

Appreciative Inquiry (AI):

A One-Page Cheat Sheet for Main Street Leaders

What Is Appreciative Inquiry?

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a strengths-based approach to leadership and change that focuses on **what gives life to organizations and communities when they are at their best.**

Instead of starting with problems, AI starts with **assets, successes, and possibility** — and builds forward from there.

Why AI Works for Main Street

AI aligns naturally with Main Street values:

- Asset-based revitalization
- Relationship-driven leadership
- Community pride and storytelling
- Collaboration across sectors and regions

Strong questions create strong downtowns.

The AI Mindset Shift

From → To

- Fixing what's broken → Building on what works
- Gaps and deficits → Assets and strengths
- “What's wrong?” → “What's possible?”

AI doesn't ignore challenges — it changes where we begin.

The 5 Core AI Principles (Plain Language)

- **Words Matter** – The way we talk shapes how people see their community
- **Asking Is Doing** – Questions spark change immediately
- **Stories Are Powerful** – What we focus on grows
- **The Future Pulls Us Forward** – Hope creates momentum
- **Positivity Builds Energy** – Strengths motivate action

The 4D Cycle (How AI Works)

Discover - What's working? When are we at our best?

Dream - What could our downtown become?

Design - How might we build on our strengths?

Deliver - What actions will we take next?

AI Questions You Can Use Anywhere

With Boards

- “When have we been most effective as a board?”
- “What strengths do we bring to this moment?”

With Committees

- “What's already working that we can build on?”
- “What success would look like one year from now?”

With Communities

- “What do you love most about downtown?”
- “When does downtown feel most alive to you?”

With Partners

- “Where do our strengths align?”
- “What's possible if we work together?”

AI in Everyday Main Street Leadership

- Open meetings with a success story
- Frame reports around impact and momentum
- Use resident stories in advocacy
- Design Transformation Strategies rooted in strengths
- Build regional collaboration around shared assets

Remember This

- The questions you ask shape the future
- Strengths are renewable resources
- Possibility invites participation

Appreciative Inquiry isn't a tool — it's a leadership practice.