

Appreciative Inquiry in Asia

Noel E K Tan
Fiona O'Shaughnessy



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Welcome to August 2013 issue of AI Practitioner

Anne Radford, Editor in Chief

This August 2013 issue, Appreciative Inquiry in Asia, takes us to a part of the world undergoing dramatic transformations.

The editors, Noel E. K. Tan and Fiona O'Shaughnessy, show us how organisations in Asia are dealing with the organisational consequences of rapid economic growth. The complexity is compounded as leaders and consultants are looking into where and how they can use perceived western

approaches like Appreciative Inquiry in the context of their Eastern values and philosophies.

In the Feature Choice article, Jackie Stavros shares experience and empirical research on the hugely successful SOAR strategic thinking and planning framework. She also introduces the SOAR 5-I Approach or Quick SOAR as well as the SOAR Profile, a new survey instrument that will be launched in Thailand later this year.

In Research Notes, Anita Singh presents results of research that intentionally seeks

to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches while studying the impact of an AI-based intervention involving Myrada and AI in rural India. (See also *AI Practitioner* February 2013 and August 2011.)

AI Resources lists books culture, focusing on Eastern Asia; websites on social construction and psychology studies in China; and AI-related studies and resources on Asian culture. There are also two new publications, including an AI innovation: AI playing cards.

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Imposed or Self-Generated Change?

Cultural Challenges and Current Practices in Introducing Appreciative Inquiry in Rapidly Growing Asian Economies

Asia is one of the fast growing regions in the world; companies in Asia face the most severe challenges to make fast change. Some changes are inevitably imposed and some are self-generated. In this article, Laura Hsu explores her AI initiatives in supporting organizations facing the two different kinds of change. The objective is to help internal and external AI practitioners understand different responses to change within the context of Asian culture so they can customize intervention design.

Since 2001, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has become one of the key influences in my practice to help organizations ride the wave of change. As each organization faced a different type of change, my question became “would a standard 4D work for them all?” I found that how the change is perceived impacts the effective routes of an AI intervention. On top of that, culture provides another layer of understanding in how people generally experience and respond to change.

Two different starting places for change

First, how should we define the two kinds of change?

The easiest way is to examine the level of participation. (See Table 1) When the group is at levels one to three, they belong to imposed change. If the change is generated between levels four and eight, they belong to the group experiencing self-generated change, as they are engaged along the way. In surveying my work over time, I have seen change for organizations typically include both imposed and self-generated change.

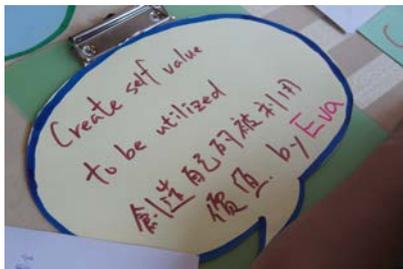
Imposed change: Sense of entering the grief cycle

When people are in the imposed-change context, we tend to hear statements like:

- “...everything is uncertain. We don’t have a clear picture of the future. Everyone is uncomfortable and in waiting.”
- “...we are afraid that we will be laid off. We don’t speak it out loud but inside we have concerns and fear for our individual future.”
- “...out of fear, one site can be better than the other, so resources could be moved from A to B. Open communication is limited.”

Table 1: Levels of Participation
(bottom, lowest level of participation; top, highest level)
(ICA Canada, 2001)

Responsibility for planning and action	<i>Full responsibility</i>	8	Participants have full responsibility for all aspects of the given situation, project or organization
	<i>Decision-making authority</i>	7	Participants are authorized to make specific decisions within clearly defined terms of reference
	<i>Implementation responsibility</i>	6	Participants are designated to implement a specific decision or project Responsibility is delegated to a group
Providing input	<i>Input toward decisions</i>	5	Participants provide ideas to be considered in decision making Plans may be presented or open questions may be asked
	<i>Input toward implementation</i>	4	Participants provide ideas on how a decision can be implemented
Receiving information and services	<i>Education</i>	3	Participants are assisted in understanding decisions, how they are affected and what is expected of them
	<i>Persuasion</i>	2	People are encouraged to agree or give consent to decisions
	<i>Information</i>	1	People are informed of decisions and operate out of decisions and guidelines made on their behalf



Laura Hsu's Quotable Quote:
'Create self-value to be utilized'

At the emotional level of guarding emotions, we hear fear, anxiety and sometimes hidden anger. These emotions put people in a state of withdrawal and feeling powerless. This resembles the beginning of the grief cycle.

Imposed change brings a sense of sudden loss. This resembles the way in which people face death and other losses in life. In this stage, jumping into a traditional AI process of 4D would usually mean that the group is "forced" to come out of their grief process abruptly. (See Figure 1)

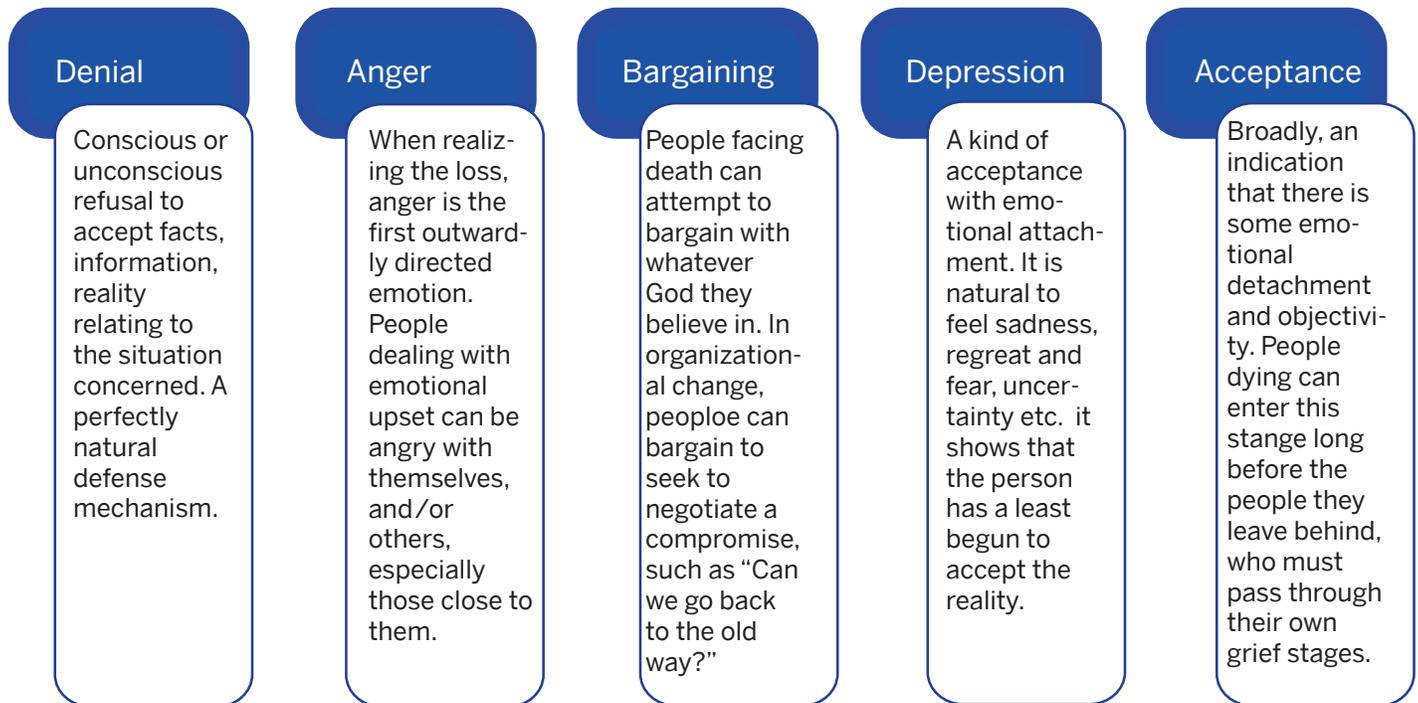


Figure 1: Five stages of grief –
Elisabeth Kübler Ross

A case of imposed change

A Taiwanese company had recently merged with a USA company and then with a European company. The change was kept a secret even within the organization until announced officially. In a three and a half day planning session of the new executive team, we were aware of many grief issues, due for example, to a perceived downgrading of status.

On the first day of an intervention, we introduced an appreciative perspective, doing AI from the personal level with a strong focus on strengths. People started to appreciate one another. We had the group differentiate facts from opinions so they could build common ground. This took longer than expected, but began to clear the air.

Then we started the AI 4D cycle. By the end of day two, the CEO came around joyfully and pointed out to me, "See, the two guys that refused to sit together, now just pair up voluntarily!"

We saw signs of acceptance by the time the new "we" was created during the stage of Dream. In the end they had gone through their grief to acceptance, and then co-created a future they were ready to support.

Self-generated change: Acceptance and creation mode

When we went into organizations which were ready for self-generated change to do our preparation work, we heard descriptions like:

Fishbowl Dream statement



“We referred to this Dream statement whenever there was a critical business decision to make. The leadership team would ask themselves ‘If we choose to do X, are we closer to our dream?’” General manager, pharmaceutical company

The key question now is, “How do we provide a great framework for our talents to make their magic?”

“In five years’ time, if we are to make a quantum leap, we will need to look at how we radically change our perception of the consumers.”

“We are busy, yet we function with a high spirit and morale. How do we prioritize and make room for creativity?”

The difference between the organization in the first example and those quoted above is that companies in the second group have no concern about the change. Groups that perceived change to be “self-generated” seemed to already have capability to reframe.

Another difference between the two groups is that the second group of companies are more ready to look at a longer-term future. They have high acceptance of what has happened which made it possible for them to lift their heads in looking further into the future.

Case of self-generated change

In 2008, I used AI for an international pharmaceutical client in Taiwan to help their long-range planning process. In the two day AI Summit, they eased into the 4D process naturally and were able to discover their strengths and build a consensus on the picture of success relative to their 2012 vision. They then put these components into a Dream statement and used it to re-design the key elements of their company. The group energy was high and the leadership team took ownership of the results.

Sharing provocative propositions in Taiwan



“When we see men of worth, we should think of equaling them; when we see men of a contrary character, we should turn inwards and examine ourselves.” Confucius

In 2010, the team realized “We have run out of vision! Our 2012 dream is already achieved!” In reflecting over the previous two years, the general manager shared the ways in which AI had brought positive change beyond the workshop: “We referred to this Dream statement whenever there was a critical business decision to make. The leadership team would ask themselves ‘If we choose to do X, are we closer to our dream?’”

The spirit of self-generative change seemed to have grown roots in this group and the process of AI helped unleashed the power.

Imposed or self-generated? It depends on perception

Whether change is imposed or self-generated are not self-contained categories. We find varying degrees of imposed change even in predominantly self-generated cases, and elements of self-generated change in situations where the change has been imposed. It depends both on the level of organizational hierarchy and on past experience.

Within self-generated change, the experience of those outside a core group in which the change is generated may be similar to imposed change.

With imposed change, there are people, usually senior decision makers, who demonstrate self-generated initiatives.

Imposed change can come about when the reasons are confidential, or are external. The change therefore comes as a surprise. Yet depending on the nature of the industry, some organizations have educated their people through past experience to expect constant change. In those cases, in companies where imposed change

**“Doctrine of the mean”:
The actual meaning
from the Confucianist
perspective is to follow the
straight path according
to one’s principles and
values.**

occurred, we found a higher degree of responses similar to those in self-generated change situations.

All in all, the quickest way to reveal how the group perceives the change is through observation of how they talk about it. When matched with five stages of grief, it will illuminate your process design for AI.

Asian cultural impact on the two kinds of change

Geographically, the cultures of Asia do not exist on distinct continents. Culturally, there has been little unity or common history for many people in Asia. Therefore, I will focus my cultural reflection around the area where I live and work most – east Asia. The dominant influence historically has been China. Major characteristics of this region include shared Chinese-derived language characteristics, as well as shared religion. There is also a shared social and moral philosophy derived from Confucianism.

Perception and culturally suggested reactions to the two kinds of change

Historical incidents and Confucius’ responses to and comments about them were recorded in Confucian classics. These incidents reflected the nature of the two kinds of change: imposed and self-generated. These sayings give a culturally specific framework of how these two changes may be perceived and to the response to them:

Imposed change: Surrender to the higher power yet impose regulations to the lower level people

Common sayings include:

- To do what is humanly possible and to submit the rest to the heaven’s will.¹
- Life and death are predestined, how much fortune, how high a position one can get is determined by heaven.²

1 The “Doctrine of the Mean” is both a doctrine of Confucianism and the title of one of the Four Books of Confucian philosophy. The text is attributed to Zisi (also known as Kong Ji), the only grandson of Confucius. The phrase Doctrine of the Mean first occurs in the *Analects of Confucius*.

2 From the *Analects of Confucius*.

The application of AI in East Asia is more successful when connected to the deeper cultural context.

Self-generated change: Continuous improvement starting at self-awareness on individual level.

Common sayings include:

- Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and knowledge are not infused into us from without. We are certainly furnished with them. And a different view is simply owing to reflection. Hence it is said, "Seek and you will find them. Neglect and you will lose them."³
- The Master said, "When we see men of worth, we should think of equaling them; when we see men of a contrary character, we should turn inwards and examine ourselves."⁴
- Heaven's plan in the production of mankind is as the following: "Those who are aware first should instruct those who are later in awareness, and those who first apprehend principles should instruct those who are slower to do so. As I am one of the first; I shall take the responsibility of doing so. If not me, who will do so?"⁵

In short, "Confucianism contributes the root of order, ethics and values in the world to internal awareness (internal excellence), in contrast to Western culture contributing those to God (external excellence)"(Yu, 1984).

Confucianist thinking does enhance the process of managing change. First, in the event of imposed change, people are asked to do everything in their circle of control and influence, leaving the rest to the higher power. This reminder helps people to leave victimhood behind and consider what can be done in the moment of imposed change. On the other hand, these sayings also encourage people to look for insights from their own reflections and for opportunities for improvement. This is the source and motivation for continuous striving for perfection and renewal. This corresponds with what we do in AI – coming up with new designs/protocols for the new dream.

On the other hand there are sayings in the Confucian philosophy which, when understood only superficially, hinder the application of AI. For example the "doctrine of the mean" is oftentimes understood by the public as being in the middle, not going to the extreme. The actual meaning from the Confucianist perspective is to follow the straight path according to one's principles and values. Yet the majority of the population has taken this to mean they should not talk about their strengths and peak experiences, but be moderate and humble.

3 From the writings of Mencius. Mencius (possible dates either 372 – 289 BCE or 385 – 303/302 BCE) is the most famous Confucian philosopher after Confucius himself.

4 From the *Analects of Confucius*.

5 Mencius.

Our experience working in Asia concurred with this finding. The degree of difference comes from how much the national culture deviates from the traditional Confucian teaching. For example, in China after the Cultural Revolution, traditional Confucian teaching was abandoned for a decade, although it has come back in the recent years.

Implication of AI practices

1. Reframing mindsets of participants

In introducing AI, we have an opportunity to reframe the group from being the victim of the situation to that of an active player in creating something new. To do so, we must be aware and allow enough processing of the grief cycle to move the group out of the denial and anger to acceptance.

In assisting the leaders to help the group through the bargaining stage, we pave the way for them to acceptance and into co-creation of AI initiatives.

2. Cultural support and resistance to AI approach

Zhongyong ("the doctrine of the mean") is central to Confucian teaching. The translation of ancient words has evolved into many versions. On the one hand, the way of the "mean" could be understood as coming out of the core and the heart. In this way, the philosophy is closer to the positive core AI is embodying.

On the other, understanding of the "mean" becomes modesty and in the middle way. This would ask people to be humble without showing their greatness. This later understanding seems to prevail in everyday conversation. With this behavior, the process of AI in sharing peak experiences and strengths becomes contrary to the practice of being in the middle and being humble.

What I have found useful is to do two things:

1. Use modern research on positivity and strength-based approaches to persuade the group to try out AI in reality (appeal to the continuous improvement culture).
2. Ask people to find out what has been helpful in the past, to be the resource of the future (appeal to the self-awareness nature in the culture).

Summary and final remarks

All in all, I have witnessed the power of AI in the organizations I have worked with. No matter what the organization is, the application of AI in East Asia is more successful when connected to the deeper cultural context.

Appendix 1: Comparison of imposed versus self-generated change

	Imposed change	Self-generated change
<i>Definition</i>	Was informed of the change (not part of the decision making discussion or purely reactive to external impacts and conditions).	The change is self-generated and selected. The participants are involved and engaged in the decision-making process.
<i>Emotions in the beginning</i>	Fear, anxiety, etc.	Positivity
<i>Grief cycle</i>	Starting from Denial	Starting from Acceptance and forward
<i>Implications in the AI facilitation</i>	Need to vamp before able to contribute positively	Need to create enough space for innovation
<i>How is this kind of change perceived in Asian culture?</i>	Surrender to the higher power yet impose regulations on people at lower levels in the hierarchy of the organization	Continuous improvement starting at self-awareness on individual level
<i>Asian cultural influence that might be hindering AI change process</i>	Being moderate (in the middle) and not going to extremes The actual meaning from the Confucians was to follow the straight path, according to one's principles and values. Yet the majority of people took this to mean we should not talk about our strengths and peak experiences, but be moderate and humble.	
<i>Client examples</i>	Mergers and acquisitions; spin-offs, company being sold	Growth targets, market ranking, positive working environment, sales excellence

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