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Feature Choice

Introducing Appreciative Inquiry into the Australian Department of Defence: Research and Reflections

The Australian Department of Defence is undergoing substantial reform, including a focus on evolving its workplace culture. Appreciative Inquiry is a tool that may be able to assist Defence; however Appreciative Inquiry has never before been applied in the DoD, so a pilot study was recently undertaken to test the methodology. Despite the limitations imposed by the sample size and composition of participants that were involved, the article concludes that AI should be implemented more broadly to elicit change throughout the DoD. The article concludes with the author's personal insights and reflections.

Strategic direction and reform in the DoD since 2009

The 2009 Defence White Paper, "Force 2030", was the precursor for wide-spread reform in the Department of Defence (DoD). It outlined the government's plan to build a stronger organisation to ensure the future national security of Australia, including the capabilities and infrastructure that would be required to support it (Department of Defence 2009). Force 2030 highlighted that, in order to build Australia's military capability, a significant financial outlay in the order of AUD\$104 billion would be required. Given this expenditure, Force 2030 also acknowledged the Australian public's expectations that Defence would "operate as efficiently as possible to extract maximum value from this funding" (Department of Defence 2009, p.3).

To ensure the success of Force 2030, the Department of Defence also announced a Strategic Reform Program (SRP) in 2009. The SRP promised to create savings in the order of AUD\$20 billion until 2019, by "...comprehensively and fundamentally improving the management of Defence, making the organisation more efficient and effective, and creating significant savings to reinvest in building a stronger Defence Force" (Department of Defence 2009, p.3). However, realising that it would not be able to reach its reform goals on the basis of technical and structural change alone and that a shift in the attitude and behaviour of DoD personnel would be necessary to support the reform, in 2012 Defence adopted a five-year strategy for culture change called "Pathway to Change" (Department of Defence 2012).

The next step

Pathway to Change provided a synthesised response to a number of culture reviews and initiatives underway in Defence, as well as the reform direction of the department (Defence 2012). Since its conclusion in early 2017, Pathway to Change has been acknowledged for increasing female participation in the Australian Defence Force (ADF), albeit slowly, and also in increasing the number of female senior officers in Defence's ranks (Rishworth 2017). Indeed, the Official Committee Hansard for the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (2017) reported 70 female senior officers in the ADF, up by between five and ten women in twelve months; an increase in the participation of women overall in the ADF from 15.4% in January 2016 to 16.1% in 2017; and a slow increase in the uptake of women in combat roles since gender restrictions on those roles were removed in 2015 (Commonwealth of Australia 2017). Anecdotally, Pathway to Change has also been acknowledged for heightening culture-change conversation throughout the ADF.

Since the conclusion of Pathway to Change, Defence leaders have facilitated discussions with their staff on the future of culture change in the DoD. These discussions enabled Defence to recognise six consistent priorities that were incorporated into a renewed Cultural Intent Statement, released in November 2017 (Department of Defence 2017). These priorities are:

1. Leadership accountability
2. Capability through inclusion
3. Ethics and workplace behaviours
4. Health, wellness and safety
5. Flexibility and workforce agility and
6. Leading and developing integrated teams.

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However, in order for ongoing reform to be effective, and for the government to be successful in maintaining a "regionally superior ADF" (Department of Defence 2016, p. 18), it is clear that the DoD must maintain its culture-change momentum. While it is unclear what change and organisational development approaches Defence employed in the past, it is apparent that the DoD must explore successful, innovative methodologies to support ongoing reform.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is considered to be one methodology that may meet the needs of the DoD; however, in order to make this assessment, further testing by way of a pilot study was considered appropriate. The remainder of this article describes the outcome of the two phases of work included in the pilot study, the critical literature review and the action research, and concludes with personal insights and reflections from the application of AI in this instance.

The pilot study

In order to assess whether AI is suitable for the DoD to adopt to assist with reform, two phases of research were undertaken. In the first phase, a critical literature review was performed to understand the strengths, limitations and criticisms of AI; to look at previous application in both Australian and global business; and, to identify cases where AI had previously been used in the context of the armed forces. Insights from the literature review were used to inform the second phase of work, the action research, where AI was tested amongst DoD staff members employed in Explosive Materiel Branch (EMB).

The literature review

The literature showed AI to be a flexible approach that has been successfully applied across a range of business sectors to address different topics.

Appreciative Inquiry is a positive change approach that effectively transforms organisations, develops leadership capability and creates significant organisational efficiencies. Analysis of the literature indicated a good fit between AI and the reform requirements of the DoD. Importantly, the literature did not reveal any reason why AI would not be suited to Defence on the basis of its command-and-control environment (Powley et al. 2004; Mantel and Ludema 2004). Indeed, the literature showed AI to be a flexible approach that has been successfully applied across a range of business sectors to address different topics. While the literature review did not reveal any evidence that AI had previously been applied in the context of the Australian armed forces, two examples where AI had successfully been employed in the United States (US) military were identified. A further example of a similar methodology that was also successfully applied in the US military, Appreciative Sharing of Knowledge (ASK), was also included on the basis that ASK is rooted in AI. The details of these studies are:

- 1. Application of AI at a US Senior Military College** This article described the use of AI at a US senior military college to identify the factors that contributed to an officer cadet's decision to commission as an officer in the US military. The research explained that in 2009, US military colleges were tasked with increasing the number of cadets

The collaborative approach used in this instance enabled hardiness, achievement-striving, grit-perseverance, psychological contract support and perceived organisational support to be identified as important factors.

they contracted annually to meet the increasing demands being placed on the US military. Elements of AI methodology were used in the research to “...establish a foundation of positivism regarding the research, while drawing both cadets and staff members of the program into a cooperative partnership to recognise best practices that could be celebrated” (Gabriel et al. 2016). The collaborative approach used in this instance enabled hardiness, achievement-striving, grit-perseverance, psychological contract support and perceived organisational support to be identified as important factors that determine whether a cadet will sign a contract with the US military or not (Gabriel et al. 2016).

- 2. Application of AI in the United States Navy (USN)** AI was employed in the USN in 2002 following the establishment of the newly created Information Personnel (IP) branch as an official member of the naval warfare community (Powley et al. 2004). In this instance, AI was used to ensure the IP community “developed a shared sense of purpose and identity” (Powley et al. 2004, p.71) via two large-scale AI summits that were conducted in 2002 and 2003. The first summit involved 250 personnel of varying ranks who gathered to enquire into the topic, “The Information Power Advantage: Force information dominance. Lead the evolution of the war fighter, and open portals for innovation.” The second summit was attended by 170 individuals who enquired into the topic, “FORCEnet: Shaping information warriors, exploiting operational and technical expertise, leading the FORCE in FORCEnet... take a fix...refine the course...win the war” (Powley et al. 2004, p.73).

This second summit also included fifteen executive-level representatives from companies such as Apple, IBM and Cisco. Importantly, observations about the use of AI in the USN in 2002 and 2003 included that democratic organising led to higher levels of commitment to change and fostered organisational learning. It was also established that command-and-control did not deteriorate in this instance, but rather was temporarily suspended to enable the accomplishment of a significant strategic project (Powley et al. 2004). Indeed, it has been estimated that the application of AI in the USN since 2002 has saved in the order of USD\$2 billion and drastically improved staff engagement (Champlain News, 2014).

- 3. Application of ASK at the US Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC)** ASK, a methodology rooted in AI, was applied at the US Army CGSC in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas to ascertain how its curriculum could be adapted to integrate the experience, insights

and perspectives of its students. CGSC had noticed its students were becoming frustrated with its curriculum, which was heavily biased towards doctrinal and theoretical principles rooted in the cold war, and sought to incorporate greater contributions from its students, to both modernise and make its curriculum more relevant, while also enriching the education experience of the students. The outcome of this study was that a number of the insights and recommendations generated via ASK were immediately implemented into the logistics and change management curriculum at CSGS (Long 2012).

Two further articles involving the application of AI in the context of the armed forces were also obtained from previous issues of *AI Practitioner* subsequent to the literature review. The first article appeared in *AI Practitioner* in May 2011 and concerned the employment of AI in a series of workshops led by the “Family Action Centre” (University of Newcastle) to develop and implement strengths-based programs in the Defence Community Organisation (DCO) in Australia. Specifically, a review of DCO’s operating system in 2010 identified Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) as being “...best placed to provide the shared language and understanding that was required for the future needs of the DCO” (Brooks and Stuart 2011, p.65). Given ABCD’s focus on the capability of a community rather than its shortfalls, AI was considered to be an ideal approach to incorporate into the workshops (Brooks and Stuart 2011).

The second article appeared in *AI Practitioner* in November 2016 and concerned the learnings from the application of AI by the Management Department at the US Air Force Academy in an organisation in the United States military. This intervention was prompted after the results of a climate survey within the organisation revealed trust, communication and respect as possible causes of discontent (Helfin et al 2016). AI was employed to “...emphasise positives, strengths and achievements to effect gradual yet collective fundamental organisational change” (Helfin et al. 2016, p.66). The outcomes of the application of AI on this occasion included that, while some success was achieved by using the approach to move the organisation in a positive direction, an in-depth understanding of the military culture was assessed to be an essential ingredient for successful interventions in the context of the armed forces (Helfin et al 2016).

While a number of criticisms of AI were presented in the literature, these criticisms were countered by other articles reviewed. For instance, while AI was criticised on one hand for glossing over problems and failing to adequately manage negative data (Willoughby and Tosey 2007; Trajkovski et al. 2013), other articles found that the practical application of AI did not prevent negative data from being raised and addressed during interventions (Palmerao et al. 2012).

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Similarly, while some researchers concluded that AI diminished the authority of senior leaders (Willoughby and Tosey 2007), others found that engaging staff in strategy resulted in a greater motivation and commitment to outcomes and did not erode structure or power (Powley et al. 2004; Mantel and Ludema 2004). Indeed, the application of AI in the US Navy was considered a stellar example where deliberate action taken to create democracy during a large-scale AI intervention did not result in the erosion of command-and-control (Powley et al. 2004); it has been estimated that the application of AI in the US Navy resulted in efficiency gains and drastically improved staff engagement (See 2. above).

The literature also pointed to a number of limitations of AI that were considered to be a risk to the successful application of the approach. These limitations included: AI may give organisations false hope if change projects are not properly implemented prior to practitioners completing their engagements (Tajkovski et al. 2013); enthusiasm could be affected when the implications of the change on workload are realised (Tajkovski et al. 2013 and Schmidt 2017); AI is unlikely to produce quick results (Watkins et al. 2016); and, the outcomes of AI interventions are dependent on the skill and experience of the facilitator (Watkins et al. 2016; Schmidt 2017; Sidebotham et al. 2015; Helfin et al. 2016).

However, the literature also outlined the controls necessary to reduce these limitations, including stating that AI should be implemented as a continuous process with appropriate metrics to measure success (Tajkovski et al. 2013); that the methodology should be clearly communicated and expectations managed from the outset; that leadership oversight should be considered to guide outcomes; and that interventions should be constructed and delivered by appropriately qualified and experienced individuals (Schmidt 2017; Sidebotham et al. 2015; Helfin et al. 2016).

Both the criticisms and limitations of AI identified in the literature were used to inform the next phase of work, the action research.

In seeking to maintain culture-change momentum, there was a requirement for Defence to also consider what change approach or approaches would best assist with reform efforts.

The action research

In 2017, Synergia met with the director general (DG) of EMB to discuss strategic and cultural reform underway in the DoD. During this meeting, it became clear that in seeking to maintain culture-change momentum, there was a requirement for Defence to also consider what change approach or approaches would best assist with reform efforts. Synergia introduced AI as a possible methodology that could assist and, approximately four weeks later, planning commenced to test AI using a pre-determined inquiry topic that aligned to Defence's culture-change priorities.

1. Methodology

It was determined that a pilot study would be used to assess AI in this instance. The purpose of a pilot study is to assess the feasibility of progressing to a large-scale investigation and to enable any issues associated with future research to be identified (Thabane 2010). Because pilot studies are adaptive, the criteria assessing whether they have been successful or not can include a requirement that modifications are made to the research protocol (Thabane 2010). One of the key difficulties researchers face when undertaking a pilot study is determining an appropriate sample size. While there is conjecture in the literature about this, Johanson and Brooks (2010) contend that a pilot study sample size will ultimately depend on the nature of what the researcher is testing. In terms of using AI in action research, the literature confirmed that AI is growing in popularity as an action–research methodology (Dick 2009), and indeed is considered to be an improvement on other tools because it is both continuous and philosophically challenges the deficit-based approach used by other change methodologies (Kim 2015).

2. Research Participants

EMB is part of the DoD's Joint Systems Division, which sits organisationally in the Capability Acquisition and Sustainment group. EMB is responsible for the acquisition and sustainment of the ADF's guided weapons and munitions and the supply of domestically manufactured munitions through Defence-owned facilities throughout Australia. The nature of EMB's business means that many staff members are subject matter experts in the niche field of ordnance engineering. These staff members generally have narrow employment options and, as such, many remain long-term Defence employees. It is thought that this could be a contributing factor to entrenched work practices amongst some staff members, who have resisted previous attempts by branch leadership to reorient EMB's organisational culture to the DoD's renewed drive to improve efficiency. This factor, coupled with the impending requirement for Defence workplaces to implement the changes imposed by the reform, were influential in reaching agreement to test AI amongst staff in the EMB workgroup.

To ensure the whole system was included in the study, an invitation to participate in an AI workshop was sent to all EMB staff members employed in the Sydney region in July 2017. The workshop was scheduled to take place over two days in August 2017. Despite all staff having the opportunity to participate in this workshop, only nine staff members ultimately volunteered to take part. While these staff members did represent the various functional areas of EMB, it was notable that no senior leaders or uniformed members of the ADF participated in the research. Given that this project was time-bound and

because it was determined that the smaller number of participants would not compromise the validity of the pilot study, it was decided that the nine staff members who had volunteered to participate would form a focus group, and that they would develop a change plan on behalf of EMB based on the inquiry topic “Creating an Inclusive Workplace Culture” which aligned to Defence’s culture change priority “Capability through Inclusion”.

It should be noted that while senior leadership and uniformed ADF members may have been absent from the action research, they were still involved at various points during the study. For instance, from late May 2017, the DG and business manager were consulted a number of times about the project, including the workshop content and administration. The DG also reviewed the draft change plan in September 2017 and arranged for his senior leaders to be debriefed on the outcome of the research in October 2017.

3. Execution

The pilot study was designed and monitored by way of a project plan which set out the research objective, success criteria and success measures for the work. The research objective defined in the plan was to “Assess the suitability of Appreciative Inquiry as a change management methodology in the Australian Defence Force.” Success was determined on the basis of whether a draft change plan was developed, and whether the participants provided positive feedback about their experience in using the methodology during the workshop. The success of the pilot study was measured in terms of whether the research design was suitable for future investigation, whether it required monitoring and/or modification, or whether it was unsuitable.

The pilot study plan also incorporated details about the research approach, participants, focus group activities and the support mechanisms required to assist the research. Appended to the plan were three documents: the project schedule, pilot study risks and pilot study risk mitigation. The pilot study risks were informed by the criticisms and limitations of AI identified during the literature review, and the controls were incorporated as risk-mitigation measures.

Pilot study training material and documentation, including a presentation, worksheets and feedback forms, were designed in line with the research and guidance provided in AI practice guides. Content specific to the inquiry topic was developed by way of research papers and other resources.

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4. Results

The two success criteria established for the pilot study were achieved. The draft change plan developed by the focus group during the AI intervention was submitted to the DG for review in September 2017. This plan included the feedback received from the focus group participants, which was overwhelmingly positive. In terms of the feedback, a number of participants commented that AI shifted their thought processes, and that they found it refreshing to be focused on what works rather than what needs fixing. They recognised that the change methodology could be applied to other areas of their work, including business planning; performance reviews, dealing with conflict and managing people.

Some participants also recognised that could be used to align the cultures of project teams as the DoD and defence industry become increasingly integrated to deliver large-scale defence projects in Australia. The participants also held a unanimous view that AI could be used more broadly in their organisation to support change efforts and identified that these efforts would have a greater chance of success with an increase in leadership buy-in.

The majority of the participants stated that they felt confident applying a positive change approach to their work following the intervention, and some stated that they felt somewhat confident applying it. Those who stated that they were somewhat confident applying the approach explained that they would only feel comfortable using AI with their direct reports, while the others stated that the approach would be too challenging to apply amongst negative and complacent co-workers.

Additionally, all of the attendees recognised the simple, appreciative ideas and actions that they could implement immediately to support the intervention and improve their workplace culture. These ideas and actions included recognising and rewarding good work where appropriate; being more collegial towards one another; commencing all team meetings with positive news stories; being more open in communicating with others; engaging in ongoing personal reflection about the impact of their own attitudes and behaviours; influencing managers during discussions and meetings by focusing on positive stories; and passing on what they have learned from participating in the pilot study to their colleagues.

Personal insights and reflections on the research

This pilot study was time-bound because it also constituted the capstone research project I was required to complete to be eligible to graduate from the University of Wollongong's Executive Masters of Business Administration

program in 2017. I was introduced to AI during this program, and under the guidance of academic staff; namely Dr Lee Styger (course director), Dr Paula Robinson (lecturer) and Lauren Richardson (librarian); decided to focus my research project on innovative change in ADF, and more specifically on AI. While I did not have any specific AI practitioner training under my belt prior to undertaking this research project, I did complete a substantial literature review on the methodology which informed my decision to include AI in the pilot study. One of my observations from the literature review was that AI complemented many of the professional skills I already possessed which made me feel at ease in testing the approach. Given that I served as an officer in the Royal Australian Navy and undertook several years of active reserve service following my full-time tenure in the ADF, I also felt comfortable venturing back into the DoD to complete this research.

Use of AI in the research project

The use of AI in this research project did successfully engage the focus group participants, who worked collaboratively to develop a draft change plan centered on improving their workplace culture.

It was my experience that the use of AI in this research project did successfully engage the focus group participants, who worked collaboratively to develop a draft change plan centered on improving their workplace culture. While some of the participants did air grievances during the intervention, I found a number of strategies useful in treating this data, which neither diminished the fact that problems had been raised, nor derailed the AI process. This experience supports previous studies, which found that AI does not fail to address or manage negative data in a practical sense. Additionally, I found expertise in facilitation and the inquiry topic, as well as my former service in the ADF, advantageous in being able to successfully guide the participants through the AI model. This aligned to the literature, which identified skill in facilitation and experience in the business sector as important factors for successful AI interventions, particularly in the case of the armed services due to its unique organisational culture.

While it would have been appropriate for the focus group members to derive and submit the change plan themselves after the workshop, I decided to take the lead on reformatting the data and submitting it to the DG for review for several reasons. Firstly, I wanted to assess whether the McKinsey 7S model was a suitable to display the data, or whether another framework would be more fitting. I created a template based on the McKinsey 7S model for the focus group to use but realised during the workshop that it required amendment, so I offered to do this offline to ensure the fluidity of the workshop was not compromised.

Secondly, because the project was time-bound, I was conscious that the data needed to be collated and submitted in a timely manner. I was uncertain whether the focus group participants had capacity to turn the change plan around quickly,

but I knew I could. Even though I took this upon myself, I was conscious that the focus group maintained ownership of the change and the initiatives they had developed. To ensure their involvement in this process, I circulated a copy of the draft change plan to the pilot study participants for comment before I forwarded it to the DG for review.

While the success criteria for the pilot study were ultimately achieved, I noted limitations in the action research, including the sample size and composition of participants, which did not include senior managers or uniformed service personnel. I contemplated whether, as a result of these limitations, the outcome of the pilot study in itself was enough to draw the conclusion that the DoD should use AI to support reform efforts. I was concerned about the effect that these factors would have on applying AI more broadly throughout Defence, even though the critical analysis of the literature review confirmed AI as a suitable methodology for Defence to adopt, and the success criteria for the pilot study were reached. While I do not believe the sample size or composition of participants in this instance should inhibit AI being employed more broadly in the ADF, I do believe a greater focus on leadership buy-in up front will play a crucial role in improving future AI interventions in Defence. As discussed earlier, this project was not totally devoid of input from EMB's leaders and uniformed staff members.

Engaging the leaders

Any extension of this project will include an investment of time up front with the leaders.

However, it is a key learning for me that any extension of this project will include an investment of time up front with the leaders, as I believe this will drive greater participation throughout the branch and create a better outcome. In addition to leadership buy-in and improving participation of the whole system, I also wonder whether the low number and composition of the focus group participants in the research are good indicators of EMB's readiness to embrace and adopt change.

This demonstrates to me that intensive effort will be required "at the coalface" to create and sustain change momentum, particularly when incorporating innovative approaches to change, and that change leadership will need to be a top priority in the DoD. That being said, I believe that EMB's involvement in the pilot study has put them one step ahead of many other workplaces in the DoD who might also be considering how they are going to implement the reform initiatives. At least EMB now enjoys a pool of staff who have been exposed to a contemporary change approach which they support, and they understand how to generate change conversation. It is also encouraging that the leadership team in EMB were supportive of piloting AI, and that they recognise the potential of the approach to assist with reform implementation.

There is a fundamental difference between knowing that something has to change, and being equipped with the knowledge, tools and skills that enable change to occur.

In October 2017 when I briefed the EMB leadership group on the outcome of the pilot study, I witnessed one leader make the following statement during general discussion: “This is the first time someone has come to us and showed us how to change.” This made me consider whether the absence of quality, evidence-based organisational development and change methodology could explain why, despite being subject to numerous culture reviews and the five-year Pathway to Change strategy, Defence only experienced a marginal shift in culture. While it is likely that there are a number of other factors that are also at play here, it is important to note that there is a fundamental difference between knowing that something has to change, and being equipped with the knowledge, tools and skills that enable change to occur.

Stages of change

Consider the following scenario: You move into a new apartment, and as soon as your furniture is in place your partner offers the opinion that the walls are too bare and need to be decorated. You go to an art shop and buy some paintings to decorate the walls. When you arrive back home, you place your paintings on the floor, leaning up against the wall where you would like to hang them. In this scenario, you know what change is required (i.e. decorating your bare walls), but just because you have been to the shop and now have some paintings in your home, doesn't mean that the change has taken effect.

To make the change happen in this instance, the paintings need to be hung on the walls, and this requires knowledge, tools and a particular set of skills that extend beyond visiting an art shop. When I compare this scenario to the DoD's attempts to change its culture over the years, it becomes apparent that there may be a missing link between the culture reviews and strategies that have been sourced by Defence, and the organisation's capability to implement and sustain the change. And I wonder if this can be attributed to the organisational change and development approaches currently employed by Defence, and if so, to what extent?

Conclusions

This article has discussed a recent pilot study designed to assess the suitability of AI in the DoD, which the academic literature supports as the first study of its kind. While the research findings were limited by the pilot study sample size and composition, the literature review and pilot study success criteria confirmed that the employment of AI would assist the DoD with its reform agenda, and the overall view was that the sample should not preclude AI from being used more broadly in Defence. The importance of leadership buy-in was noted as a crucial

The DoD's struggle to effect change may at least in part be attributed to the absence of contemporary and innovative organisational development and change methodologies.

factor for the success of future AI interventions. This article has concluded with personal insights and reflections on the research, which included an observation that the DoD's struggle to effect change may at least in part be attributed to the absence of contemporary and innovative organisational development and change methodologies. It is hoped that the AI experience in EMB will trigger curiosity throughout the DoD, and that other Defence workplaces might also consider exploring AI. Indeed, given the struggle to effect culture change to date, it is considered that the DoD has nothing to lose and everything to gain by adopting this approach.

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