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# AI Practitioner



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## India and Appreciative Inquiry

Generative Connection between Ancient  
Wisdom and Today's Endeavours in the Field

**Neena Verma**  
**Ronald Fry**  
**Zeb Waturoucha**



## Inside this issue

### Welcome to a new year for AI Practitioner!

Anne Radford, Editor in Chief



We begin the year with an issue, gratefully sponsored by Involve Consulting in France, which focuses on India and AI and continue with issues on AI communities of practice, AI in Asia and the effect of AI within cities.

In this February issue, our articles connect ancient Indian philosophies with AI practices of appreciative engagement and mindset. Through the articles, pictures and poems, our contributors invite us to witness changes with GenY employees, tribal communities and innovation in Indian industry.

In our first Feature Choice article this year, Mo McKenna focuses on the urgent need for climate change in our physical and human world environments, including our organizations and communities.

In Research Notes, we focus on the potential complications which occur when the researcher is also a manager where she is collecting data and has a stake in the project outcome.

In AI Resources, you will find key books, articles and videos connecting AI and India. This column is dedicated to Suresh Srivastva, born in India and an instrumental figure in the creation and development of Appreciative Inquiry.

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# Leveraging Appreciative Intelligence for Innovation in Indian Organizations

## ABSTRACT

Appreciative Intelligence®, the ability to reframe, to see the positive and act on it, is an important component for innovation. My prior research showed that Appreciative Intelligence was instrumental in driving innovation in Silicon Valley in the United States. A case study of the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation illustrates how the concept can be applied for innovation in Indian organizations.

When the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) was formed in 1995, it was widely believed that, owing to several constraints, its goal of providing rail-based public transit would never become a reality.<sup>1</sup> A few years later, India's capital city of New Delhi claimed a world-class underground transit system known as Delhi Metro, which carries about 1,900,000 commuters every day (*The Times of India*, 21 June, 2012). The initial phase of the \$2.3 billion project was completed in December, 2005, on budget and nearly three years ahead of schedule (Lakshman, 2007). Pollution levels in Delhi have come down by 30% and the number of carbon-emitting public-transport buses has not increased, though the population has.

In a country where public spending on infrastructure is often marred by mismanagement and corruption, Delhi Metro stands out as an unusual accomplishment on several grounds, and has been featured as a model of innovation in management literature (Thatthenkery, 2011). This article is a very good example of "positive deviance" (Cameron, 2008)) which can act as a source of learning for other applications in Indian organizations, and perhaps beyond.

### The miracle-worker of the Delhi Metro

Elattuvalapil Sreedharan, the managing director of DMRC until December 31, 2011, may be seen as an embodiment of Appreciative Intelligence, thanks to his capacity to reframe and make the once seemingly impossible become a reality. A *Business Week* (Lakshman, 2007) cover story featured this "unusual bureaucrat" as "the miracle-worker of the Delhi Metro". He has been hailed as a brilliant and innovative leader who can think outside the box, reframe challenging situations into opportunities, and bring his vision to perfect execution, all components of Appreciative Intelligence®.<sup>2</sup>

1 A previous version of this article appeared in *Paradigm* (2009), under the title "Appreciative Intelligence for Innovation in the Indian Industry," *Paradigm*, 13 / 1, 1-5.

2 Appreciative Intelligence® is a trademark owned by Tojo Thatthenkery.

Elattuvalapil Sreedharan: the 'miracle worker' of the Delhi Metro



Intelligence, leaders of Indian businesses, the public sector and the government can positively contribute to the creation of more innovative organizations.

Appreciative Intelligence is the ability to perceive the positive potential in a given situation, and to act purposively to transform the potential to outcomes. Thatchenkery and Metzker

### Understanding Appreciative Intelligence

Howard Gardner (1983) has shown that there are eight types of intelligence: linguistic, body-kinesthetic, spatial, musical, logical-mathematical, intrapersonal, interpersonal and naturalist. Appreciative Intelligence should be seen as yet another addition to this model of multiple intelligences.

I coined the term *Appreciative Intelligence* in 1996 after studying the phenomenal growth of entrepreneurship in the Silicon Valley in USA during the late 1980s. Talents of all sorts congregated around a small region in northern California during that period. Entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, academics, researchers and immigrants (primarily from Asia) took significant risks that led to the rise of the internet and the networked world we are part of today. I hypothesized that Appreciative Intelligence is the individual ability that partly contributed to the success of Silicon Valley (Thatchenkery and Metzker, 2006).

My research into Indian American entrepreneurs in early 1990s suggested that the various ethnic groups felt valued and experienced the freedom to experiment in Silicon Valley. The venture capitalists who invested in them were asking the question "how can I make this work" as opposed to "what are the chances this idea will fail?" An environment of opportunity recognition, persistence, resilience and anticipation of positive outcomes existed in the region that defined the area as a fertile ground for entrepreneurship.

### Embracing ambiguity and the unknown

If Appreciative Intelligence-based entrepreneurship helped create Silicon Valley, can it produce a comparable, new, fertile soil for entrepreneurship in India, both for corporate and public sectors? I believe that it can, partly because of the various Indian cultural values which celebrate embracing ambiguity and the unknown, two ingredients for innovation. Indian philosophy is not based on dichotomies, but on valuing the existence of multiple perspectives and realities. Appreciation and openness for new ideas are possible when we can step out of rigid mindsets and established ways of doing things. The notion of *maya* (illusion) suggests that reality is socially constructed. Having a playful attitude (*leela*) towards it frees us from being too fixated on one way of problem solving and helps us to experiment with new ways of creating new knowledge (Thatchenkery and Upadhyaya, 1996).

Appreciation and openness for new ideas are possible when we can step out of rigid mindsets and established ways of doing things.

Appreciative Intelligence has three components: reframing, appreciating the positive and seeing how the future unfolds from the present. The prevalent framing in the DMRC before the arrival of Sreedharan was based on past experiences about several public work projects which had lasted much longer than anticipated, with the cost over-running by millions of rupees. Sreedharan looked at the same gloomy scenario but reframed it to see possibilities and opportunities. He saw a capital city where thousands would commute, mostly underground, significantly reducing air pollution and congestion. He believed that given the right framing, people of Delhi would make the necessary sacrifices to let the construction go ahead smoothly and safely. He reframed and believed that people are inherently good and would take care of the new transit system. Thanks to his Indian value system, Sreedharan was comfortable with ambiguity and believed in Karma.

### Irrepressible resilience

The type of reframing that Sreedharan practises does not begin easily. A leader will have to be highly intentional and pro-actively look for reframing possibilities. With persistence and irrepressible resilience – qualities of Appreciative Intelligence, a leader becomes better at it. Eventually, reframing may become second nature to transformational leaders such as Sreedharan. For example, in the 1990s, Sreedharan led the 470-mile Konkan Railway project, another engineering accomplishment and the first major railway project since the British left India in 1947. Yet another example was how, despite slow clearances, he led the information technology park project outside Delhi, now a thriving hub of entrepreneurship.

Appreciating the positive, the second component of Appreciative Intelligence may sound counter-intuitive for Indian business leaders because they are accustomed to anticipate what could go wrong instead of what might go right. While effective leaders need to anticipate how various constraints may negatively impact their plans, they also have to sort out what might go right and invest their energy in that direction. Sreedharan was able to do this through his exceptional ability to recognize positive possibilities in everyday organizational situations, including routine procedures.

Appreciating the positives must become a habit if it is to have lasting impact. Just as in reframing, recognizing and appreciating the positives need persistence and resilience. It is similar to the process of discovery embedded in scientific experiments. Due to the “learned helplessness” outcome (Seligman, 1991) generated by past experiences, many leaders tend to miss the already embedded positive possibilities. Sreedharan reframed and discovered positive possibilities as a matter of habit.

### Workable small steps

The third component of Appreciative Intelligence, seeing how the future unfolds from the present, is the critical last step for generating successful outcomes. The future possibility must be realized in the current reality through purposive action. Leaders such as Sreedharan are known to break down their actions into a series of workable, time-sensitive small steps. For example, Sreedharan not only mapped the flow of his engineering actions but also their social and cultural impact. Recognizing that a significant number of migrant workers at the Delhi Metro could be exposed to HIV and AIDS, he insisted on creating a HIV-



DMRC: completed on budget, three years early

People with high Appreciative Intelligence exhibit irrepressible resilience.

awareness program which covered 3000 workers and contributed to the overall effectiveness of the project (World Bank Report, 2006).

Sreedharan brought down the average duration of major tenders for Delhi Metro to nineteen days, whereas similar projects took three to nine months in the rest of the country. It took 22 years to build the Kolkata Metro in one of India's largest cities because of mismanagement and lack of funds. In contrast, Sreedharan got the various government agencies to work together. Initially there was a disagreement between the Delhi Metro and its partner, Indian Railways, about the type of tracks to use (single versus double gauge). But thanks to Sreedharan's Appreciative Intelligence, the contractors came up with a plan to assemble the metro carriages in Bangalore and roll them on Indian Railways track straight to the New Delhi metro.

#### Four qualities of Appreciative Intelligence

In addition to the three components discussed earlier, Appreciative Intelligence leads to four qualities in individuals: persistence; conviction that one's actions matter; tolerance for uncertainty; and irrepressible resilience – the ability to bounce back from a difficult situation. Persistence or perseverance is the ability to stick with a project or problem to its fruitful completion and is influenced by high self-esteem. Overall, people with high self-esteem are more likely to see the presence of alternatives toward their underlying goal, even when faced with failure. Because people with Appreciative Intelligence envision a clear outcome, they hold a strong conviction that their actions matter, just like Sreedharan who accepted the offer to create Delhi Metro because he wanted to make a difference.

The highly creative ideas and actions that individuals with high Appreciative Intelligence routinely pursue create uncertainty or ambiguity. Beyond tolerating their own uncertainty, they help other people deal with uncertainty, often by reframing situations to help them see what is positive, how the future could unfold from the present and by encouraging persistence until the unknown becomes known.

People with high Appreciative Intelligence exhibit irrepressible resilience as a result of reframing, seeing what is positive in the situation, and understanding that a better future can come about despite a crisis or setback. They bounce back higher from challenges than the position from which they began – the way Sreedharan did on many occasions.

As leaders and innovators reframe, appreciate the positive and see the future unfolding from the present, leadership practices emerge that build Appreciative Intelligence throughout the organization. Sreedharan demonstrated successful practices for others to model, thereby helping his people use language to reframe difficult realities in a generative way to set high expectations and design practices and processes, building a continuous cycle of innovation, as had been evident from the remarkable success of Delhi Metro.

#### Conclusion

Because of their ability to bring out the best in others, capacity for innovation and resilience, people with high Appreciative Intelligence become valued members of organizations (Thatchenkery and Metzker, 2006). Very much like Sreedharan, they are often at the forefront of facilitating innovation and creating new ventures. They help harness the competitive advantages brought about by

Appreciative Intelligence – innovation, talent development, employee retention and resilience – that all affect an organization’s success.

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