traditional strategic planning processes. By elevating and accentuating the strengths, opportunities, and aspirations of the organization and by involving multiple stakeholder groups, results are achieved with energy to help the organization SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results).

In the words of one satisfied client:

*“I wanted you to know that I have been involved in many strategic planning efforts over the past 15 years and have always found them useful in moving a school forward. However, what I really liked about (the AI strategic planning approach) and how your team managed the process, was the fact that all during the two days we were together, everyone was smiling and contributing in a positive manner. That, I have never seen happen before! It has already started having an affect on how we approach things administratively...It is a nice change in approach that brings people on board rather than putting them off. We will continue down this path.”*

*David Kramer, Head of School,  
Jakarta International School*

*Reprints of this article are permitted provided that the authors name and contact information are clearly listed on each page.*