The traditional approach to change is to look for the problem, carry out a diagnosis, and find a solution. The focus is on what is wrong or broken; when we look for problems, we find them. By paying attention to problems, we emphasise and amplify them across the organisation.

I ask myself why this happens and a review of traditional approaches to managing change highlights some important themes that may help to explain this pattern:

- The use of tools tends to predominate – innumerable “fix it” mentality tool kits have been developed, all of which imply a mechanistic approach to change as if you were fixing a car;
- Attention is focused on the tool itself rather than on the social interactions – I have spent much time listening to discussions in which people have lost sight of why they are meeting and so end up discussing the tool they are using to help them resolve the change (for example the plan, do, study, act cycle);
- The approach is linear and predictable and underpinned by a desire for the leader to be in control of what is happening;
- There are traditional expectations for the leader to be a hero, fixer or fortune teller;
- Based predominantly on systems thinking, there is an assumption that you have control over the system as if it were central heating, and as a result there is a failure to pay attention to the human side of change;
- The approach is solution focused rather than inquiry focused.

Instead, we should consider using the appreciative inquiry approach to manage change; it is less deficit based compared with traditional approaches. It asks important questions about what works in an organisation, rather than what isn't working, thereby amplifying good practice.

This approach to change is highly engaging and motivating for members of staff. The results of the engaging and inquiry process is a series of statements that describe where the organisation wants to be, based on the high moments of where they have been when things have worked well. Owing to the fact that the statements are grounded in real experience and history, people know how to repeat their success and change becomes more sustainable.

‘There is often an assumption that you have control over the system as if it were central heating, and as a result there is a failure to pay attention to the human side of change’

GERALDINE CUNNINGHAM is head of learning and development, Royal College of Nursing