

February 2026

Volume 28 Number 1

ISBN 978-1-907549-67-0

 dx.doi.org/10.12781/978-1-907549-67-0

AI Practitioner

International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry



Strengthening Community with Appreciative Inquiry: Stories From a Learning Network

Edited by

Luc Verheijen and Saskia Tjepkema

Image courtesy of Griet Brouwen

Co-publishers

The David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry
and Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company



<https://aipractitioner.com/product/subscription-for-practitioners/> 





Luc Verheijen

Luc Verheijen is a partner at Kessels & Smit, the Learning Company. He is a Taos Institute associate and co-publisher of *AI Practitioner*. His book, co-authored with Saskia Tjepkema and Joeri Kabalt, *Appreciative Inquiry as a Daily Leadership Practice* was published by Taos Institute Publishers in 2020. Contact: lverheijen@kessels-smit.com

When Appreciative Inquiry is in Your Organisation's DNA

Nearly 20 Years of Pioneering At Stebo

In line with the theme of this issue of *AI Practitioner*, which brings together stories from the latest Appreciative Inquiry Learning Network, the seventh network of its kind, this article relates the story of Stebo's connection. Stebo, a Belgian social profit organisation, has participated in all of the Learning Networks. Even more: in 2008, Stebo co-initiated the very first AI Learning Network. They were the driving force behind a European subsidy grant for this network, enabling 90 participants to explore and learn about strengths-based development across organisations.

From years of collaboration with Stebo, and from the stories their participants share in our learning networks, it is clear that the theory and practices of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) are deeply intertwined with Stebo's way of working. Guest-editing this issue of *AI Practitioner* offered me the opportunity to interview three team members: Ina Metalidis (team leader, Energy), Hilde Van Ransbeke (team leader, Housing), and Erwin Debruyne (director, Stebo). Their insights reveal how AI has been embedded into the organisation's culture and practices over almost two decades.

Stebo, a Belgian social profit organisation, has been active since 1987 in socio-economic development and community building, with a strong focus on strengthening people, neighbourhoods, and local economies.

The organisation strives for an inclusive society in which everyone can participate, regardless of background or social position. From this conviction, policy is translated into concrete services and projects that build on people's capacities, talents, and lived realities. A key strength of the organisation lies in connecting policy and practice, ensuring that measures effectively reach and benefit the communities they are intended for.

Stebo combines project-based and service-oriented work across several societal domains, including:

- **Work and social inclusion** Supporting people who must travel a long way to a labour market towards employment or entrepreneurship.

A key strength of the organisation lies in connecting policy and practice.

- **Entrepreneurship** Stimulating and coaching start-up entrepreneurs.
- **Housing** Supporting local housing policy and advising residents on housing quality, renovation, and energy efficiency.
- **Energy and sustainability** Promoting rational energy use and accessible pathways to sustainable energy solutions for citizens.
- **Community development and neighbourhood work** Strengthening social cohesion and social capital in neighbourhoods.

Call to adventure: Starting an Appreciative Inquiry Learning Network

Stebo's story offers an inspiring example of how an organisation can embed a tradition of appreciative learning, reflection, and innovation into everyday practices. Their use of AI – both internally and externally – reads like a hero's journey: a path full of challenges, discoveries, trials, and rewards. It is the story of an organisation that encourages employees to work intuitively and experimentally, rooted in a view of humanity and the world that is clearly linked to the foundations of AI.



The journey did not begin with a detailed plan, but with an invitation: to co-organise an AI learning network where participants could experiment with new questions, methodologies, and ways of working together. For Stebo employees, this network felt simultaneously familiar and challenging. It offered space to connect daily work and projects with broader themes: collaboration with colleagues and partners, addressing societal challenges, and exploring intuitive approaches to problem-solving.

Appreciative Inquiry is our travel companion.

Over time, these AI practices became part of Stebo's DNA, shaping both culture ("who we are") and methodology ("how we do things"). "Appreciative Inquiry is our travel companion", one interviewee said. "It's not always in the foreground, but it offers us a way of seeing the world and a way of relating with people."

Entering the unknown: Experimentation and trial-and-error

Applying AI methodologies in practice required courage, flexibility, and experimentation. "The story comes to you. You don't have to plan everything in advance; it will come. This was one of my core learnings," another interviewee

said. Participants learned to anticipate answers they didn't fully know themselves and discovered how prior experience enabled new possibilities.

Time and again, specific projects illustrated this learning. For example, when designing a new talent development programme, an employee wondered what questions would guide the conversation without influencing the outcome. Or, in facilitating social interventions, colleagues learned to improvise, adjusting plans in response to unexpected challenges or the specific context of citizens and communities. Through practice, reflection, and letting go, insights emerged that otherwise might have remained hidden.

Mentors and inspiration along the way

Stebo's journey was enriched by a broad network of mentors, international examples, and the wider AI community.

Stebo's journey was enriched by a broad network of mentors, international examples, and the wider AI community. One participant, inspired by Angela Blanchard in South Africa, recalled the workshop she presented at the 2015 World Appreciative Inquiry Conference entitled "You Can't Build on Broken". "Even when lives seem completely broken, you can help people see their strength," he reflected. "So even in the most challenging circumstances, perspective and resilience are possible."

The AI learning network itself provided a space for dialogue and reflection, bringing Stebo employees together with colleagues from other organisations. Participating as a group in this cross-organisational network heightened their awareness of Stebo's unique identity and deepened their sense of personal responsibility for nurturing and sustaining the organisation's DNA.

Applying AI methodologies in practice requires courage, flexibility, and experimentation



The wider international AI community – for instance, events such as one of the World Appreciative Inquiry Conferences – provided not only methodologies but also theoretical frameworks. As one employee said: "I discovered AI as not being

the music score, but the music itself.” The AI framework offered structure while leaving room for improvisation. In practical projects – from talent development to complex social interventions – employees learned to improvise within a shared foundation of values and methodologies.

The trial: Challenges and conflicts

As in every hero’s journey, employees faced their dragons: conflicts, misunderstandings, and personal and leadership challenges. One interviewee described a tense internal discussion with colleagues where criticism and negative energy unexpectedly surfaced. This confrontation demanded personal reflection, emotional control, and leadership.

By stepping back, reflecting rationally, and creating a safe context, new insights emerged.

By stepping back, reflecting rationally, and creating a safe context, new insights emerged: emotions could be separated from rational considerations, and responsibility could be shared within the team. The interviewee rearranged the tables, organised a meal, and went for a walk with the team to break the tension. The conversation could then proceed constructively, maintaining engagement and energy.

This trial also taught a valuable lesson about leadership: it does not mean solving everything for everyone. Sharing responsibility transformed the way the team works: facilitating, observing, and supporting rather than controlling. The challenge became an opportunity to strengthen both leadership and team cohesion.

The reward: Trust to improvise

From these challenges emerged the rewards: trust, agility, and the shared ability to see new opportunities. AI became a flexible framework for improvisation and creation, not a rigid method. Employees learned that plans could adapt and that improvisation flourishes when grounded in shared values and structures.

Small but meaningful practices, such as sharing stories of pride and achievements, reinforced connections and allowed employees to appreciate each other’s perspectives. A simple exercise in which team members shared experiences from the past year even helped more reserved colleagues feel included and fostered a sense of shared pride. Over time, these daily practices and rituals embedded AI deeply in Stebo’s culture, making it tangible in interactions, projects, and shared celebrations.

Stebo has built a culture in which AI is not just a methodology, but a living, shared DNA.

Returning with wisdom: Balancing sustaining and innovation

After nearly twenty years of tradition, Stebo has built a culture in which AI is not just a methodology, but a living, shared DNA. The organisation balances maintenance – safeguarding values and methods – with innovation: constantly integrating new insights, experiments, and applications. Culture is not abstract but lived practice, shaped through daily interaction.

New colleagues are actively welcomed into this culture so that the DNA remains vibrant and evolving. As one interviewee summarised: “The only way to make music is to keep making it. It’s not enough to hang a score on the wall; you have to play together, practise again, and produce new music.” The AI DNA is passed on while constantly renewed.

Continuing the journey: Constant evolution of AI practices



The intergenerational nature of the team, the ongoing dialogue, and the link between policy and practice create a resilient and adaptive culture.

Stebo is an organisation in motion, navigating the interplay between sustaining core strengths and exploring new possibilities. Employees continue to experiment, reflect, and support one another, keeping the organisation agile even under external pressure or societal challenges. The intergenerational nature of the team, the ongoing dialogue, and the link between policy and practice create a resilient and adaptive culture.

This story demonstrates that organisational culture is not something automatic. Nor does it emerge spontaneously: it is shaped by people willing to experiment, reflect, and create together. It is a story of trust, agility, and continuous innovation. And, like any hero’s journey, it is never truly complete: there is always a new note to play, a new story to tell, and a new challenge to embrace.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)