Following the strengths-based leadership philosophy of Peter Drucker, Appreciative Inquiry says “the essential task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths in ways that make a systems’ weaknesses irrelevant.” It says that managing and leading change is ALL about strengths: elevating strengths, magnifying strengths, and creating new combinations and chemistries of strengths in ways that propel innovation.

Appreciative Inquiry—or “AI” for short-- has two radical but exciting premises. First, it says forget everything you learned in change management 101—organizations are not problems-to-be-solved—and that all the deficit based change methods, from gap analysis to organizational diagnosis, are in fact creating an exhausting treadmill and barrier to real innovation. Appreciative inquiry turns the problem-solving habits of the field on their head, and shows that change is more powerful, energizing, and effective when we inquire into the true, the good, the better and the possible—everything that gives life to a system when it is most alive and at its exceptional best. Do you really think one more survey into low morale is going to generate the energy and new vision of a company filled with people alive with passion and high commitment? AI theory says no: all the studies in the world of low morale will not tell us one thing about “high commitment work systems.” If we want to know how to create a high commitment work system, we would be better off doing 100 interviews—a real study—of “high point moments” in people’s career in the organization, times when they were most committed and alive in their work and when they were going way beyond their job descriptions. So AI is about the discovery of life-generating strengths and instead of SWOT it is built on an analytic model called SOAR, that is, the systematic study of signature strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results.

The second idea AI promotes, beyond the idea of strengths-based inquiry and change, is the principle of whole system in the room. There are endless arguments over the relative merits of top-down change versus bottom up change. AI theory says both are increasingly obsolete, and so is the idea that the most effective sized group is 6-8 people, for example 6-8 people at the top doing strategy work and then doing the famous “communications rollout.” Indeed some of the most exciting AI strategy work happening today is starting to answer the most perplexing and challenging question every CEO faces and that is: “how do we really change at the scale of the whole?” AI responds and in turn raises its own compelling question: “Could it be that the most effective size group, for significant and major strategic issues, is 50, 100, 500 or a 1000 people, interactively visioning, designing, and creating vis-à-vis a true alignment of the strengths of the whole?”