ebg
CONSULTING

419 Hudson Road ● Sudbury, MA. USA 01776
Phone: +1.978.261.5552 ● Fax: +1.978.261.5553 ● www.ebgconsulting.com

What's Going Right Around Here?
Using AI to Improve Your Agile Requirements Process

by Ellen Gottesdiener
EBG Consulting, Inc.: www.ebgconsulting.com

(This article first appeared in StickyMinds, March 2009)

Summary: Instead of focusing on the problems, focus on what works. That is the simple premise of "appreciative inquiry." In this week's column, Ellen Gottesdiener explains how to help your team focus on the processes that work by outlining what should be included in your appreciative inquiries, in order to make more positive organizational changes.

"Adam, I appreciate you for tracking down the regulation implications of the disability refund story," Sarah said. "It didn't even occur to me we'd have to build in some tests for auditing. You saved us time, no doubt, by being ready to describe that to us during the iteration-planning workshops."

Now Ryan spoke up. 'I appreciate you, Nora, for putting together that grid showing how the features and events in the release plan are aligned to our iteration-level stories. As product owner, that helps me to decide how to chop up the stories and also prioritize them."

"Mia, I appreciate you for researching the data attributes we'd need for that refund story,' Amy added.

What prompted all these positive comments—and all this learning—from a group whose agile project was floundering only two weeks earlier?

Getting Unstuck

We were in the midst of our team's iteration retrospective workshop for an agile project and were wrapping up the session with a short retrospective. Instead of focusing on the problems we had experienced and how to fix them, I suggested that we begin by expressing appreciation related to agile requirements practices team members had noticed during the iteration.

My reasoning? The team had decided (in the last iteration retrospective) they needed to take action to improve their agile requirements practices, and we wanted to find out what was working. So, out of my facilitator's toolkit I pulled a technique called appreciative inquiry (AI).

I set the stage with the team by asking, "Recall times during the iteration when you felt we really connected with doing our requirements in an agile way. You knew we had done 'just enough.' You were in sync with Jane [our product owner] about the business value of the story. You could define story 'doneness' and effectively task out the story."

I paused for some fifteen seconds to let this sink in and then continued, "Please name the person and her action in the form of an appreciation. For example, 'Heidi, I appreciate you for ...'" Once we got started, everyone participated, and the group jump-started the next iteration.

How It Works

When you use AI, you look for what works in an organization, project, team, or event. You use that positive core as the basis for sustenance and change. AI is based on well-documented research and numerous case studies but is essentially an organizational change method.

When you inquire into moments when the team members had great success, you harvest what people know, and you learn how to repeat those moments. So, rather than asking, "What are our problems?" you ask, "What is working around here?"

The AI method has four phases: discovery, dream, design, and destiny. These phases are based on selecting an affirmative topic of choice. I won't explain the entire methodology in this article (see the references section for more information). Instead, let's look at how you can use aspects of the first phase, discovery, to improve your practices and enhance team cohesion. One way is to use appreciative interviews, followed by discovering themes and then action planning.

The Appreciative Interview

The first step of AI's discovery phase is to find out what works. On one agile team, team members grouped themselves in pairs, asking each other appreciative questions using a short interview protocol (details below). Next, we shared findings as a team, wrote down themes we discovered that were consistent across the team, and decided which agile requirements practices and activities we wanted to continue using.

At the end of the fourth iteration, the team decided to improve how agile requirements were working. Specifically, we focused on two things: our biweekly "work ahead requirements" work sessions and the way we were using low-fidelity, supplemental models for complex stories.

This goal led me, in my role as agile coach and facilitator, to consider how to explore these topics in our next iteration retrospective.

Designing Appreciative Questions

Appreciative questions explore the extraordinary—the mundane yet positive occurrences that we take for granted. These positive occurrences sustain forward movement.

You can use positive questions to explore topics that the team needs to address. Suppose the topic for discovery and change is team communication. You, as facilitator, can ask the team to recall a moment in the iteration, release, or project phase when communication allowed the team members to connect and work exceptionally well together.

Side Note: **Best Practices in Appreciative Questions**

Good appreciative interviews provide important data but also reveal much about relationships and experience. Good appreciative questions have these qualities:

- Help forge personal connections between interviewers and interviewees

- Invite stories, rather than abstract opinions or theories

- Draw on people's life experiences

- Are personal, almost intimate

- Invoke a mental scan (promote thinking of multiple possibilities from which to select one)

- Are uplifting

- Give free rein to the imagination

- Are open, allowing you to answer in a variety of ways

- Suggest action

- Have an emotional and logical flow

(Adapted from *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry* by Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2003).

You might pose the question by saying, "Recall a time during our requirements work when some communication mode or activity allowed you and a customer to connect and work exceptionally well together. What were the circumstances? What made that communication compelling?"

The pairs answer these questions in turn. While one person answers, the other takes notes and asks clarifying questions. They explore the positive question for about fifteen minutes and then swap roles. You will find the experience extraordinary.

Discover Themes

The next step is for the entire team to uncover key themes that emerged. When I am facilitating this activity, I like to ask people to record these on cards. We next array them on the wall and organize them into themes. If the topic is about agile requirements, themes might include "readiness of stories for iteration planning" or "backlog dynamics."

With your themes visually accessible, you, as facilitator, can pose questions to explore how the team members' current behavior aligns with their best work—for example, communicating with customers.

Here are questions you might ask to discover themes:

- Which ways of communicating with our customers are most effective?

- Which foster a sense of connection and alignment with our project goals?

- Which enable us to work together in ways that are mutually satisfying

Action Plan

Next, the team does action planning, which begins with the team's imagining a positive future. As facilitator, you should paint an image of this and follow it with a focus question. You might ask, "Imagine you've arrived at work tomorrow and we've had a miracle—compelling communication is a way of life on our project! What is different? How does it feel? What did we do to get here?"

From there, you facilitate action planning. The team should name specific actions that are needed and define who, what, when, and how for each action that will lead to implementing compelling communications. As you might guess, the appreciative questions are the heart of this process.

So, next time you need to make a change, try AI. You'll be positively delighted!

References and Recommended Reading

General Information on Appreciative Inquiry:

- Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2003

- Sue Annis Hammon, *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry* (2nd edition), Thin Book Publishing Co., 1998.

- David L. Cooperrider, Peter F. Sorensen, Jr., Diana Whitney, and Therese F. Yaegers, editors, *Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking Human Organization Toward a Positive Theory of Change*, Stipes Publishing, 2000.

- [Appreciative Inquiry Commons](#)

- [Appreciative Inquiry and the Quest](#)

- [Gervase Bushe](#)

- [AI Discussion List](#)

On Appreciative Questions:

- Diana Whitney, David Cooperrider, Amanda Trosten-Bloom, and Brian S. Kaplin, *Encyclopedia of Positive Questions, Volume I: Using Appreciative Inquiry to Bring Out the Best in Your Organization*, Lakeshore Communications, 2002.

- [Practice Tools: Positive Questions and Interview Guides](#)

On Retrospectives:

- Norm Kerth, [Project Retrospectives: A Handbook for Team Reviews](#), Dorset House, 2001.

- Esther Derby and Diana Larsen, [Agile Retrospectives: Making Good Teams Great](#), Pragmatic Bookshelf, 2006.

- Ellen Gottesdiener, ["Retrospectives: Harvesting The Wisdom Of Teams"](#), Neuland Newsletter, February, 2005.

- Ellen Gottesdiener, ["Team Retrospectives—for Better Iteration Assessment"](#), The Rational Edge, April, 2003.

About the Author

Ellen Gottesdiener, Principal Consultant and Founder of EBG Consulting, is an internationally recognized trainer, facilitator, speaker, and expert on collaborative requirements development. Ellen's company provides high-value training, facilitation, and consulting services to agile and traditional teams. An agile coach and trainer with a passion for agile requirements, Ellen works with large, complex products and helps teams elicit just enough requirements to achieve iteration and product goals.

Ellen's book *Requirements by Collaboration: Workshops for Defining Needs* describes how to use multiple models to elicit requirements in collaborative workshops. Her second book, *The Software Requirements Memory Jogger*, is the "go-to" industry guide for requirements good practices. In addition to providing training and consulting services and coaching agile teams, Ellen speaks at and advises for industry conferences, writes articles, and serves on the Expert Review Board of the International Institute of Business Analysis (IIBA) Business Analysis Body of Knowledge™ (BABOK™). You can get EBG Consulting's FREE monthly newsletter Success with Requirements, offering practical guidance and requirements-related news and visit the EBG's Web site for a variety of other resources.