Appreciative Inquiry

A Positive Revolution in Change

DAVID L. COOPERRIDER and DIANA WHITNEY

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What People Are Saying about Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry is currently revolutionizing the field of organization development.

—Robert Quinn, Distinguished Professor of Management,
University of Michigan Business School

Appreciative Inquiry is the philosophy that is allowing us to engage the hearts, minds, and souls of our people—all of our people. Only when we do that, will we achieve breakthrough performance.

—Cindy Frick, VP, Organizational Development and HR Planning,
Roadway Express

[AI is] a process that gets you moving up the success spiral rather than down the failure one. It has a motivating effect helping achieve self-fulfillment rather than getting into a doom and gloom syndrome.

—Rob Treeby, Health, Safety, and Environment Manager, BP AMOCO

I would like to commend you more particularly for your methodology of Appreciative Inquiry and to thank you for introducing it to the United Nations. Without this, it would have been very difficult, perhaps even impossible, to constructively engage so many leaders of business, civil society, and government (for the UN Global Compact Leadership Summit in 2004).

—Kofi Annan, Secretary General, United Nations

We introduced the concept of Appreciative Inquiry into our "Breakthrough Leadership at Roadway" curriculum. Our senior managers have been enthusiastic about using this innovative approach to deal with some of our most pressing issues. The output has been amazing and provides a great map to desirable outcomes.

—Jim Staley, President, Roadway Express

I had the privilege of utilizing an AI methodology with a sales and marketing organization involved in a strategic alliance with a major channel partner. In the two plus years since AI had been introduced to and embraced by the group, a significant transformation has occurred. Morale has improved dramatically, relationships have grown tighter, teamwork has significantly improved—and equally compelling—sales and profitability outpaced the rest of both organizations. A holistic "appreciative approach'" has truly become the way of life for this organization.

—Jim Gustafson, Vice President and General Manager, ELECTRICjob.com

Appreciative Inquiry is helping us be "a breakthrough organization." We started by closing our entire factory and bringing all seven hundred people from the shop floor to the directors together to plan our future. It was a four-day meeting. This year we will use AI to bring one thousand people into the strategic planning and participative redesign process, including all our internal people and representatives of external stakeholders—suppliers, customers and community.

The best in people comes out when you bring the whole system into the room. Wholeness is healthy and that is our purpose at Nutrimental Foods: to produce health-ability. It is exciting, and it pays. After our first large group session profits rose 200 percent and absenteeism, in the next year, dropped 75 percent. AI is about connecting with spirit, self-organization, and self-sustainability, and in the final analysis, human happiness. I wish you could all come and experience our next session!

—Rodrigo Loures, CEO, Nutrimental Foods, Brazil

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& Diana Whitney

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San Francisco

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Contents

Preface vii

Chapter 1 An Invitation to the Positive Revolution in Change 1

AI and the New Model of Change Leadership 2
Approacing Problems From the Other Side 3

Chapter 2 What is Appreciative Inquiry? 7

The Positive Core 8
A Working Definition of Positive Change 12

Chapter 3 The Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle 15

Overview of the 4-D Cycle 15
Passion for Service: Getting Started with AI at British Airways 18

Chapter 4 The 4-D Cycle in Action 25

The First D, Discovery 25
From Discovery to Dream 26
Design for Organizing into the Future 28
The United Religions Initiative: Design of a Global Community 31
Realizing Destiny 34

Chapter 5 Applying the 4-D Cycle 37

Whole-System Inquiry 37
The AI Summit 38
Roadway Express: Moving from Good to Great 39

Chapter 6 Roles, Responsibilities, and Relationships **45**

The Role of Leadership 45
The Role of an AI Consultant 46
The Role of the Core Team 48
The Role of the Participants 48

Chapter 7 Principles for a Positive Revolution **49**

The Constructionist Principle 49
The Simultaneity Principle 50
The Poetic Principle 51
The Anticipatory Principle 52
The Positive Principle 53

Chapter 8 Conditions for Success: The Liberation of Power **55**

Freedom to Be Known in Relationship 56
Freedom to be Heard 57
Freedom to Dream in Community 57
Freedom to Choose to Contribute 58
Freedom to Act with Support 58
Freedom to Be Positive 59
The Liberation of Power Leads to Positive Change 60

Conclusion **61**
Notes **63**
Questions for Applying AI **67**
Where to Go for More Information **69**
Index **73**
The Authors **79**

Preface

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a new model of change management, uniquely suited to the values, beliefs, and business challenges facing managers and leaders today. It is a process for large-scale change management that can enable you to engage and inspire your highly diverse and dispersed workforce; to involve customers and other stakeholders in the future of your business; to discover and extend your business strengths and strategic advantages; and to balance outstanding financial returns with heightened societal contributions.

This small book is an introduction to Appreciative Inquiry. It provides a basic overview of the process and principles of AI along with actual stories illustrating how successful businesses have applied AI—and the benefits they have gained as a result. It is not intended to provide a thorough treatment of the subject, nor does it aim to be a how-to book. Instead, this book is written as an invitation, as a starting point into the exciting world of positive organizational change.

We suggest two of our other books for a more through coverage of AI and positive change. *The Appreciative Inquiry Handbook* provides a comprehensive explanation of the subject along with numerous supporting articles and sample materials. *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry* offers a thorough explanation of how to get started and lead an AI initiative.

AI is a process that starts with strengths and, as the stories in this book illustrate, results in dramatic improvements in the triple bottom line: people, profits, and planet. The book tells of how AI has been used to significantly enhance employee engagement, retention, and morale, customer satisfaction, cost competitiveness, revenues and profits, as well as businesses' understanding and abilities to meet the needs of society.

If results such as Nutrimental Food's 200 percent increase in revenues, or Hunter Douglas Window Fashions Division's $3.5 million in savings, or Green Mountain Coffee Roasters acting for the greater good while building exceptional returns and profitability seem extraordinary to you, read this book and discover how and why they are becoming the norm for companies using Appreciative Inquiry.

As thought leaders and pioneers in the growing field of positive change, we have had the good fortune to introduce AI to organizations and communities around the world. Some of the work described in this book in organizations such as Roadway Express, Verizon, British Airways, Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, Hunter Douglas WFD, Nutrimental Foods, the United Nations, and the United Religions Initiative is setting a precedent for the emergence of new, life-affirming, results-oriented practices of positive change management. We are glad that you—by reading this book—have decided to join us in this positive revolution.

David L Cooperrider and Diana Whitney
October 2005

Chapter One

An Invitation to the Positive Revolution in Change

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is, as Professor Robert Quinn at University of Michigan has recently written, "creating a positive revolution in the field of organization development and change management."[1] Why? One clue lies in how AI turns the practice of change management inside out. It proposes, quite bluntly, that organizations are not, at their core, problems to be solved. Just the opposite. Every organization was created as a solution designed in its own time to meet a challenge or satisfy a need of society.

Even more fundamentally, organizations are centers of vital connections and life-giving potentials: relationships, partnerships, alliances, and ever-expanding webs of knowledge and action that are capable of harnessing the power of combinations of strengths. Founded upon this lifecentric view of organizations, AI offers a positive, strengths-based approach to organization development and change management.

AI and the New Model of Change Leadership

Management guru Peter Drucker commented in a recent interview, "The task of organizational leadership is to create an alignment of strengths in ways that make a system's weaknesses irrelevant." Could it be, as Drucker implies, that leading change is *all* about strengths? Why would strength connected to strength create positive change? What would it mean to create an entire change methodology around an economy and ecology of strengths? Where would we—as managers, facilitators, and change leaders—start? What might be the steps and stages of positive change? What about unique skills? How could the discovery and fusion of strengths elevate and extend a system's capacity to adapt, learn, and create *upward spirals* of performance, development, and energizing growth?

Indeed, the field of management has always acknowledged that strengths perform and that their very presence, that is, the visible display of strengths, signals some kind of optimal functioning. The principles and practices of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) suggest the idea that collective strengths do more than perform—*they transform*.

At the surface, this sounds obvious and good. But when we pause and take stock of the way contemporary change management is practiced, we see clearly that positive approaches to change are not yet the norm.

Many, for example, were shocked at the results of the largest, most comprehensive survey ever conducted on approaches to managing change. The study concluded that most schools, companies, families and organizations function on an unwritten rule. That rule is to fix what's wrong and let the strengths take care of themselves.

Although the results of this study do not sound like the Peter Drucker quote put into practice, where change is all about strengths, the research conclusion unfortunately rings familiar and true. Companies all too often call for low-morale surveys instead of designing rigorous inquiries into extraordinary moments of high engagement, commitment, and passionate achievement. Managers charter and analyze turnover rates—one report after another—instead of calling for analyses of

retention or of *magnetic work environments*, that is, times when people felt so connected to their work, their colleagues, and their organization that the bonds could not be broken.

> *How pervasive is this* deficit-based approach *to change, which says change begins with the identification of the most pressing problems, the gaps, and their root causes? Do you recognize it? Okay, try this: Think about the last three projects you've worked on and the last half dozen meetings you've attended. How many of the projects were designed to fix something? How many of the meetings were called to address a problem?*

This book puts forth a bold challenge: Could it be that we as a field have reached the end of problem solving as a mode of inquiry capable of inspiring, mobilizing, and sustaining significant human system change? What would happen to our change practices if we began all our work with the positive presumption that organizations, as centers of human relatedness, are alive with infinite constructive capacity?

This book provides a beginning answer in an overview of the newest findings related to the definitions, principles, and practices of Appreciative Inquiry as a model for change leadership. Drawing upon twenty years of practice since AI's birth at the Case Western Reserve University's School of Management, we share stories of the success of positive change—bold and inspiring experiments in businesses and communities around the world.[2] Our hope is that this book will open your hearts and minds to the possibilities of positive change and the many ways that Appreciative Inquiry can help you and your organization achieve your greatest potential in service to a world of peace and prosperity for all.

Approaching Problems From the Other Side

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) begins an adventure. Even in the first steps, one senses an exciting new direction in our language and theories of change—an invitation, as some have declared, to a "positive revolution." The words just quoted *are* strong, but the more we replay

the high-wire moments of our five years of work at GTE/Verizon,[3] the more we find ourselves asking the very same kinds of questions that the people of GTE asked their senior executives: "Are you really ready for the momentum that is being generated? This is igniting a grassroots movement . . . it *is* creating an organization in full voice, a center stage for positive revolutionaries!"

Tom White, president of what was then called GTE, Telops (making up 80 percent of GTE's sixty-seven thousand employees), replied with no hesitation: "Yes, and what I see in this meeting are zealots, people with a mission and passion for creating the new GTE. Count me in, I'm your number one recruit, number-one zealot." People cheered.

Fourteen months later, GTE's whole-system change initiative won the ASTD (American Society for Training and Development) award for the best organization change program in the country. This award was based on significant and measurable changes in stock prices, morale survey measures, quality and customer relations, union-management relations, and more. Appreciative inquiry was cited as the "backbone."[4]

To achieve this stunning shift in organizational culture, the team of internal and external change agents asked, "How can we engage the positive potential of all employees toward transforming the company?" The team wanted whatever we did to recognize and invite the positive expression of frontline employee strengths, initiatives, and capabilities. We set a goal of creating a narrative-rich culture with a ratio of five stories of positive performance and success to every negative one as a way of building a vibrant, high-performing, customer-focused culture.

This goal was approached in a number of ways:

- In year one, more than fifty internal change agents (OD consultants, ER managers, Public Affairs and Corporate Communications staff) received extensive training in Appreciative Inquiry. In addition, Appreciative Inquiry was taught to eight hundred frontline employees.

- Opportunities for sharing good news stories were created. One executive volunteered to be the story center. The stories came into his office, and he sent them out to other groups and departments to share and replicate. Many were published in the company newsletter.
- Storytelling was embedded into many existing processes. For example, the annual President's Leadership award focused on relaying stories about winning employees, their teams, and customer service.
- Open-ended questions were added to the company employee survey, and the ratio of positive to negative comments was tracked.
- An Appreciative Inquiry storybook was created as a teaching tool for all employees.
- Appreciative Inquiry was used to introduce a new partnership model for the unions and for company management.[5]

Based on his experience, Tom White described AI in executive language: "Appreciative Inquiry can get you much better results than seeking out and solving problems. That's an interesting concept for me—and I imagine most of you—because telephone companies are among the best problem solvers in the world. We troubleshoot everything. We concentrate enormous resources on correcting problems that have relatively minor impact on our overall service and performance . . . when used continually and over a long period of time, this approach can lead to a negative culture. If you combine a negative culture with all the challenges we face today, it could be easy to convince ourselves that we have too many problems to overcome—to slip into a paralyzing sense of hopelessness. . . . Don't get me wrong. I'm not advocating mindless happy talk. Appreciative Inquiry is a complex science designed to make things better. We can't ignore problems—we just need to approach them from the other side."[6]

Are you ready for a positive approach to change? Are you tired of the same old discussions of what's not working, how hard it is to overcome, and who's to blame? Do you have hopes and dreams for your organization? Would you like to see engagement, commitment, and enthusiasm rise along with revenues and profits? Are you searching for a process to open communication, unleash human potential, and create a truly learning organization? If your answer to any of these questions is yes, you are ready to accept the invitation to the positive revolution, to embrace Appreciative Inquiry, and to benefit from a positive approach to change management.

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