

Appreciative Inquiry inside

A **STORMZ** interview with
Bernard Tollec





"Appreciative Inquiry is the obsessive hunt for resources"

The Stormz Team explores the field of Collective Intelligence and its influence on our organizations through a series of interviews with experts from our Facilitators community.

STORMZ :

Today, we welcome Bernard Tollec, of POSITIVE TRANSFORMATION and Appreciative Inquiry specialist, our collaborator on several Appreciative Inquiry workshops. His approach is interesting to us as it relates to several concepts that we have previously touched upon:

Powerful Questions are central to Appreciative Inquiry, both by allowing participants to dive into the heart of a subject based on their real-life examples, but also by changing perspectives through their generative nature.

SWOT is a well-known marketing framework that has been reinterpreted in a very appreciative way with **SOAR**, which analyses a company by focusing on the positive. As Weaknesses and Threats are included in Opportunities, this leaves room for more constructive values: Aspirations and Resources.

The Art of Hosting is both an attitude, a community and a facilitation method that allows for the multiplication and structuring of qualitative conversations. The Art of Hosting was freely inspired by Appreciative Inquiry, as Nancy Bragard shared with us, both philosophically and methodologically.

Understanding Appreciative Inquiry to a greater extent will allow us to gain perspective on these 3 notions, and for this reason we have invited Bernard Tollec to talk to us today. With this interview, we would like to share with you the posture and thoughtfulness of his methodology that have impressed us so much.

STORMZ : Hello Bernard. Could you introduce yourself and describe Appreciative Inquiry to us?

BT: I am the founder of Positive Transformation and guide organizations and managers in their transformation, which is in fact 'Appreciative Inquiry Inside,' a particular and innovative form of what is usually called Organizational Development (OD).

Appreciative Inquiry is the intentional and obsessive hunt for resources. A resource is everything that is available to a person, either in the past (something that a person or organization has done successfully and could be reused), in the present (people's energy towards a project, their personal aspirations, etc.), or in the future (is our vision of the future optimistic or anxious and depreciative?).



Appreciative Inquiry can be falsely considered as a just method among many others (though this may sometimes be the case), or as a superficial approach, reduced to a mere "positive attitude." Fortunately, it is much richer and deeper than that.

Nowadays, companies tend to intentionally seek out dysfunction, scarcity, what is lacking, or anything that doesn't work properly or is not available. Positive Transformation and Appreciative Inquiry, on the other hand, seek out what works, what exists, and ask: what do we really want to transform?

It's therefore an intentional and obsessive pursuit of resources, of what is possible and feasible. It's working on people's talents rather than their flaws, on their aspirations rather than their frustrations.

Often, business leaders tell us that absolutely nothing works in their organization. This is where an obsessive search must come into play: if the business is still in existence, something must be working! It becomes necessary to look for these tiny potential resources - in a person, a team or an organization - identify them and amplify them.

Resources



Positive Transformation and Appreciative Inquiry look at what works and what is available, and asks the question, what do we really want to transform?

STORMZ : Who created the Appreciative Inquiry approach? Is there a founding story or publications?

The founding story is that of David Cooperrider, the true embodiment of Appreciative Inquiry, who began this journey as a doctoral student in Sociology of Organizations at a Cleveland university. As part of his research, he went to a highly renowned clinic in Cleveland to research malfunctions. But after having met with the whole clinic's ecosystem - patients, doctors, suppliers, middlemen, etc. - he realized that the clinic was functioning extremely well! With his mentor Suresh Srivastava, he decided to return to the clinic and approach the Board with the idea of conducting an 'appreciative investigation': no longer looking for dysfunctions but identifying why things worked. Appreciative Inquiry was born.

David Cooperrider started to talk about this practice around the United States, but the success he enjoys today did not happen immediately since it's always hard to be a pioneer. He then met Jane Magruder Watkins, who was the Dean of the National Training Laboratory, one of the world's leading research centres on Organizational Development. Jane is one of the greatest practitioners in this field, she is the one who trained me, and she has the unique talent of discovering resources in people before they're even aware of them. David and Jane began to develop this practice worldwide: this practice is currently well-known in the Anglo-Saxon world and arrived in France around 2009-2010. Today, there must be around 1000 Appreciative Inquiry practitioners in France, many of whom were trained by us.



STORMZ : What is your place in the Appreciative Inquiry universe? When did you decide to get involved?

I was immediately won over by the practice when I discovered it in 2009. I introduced it to PHILIPS where I worked as International HR Director of the Automotive Branch on a major and complex transformation project. I told myself: "If this works in the auto industry, it'll work anywhere," and it worked beyond my imagination! So, I continued to practice and delve into the discipline. The idea of pursuing Appreciative Leadership came to me during a very inspiring conversation with Jane, in which she convinced me that I had the legitimacy to develop Appreciative Inquiry in France.

From then on, I started building www.appreciative-inquiry.fr with Claire Lustig-Rochet to give more visibility to this practice and to train practitioners in France, Germany, England and even South Africa.

We continued training in other applications of Appreciative Inquiry: strategy-building (with SOAR), StrengthsBased Teambuilding, and human interaction facilitation. This rather explosive and disruptive workshop allowed us to develop a particular approach to appreciative facilitation.

There is a huge potential to share this practice, since it is still not well-known in some regions, particularly in Southern Europe and Asia.

And it's not only useful in the world of organizations, it can be very useful in the field of public administration (we recently used it for a programme with the top French administration school) and in various types of communities: the city of Chicago used Appreciative Inquiry for urban planning development, for example. While the business potential is big, Appreciative Inquiry goes way beyond that: a person that I had trained in AI once told me that Appreciative Inquiry prevented him from having a nervous breakdown!

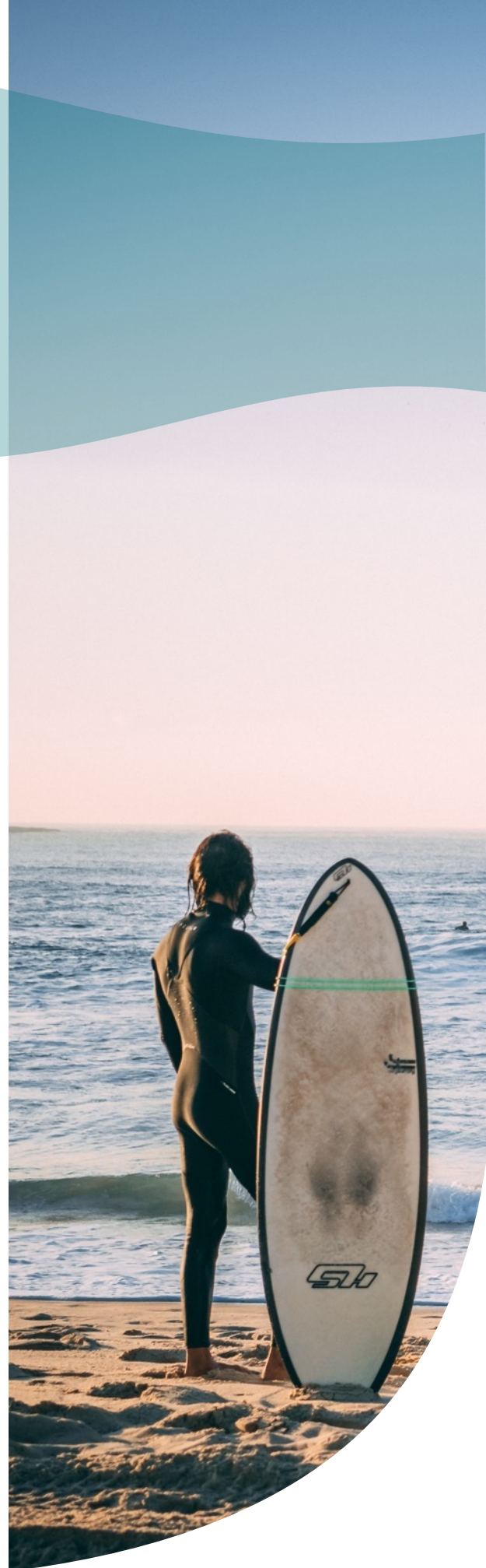
Positive disruption



STORMZ : Could it be said that Appreciative Inquiry is also a personal development approach? Whether at the individual or the macro level?

Appreciative Inquiry is universal: it can be used anywhere and is always appropriate but not necessarily easy to implement. It can be used in an organization, but also in a family, for a personal matter, for a long-term project or for a short-term scenario. You can use the tools in place in a company and 're-appreciate' them: for example, I believe that some tools, such as personal development plans and annual appraisal interviews often focus on personal flaws and should be thoroughly amended... It's possible to "add some appreciation" by developing talents rather than focusing on flaws.

Appreciative Inquiry is totally inclusive: instead of getting rid of processes and tools that people use, appreciative practitioners will invite people to use them in other ways by redirecting their focus on finding resources. Most tools today are focused on scarcity because we live in a general paradigm that focuses on detecting problems or gaps, and analyzing them - with the intention of problem-solving or filling the gaps.



STORMZ : Does Appreciative Inquiry focus on posture, such as in the Art of Hosting, or on methodology, such as with Liberating Structures?

Appreciative Inquiry is really composed of "5Ps": **Presence, Paradigms, Principles, Processes and Parts** – which form a complete set and structure the framework developed in our book *AI Power 5*.

First, AI is a **Presence**, a philosophical approach that allows us to see what works rather than focus on what doesn't. This 'appreciative presence' must really become a true reflex within our organizations...

... But it is also a **Paradigm** – a way of perceiving the world to support organizations, teams and people in their transformation...

... Appreciative Inquiry is also a set of six basic **Principles** that bridge the gap between "being AI" (the Presence and the Paradigms I just mentioned) and "doing AI..."

... **Processes and Parts**, the concrete tools we use. The Principles are the cement that connects these two aspects, and Appreciative Inquiry is all of this at once: simultaneously knowing how to be and knowing how to do.

After internalizing the philosophy and deep convictions of AI, we are able to apply the different processes and invent new ones. But if we go no further than the processes, we will only discover one island in an archipelago of 5 islands represented by the 5Ps. Often, people only approach AI through the lens of processes and believe that Appreciative Inquiry is summed up by the "5Ds." In fact, a quick Google image search makes this clear. But this is only process and Appreciative Inquiry is thankfully much broader than that. It would be a sad state of affairs if Appreciative Inquiry was reduced to a stiff and mechanical methodology.

However, we must understand that Appreciative Inquiry did not begin with processes. These appeared much later, while David Cooperrider was in Africa within a community that did not fully understand the complex philosophical concepts behind AI and drove David to formulate the first 4Ds, which later became the 5Ds. It was an external demand for a practical translation of Appreciative Inquiry that followed because it is easier to understand. While the 5Ds are useful and powerful, there are many other ways to implement this approach which is why we wrote this book, to move on from rigidly applying the 5Ds to a more flexible and agile way of applying AI by visiting the 4 other P's.

Appreciative Inquiry is an invitation to revisit our way of perceiving transformations: moving from what lacks to finding resources!

STORMZ : How does the role of an appreciative leader resemble that of a facilitator? What are its key principles?

Appreciative facilitators are always looking for resources: they say to themselves "everything is here, nothing is missing"; then they just need to facilitate the emergence of available resources. The resources are there; they just need to be activated. Essentially, it's like Apollo 13, the famous spacecraft that narrowly avoided explosion. NASA ground engineers only had access to the astronauts' skills and tools present in the cockpit. That's AI, focusing on existing and available resources rather than on the potential disaster and the tools missing from the cockpit. As Jane would say, "Trust the people, trust the process, trust yourself!"

For instance, when I'm doing a training, sometimes my instructions are a little too vague and some participants don't understand them. First of all, I don't judge them for misunderstanding, it's perfectly acceptable. Then, I don't just repeat the instructions, instead I use this opportunity to ask if anyone would be able to explain the instructions again. As an instructor of this appreciative process, I know there are as many resources as there are people in the room. So I rely on the talent of the

participants, I trust them and I try to be inclusive by never rejecting any idea or remark. The goal is to get the most out of the idea and understand what the person wanted to say.

There are 6 Key Principles for the appreciative facilitator that are consistently present, and which are constantly blending together, like paint colors or cooking ingredients. These are social constructionism, the positive principle, simultaneity, anticipation, the poetic principle, and completeness. The latter was added later on by David Cooperrider. In fact, rather than saying "positive principle," it would be better to say "generative principle," meaning everything that generates resources.

Appreciative facilitators will often pick a major Principle that is more meaningful to them. The principle of simultaneity is the one I like best because it says that change is accessory to the questions we ask: I love to ask questions that generate an immediate change, a shock even. We must always pay attention to the questions we ask, because they can either generate a change or lead a person to a dead end.



Social constructionism is perhaps the most complex of these and the one that has generated the most literature: this principle demonstrates that there is no objective reality between us other than the one we co-construct together.

STORMZ : How do you respond to critics of Appreciative Inquiry? Particularly about AI being naively optimistic or “jargony”?

Personally, I do not use appreciative jargon and I prefer to use the name "Positive Transformation" when speaking directly to leaders of an organization, leaving behind the admittedly “jargony” vocabulary of Appreciative Inquiry. I was a bit reluctant to use this expression at first, because the word "positive" might sound naively optimistic.

But I realized that it interested my counterparts. It is a bit of a 'marketing gimmick' that nevertheless allows you to go straight to the heart of the subject in order to initiate transformation: How do the leaders behave? How are they looking for resources?

To use meaningful words, however, you have to really understand what Appreciative Inquiry is. Otherwise, we just regurgitate jargon, which is normal for those just starting out. But we need to be able to talk about AI using the client's own vocabulary. It's crucial to have a clear understanding of AI from the inside, to be able to reinterpret and rephrase concepts in an intelligent manner.

With regards to the second criticism: we are often accused of seeing the world through rose-colored glasses. Personally, when I receive this critique, I try to adopt an "Inquiry" approach: Why do you think that is so? We have to adapt each time though, and it always depends to whom you are speaking: the easiest way is to present the list of our clients, projects and ventures. Afterwards, I simply give examples to show how Appreciative Inquiry is far from being naively optimistic. I insist on the obsession with finding resources and amplifying what exists, which I find incredibly fruitful and much broader than we imagine!

A change of perspective



It is possible to use Appreciative Inquiry in any situation, in any culture. You do however need a certain dexterity and experience behind strong convictions in order to put it into place in situations where everything we observe tells us that is cannot work!

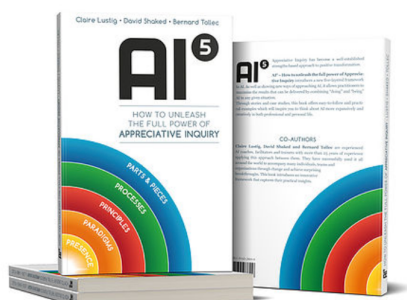
Nonetheless, this criticism still bothers me, so I realize that I haven't yet found the best way to answer it and to convince the person with whom I'm talking. I don't think it's useful to have to "prove" that our approach is not naive, it really depends on the practitioner – sometimes the practitioner can make it seem like a superficial approach. In fact, everything comes down to the practitioners, their ability to have an appreciative presence, to question, and to explain what will be introduced.

STORMZ : How can we learn about Appreciative Inquiry? Can you briefly tell us about your forthcoming book?

You need to practice, practice, practice, practice... It's absolutely essential to train in Appreciative Inquiry and then to be able to deepen your practice and develop your skills. It's also very important to do this with people who have been practicing for a long time and to learn from your peers. We currently hold three training workshops per year in France for fifteen participants per program, plus workshops abroad. The training lasts three days followed by a half-day that we call "AI Laboratory," where we further explore the participants' experiences and continue learning from them.

In general, people stay in touch and start practicing immediately, as we recommend. For corporate participants, I usually invite them to attend in pairs and at least twice, because when they return to their organizations, they are often confronted with a totally different paradigm that can inhibit and demotivate them. In one of my client's organizations, the group of practitioners that we trained meets weekly to encourage each other and work on integrating AI into their meetings, trainings, strategy, etc. We support them in the long term so that they can meet regularly and turn their practice into a good habit. But we don't just provide training, we also directly intervene in organizations to share content, experiences and enthusiasm.

We have written a new book on **Appreciative Inquiry, AI Power 5: How to Unleash the Full Power of Appreciative Inquiry** (www.AIpower5.com) that we published as part of the last World Congress on Appreciative Inquiry. The book was received with great enthusiasm and was a big hit, which led us to launch a second printing and to continue developing it further.





It is illustrated with many anecdotes and reintroduces all the elements of Appreciative Inquiry, including Presence, which had never really been spoken about before. This concept of the "5Ps" (presence, paradigms, principles, process, parts) is a new framework that we have invented, and which gives Appreciative Inquiry its full power. This book was written by Claire Lustig-Rochet, David Shaked and myself. I have also developed a model of Organizational Development called "Positive Transformation" which identifies three dimensions that need to be taken into account and acted on in order to generate real and lasting transformation: leadership, organization and projects.

**Appreciative Inquiry
is about surfing on
the wave of what is
possible — for
ourselves and our
organizations!**

Go further with Positive Transformation !



A 50-page document on the Positive Transformation that maps out the gateways to transformation (contact us for the full document)

[What is Positive Transformation](#) and how can it impact the future of work?



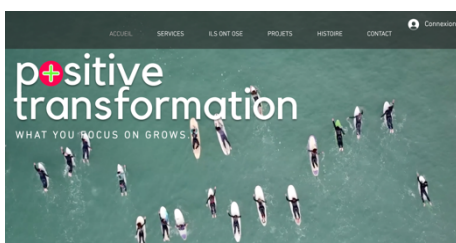
The Positive Transformation [approach in action](#) at the Centre Pompidou in Paris



AI Power 5, How to unleash the full power of Appreciative Inquiry, [available here!](#).

For more articles on Positive Transformation visite our websites :

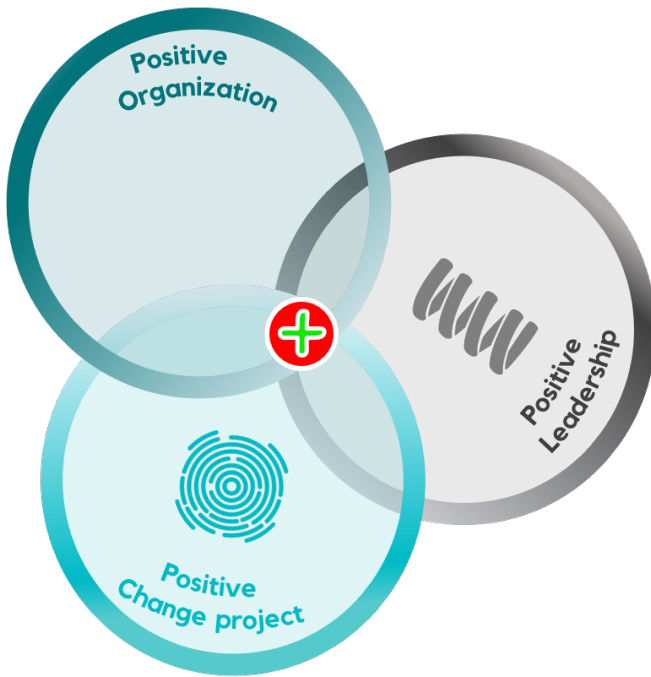
www.transfo-positive.com
www.appreciative-inquiry.fr



About the author



Bernard Tollec is one the European specialists in strengths and resource-based approaches like Appreciative Inquiry and Solution Focus. As an Executive Coach and expert in Organizational Development, he works with organizations that want to experience rapid and sustainable transformation. He also coaches, trains and supervises leaders, executive coaches, and internal change agents in these new methods of collective intelligence. Bernard is the author of *AI Power 5 : how to unleash the full power of Appreciative Inquiry* and of *Positive Transformation*.



Positive Transformation is a systemic approach to organizational transformations. It is an unexpected and disruptive look at transformation and leadership development and targets the following three areas :

- Positive Leadership
- Positive Transformation Project
- Positive Organization

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