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How to Take the Appreciative Route in Your Work: Appreciative Inquiry in England's NHS Leadership Training

The author has been delivering Appreciative Inquiry training as part of a programme designed to support senior and aspiring senior National Health Service staff in England. The pandemic gave her the chance to completely rework and improve a key element of the programme, as explained in this article.

I've been working with Appreciative Inquiry (AI) for around six years now, being lucky enough to receive my initial training and a considerable amount of support from the team at [Appreciating People](#). I've been delivering AI training for around five years as part of a small team at [Aqua](#) (the Advancing Quality Alliance, a British [National Health Service](#) improvement organisation).

Recently I had cause to review one of my programmes, also one of our most popular quality improvement programmes. Although we review them regularly to ensure they meet the ever-changing needs of health and social care staff, the opportunity to completely rework an already successful programme and provide an improved, more holistic offering doesn't come around often. It has turned out to be one of the most rewarding and transformative experiences of my career so far.

Advanced Improvement Practitioner (AIP) is an ambitious development programme designed to support senior and aspiring senior staff with leading and facilitating improvement at system level within the English National Health Service. The programme is grounded in the science of quality improvement and supports learning through a blend of virtual and self-directed learning and exploring theory with peers, alongside an emphasis on application of learning to a current work-based focus area that supports organisational improvement. Participation in the AIP programme supports learners to become well-rounded leaders of improvement with a deep understanding of themselves, an ability to inspire and lead others, and an in-depth understanding of the levers of improvement and system change.



The aim of the AIP programme

The aim of the programme is to develop knowledge, skills, and behaviours to be able to:

- Understand improvement leadership at a micro, meso and macro level
- Lead sustainable improvement in health and care services
- Develop improvement approaches for large-scale change
- Analyse and deploy appropriate improvement concepts and methods
- Engage and support people through change
- Facilitate sustainable improvement at organisational and system levels
- Understand how to set improvement priorities from a position of knowledge and insight.
- Identify strengths in yourself and others, and enable and encourage strengths-based working
- Lead colleagues in applying improvement techniques
- Provide oversight and guidance on multiple projects
- Take a whole-system view of improvement

The course adopts a self-directed learning approach with personal learning through reflection and participation in the development of an improvement learning community.

Moving to virtual learning really gave me an opportunity to review the offer and fully embed a strengths-based, appreciative bedrock to the programme.

The pandemic meant, for us as for so many, a need to move to virtual learning. That really gave me an opportunity to review the offer and fully embed a strengths-based, appreciative bedrock to the programme, as well as enabling learners to self-select elements based on their own interests. To enable this, I devised a series of elective sessions that learners could register for in addition to the core taught days. Each subject was to be taught by Aqua leads, allowing learners to align the programme to their specific development needs.

This was a departure from anything we had done at Aqua before and required a real leap of faith from my senior leader. I am so pleased she had the confidence

to encourage and enable me to pursue the project – indeed, it is now something we are considering applying to other programmes.

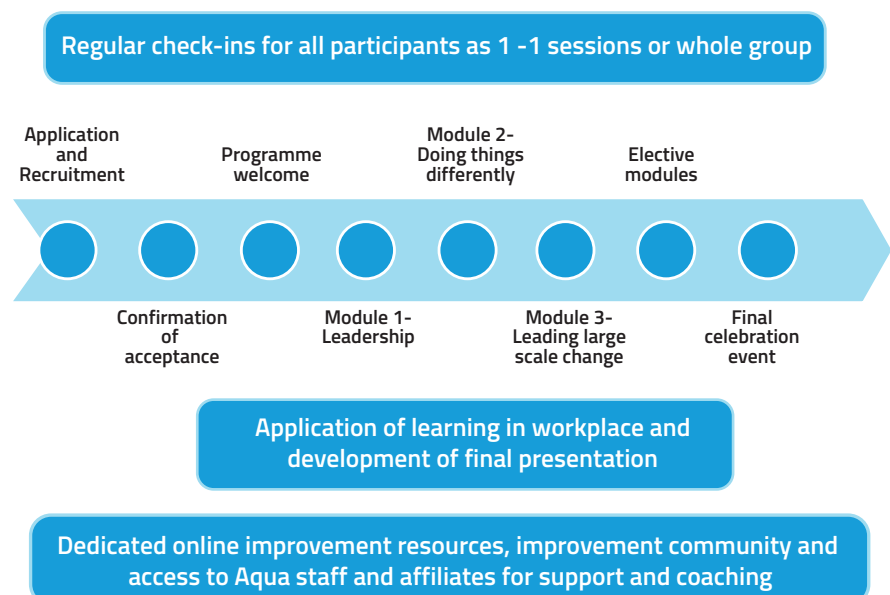
Programme design

I applied the same strengths-based principles I would be teaching to the creation of the programme.

The design principle was to practice what we were going to be teaching: I applied the same strengths-based principles I would be teaching to the creation of the programme. This gave rise to questions such as, who in Aqua is best placed to deliver each element of the programme and give our learners the best experience possible? This required extensive and detailed collaboration with colleagues across Aqua in order to identify the person best placed to deliver each element of the programme, with members of our core team delivering specific sessions that most closely aligned to their passions and strengths. Learners get the most up-to-date knowledge delivered by someone with a true passion for the subject matter. That enhances their learning. The electives are led by the organisational lead in the field concerned, ensuring the same passion and knowledge flows through the whole programme.

The new programme design maintains the three-module principle and has built strengths based elements into all of these modules. It also now includes a full day dedicated to unleashing creativity in ourselves and others in a professional environment, as well as a full day dedicated to understanding our own key values and intrinsic drivers. The programme uses appreciative interviews in various ways throughout, including using specifically designed protocols and thinking-partner elements. There is also an AI elective which utilises strengths-based exercises undertaken with learners, as well as encouraging them to take these exercises back to their teams.

The Advanced Improvement Practitioner programme design



Visualising a strengths-based approach to leadership



STRENGTHS BASED LEADERSHIP

A strengths-based approach to leadership is more effective than the traditional method of focusing on performance weaknesses.

To help organisations grow and thrive we need to tap into people's strengths



By hearing others speak about their learning journey in positive and curiosity-focused language, they are able to undertake deeper reflection.

For example, in the elective, learners take part in an appreciative conversation about their own project and talk through the best of their work. This is a direct use of the positive principle of AI. By answering positively worded questions they are considering positively framed answers and are able to take these back to their teams. They also undertake a “dream” activity based around their project, which helps people build the narrative for engagement.

At the end of the programme, we ask learners to present a reflective review of their learning journey. We also ask peers to provide appreciative feedback, sharing what was great about each person’s presentation and what it would be good to have more information about. This speaks to the constructionist principle, that our worlds are created by the words that we use. By hearing others speak about their learning journey in positive and curiosity-focused language, they are able to undertake deeper reflection. We’ve now completed four cohorts of the revised programme and have used learning from these cohorts to refine it even further for the coming year.

Realising the benefits

Many positive things have come out of applying AI to this programme: for our learners, for Aqua as an organisation and for me as an individual.

Our learners value the opportunity to connect at a deeper level with the purpose behind their work and what drives them

The programme has always received excellent feedback from participants and, since the redevelopment, the AI and strengths-based elements have been highlighted by many participants as an additional benefit.

One participant recently told me that the programme was the bright spark that got them through a particularly difficult time, which was so rewarding and

uplifting to hear. We also received the following testimonial from one of our participants:

I really believe this course has been a revelation!! And shown me what I am capable of!! I really can't thank you all enough.

This came from a learner who had been unsure whether to attend the programme, as they thought they were underqualified. By the end of the programme, they had applied for – and achieved – a promotion, which they attributed to the learning on the programme. The people who have attended the newly structured programme are effusive in their praise of the content and the delivery method.

At Aqua, we have been able to understand and respond to our individual passions and strengths

When we deliver on this programme, the energy from the facilitators is palpable because we are speaking from a place of joy.

When we deliver on this programme, the energy from the facilitators is palpable because we are speaking from a place of joy. Alongside further refining this programme, we have been able to take the learning from this way of working and apply it to other programmes within our capability-building offer. We've reviewed our three main programmes for the coming year and, by applying a mixture of quality improvement and AI principles to the review process, have created more alignment and development between the different levels.

Alongside this, the trusted relationship that has been built as a result between me and the programme lead for capability-building has led to working even more cohesively together. When developing a new programme recently, it was clear that we were able to constructively challenge each other to be brave and try out elements that we had not to that point considered making virtual. This relationship will continue to help us drive even more engagement and excellence within our programmes and is the most fruitful and generative relationship I have experienced in my career so far.

My own development

Now I am using my AI knowledge as the underpinning and guiding principle for all of my work.

The process has really deepened my personal connection to AI and cemented it as the way I will continue to undertake my work going forwards. Previously I had used it as a tool to call on when people were struggling in a negative space; now I am using my AI knowledge as the underpinning and guiding principle for all of my work. It has given me faith in my own knowledge and experience and reminded me that I am as passionate about AI and strengths-based ways of working as I am about the benefits and positive outcomes that it can bring to our work.

I've learned that I really thrive when I am able to build meaningful relationships with my learners.

I am passionate about spreading this message through my practice. I've learned that I really thrive when I am able to build meaningful relationships with my learners. Being able to understand people and their drivers enables me to personalise elements of the delivery to the specific people I have in the room, rather than solely teaching the content. Building relationships and feeling that I am a small part of their individual development drives me to enhance the programme with every cohort.

So, what's next?

Aqua is just about to start a new cohort of the programme. This will be the first face-to-face cohort since 2019. After each cohort the team will continue to take an appreciative and reflective view of the programme to ascertain what further tweaks and improvements can be made. In direct AI work, we are continuing to develop our offer, with five team members now trained to facilitate AI training, and two members accredited to deliver advanced training. We're looking forward to continuing to build the team and develop new elements in our offer.

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