

Appreciative Inquiry in a Pandemic: An Improbable Pairing

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The COVID-19 pandemic has irrevocably transformed economies all over the globe, infected millions, and has tragically caused large numbers of deaths. Institutional leaders must react to disrupted supply chains, enable remote workforces, break bad news to employees and families, as well as maintain their own hope and energy so they can continue to serve, guide, and move forward without any trusted roadmap. Amid this unpredictable emergence, we are grateful to *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* Editors for the opportunity to share thoughts on why and how appreciative inquiry (AI) can be of help.¹

To begin, let us recognize that it is in times of disruption the best in human systems can burst forth. Resilience, grit, and care for others, for example, can grow. Values can come alive and be intensely lived. To be sure, in the immediate or near term, *resilience* is existentially crucial. And for longer term, we know this from years of research on organizational culture: *corporate cultures are almost totally tested and forged in the crucible of crises, during the most challenging times of external adaptation and internal integration* (Schein, 1983). How leaders lead during times of catastrophe has an outsized effect on the future of organizational identity, collective confidence, resilience, and corporate value congruence. Moreover, while it may seem a luxury to talk about organization development (OD) during a major dislodgement like this, that is exactly what leaders need to do.

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Harnessing Appreciative Inquiry for Deeply Developmental OD

AI is about the search for what gives life to people, their organizations, and the opportunity-saturated world around them. In its broadest focus, “AI” involves systematic discovery of everything that supports a system when it is most vibrant in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves, in a very artful and disciplined way, the craft of asking questions that elevate a system’s cooperative capacity to apprehend strengths and positive potentials, unite around greater meanings and shared goals, and activate the kind of generative designs that serve to open those systems to better and more valued possibilities (Barrett & Fry, 2005; Cooperrider, 2013). AI often involves the mobilization of enterprise-wide inquiry through the crafting of discovery, dream, and design oriented questions, involving hundreds or even thousands of stakeholders in mutual collaboration and cocreation, whether face-to-face, on Zoom, or in digital cyberspace.

In AI, our basic assumptions or metaphors matter. From its earliest articulation (Cooperrider, 1985), AI took the stance that human systems are not inert machines or mechanistic “problems-to-be-solved.” That kind of metaphor often leads us to certain remedial or deficit-inclined interventions with less than favorable results (Hammel & Zanini, 2014). Instead, AI chooses to embrace “the miracle of life on this planet,” whereby human organizations, as living systems, are viewed as relationally alive “universes of strengths.” In Peter Drucker’s more managerial terms, the purpose of organizing is “making strengths effective.” Indeed, in one of our privileged meetings with Drucker—it was when he wanted to hear more about the rapid growth of AI as a second generation OD action research modality—he said, “well I wrote about it many years ago. . . . The task of leadership is ageless in its essence; the task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths in ways that make a system’s weaknesses irrelevant.”

In practice, AI has built on this strength-based premise and has drawn on the science of positive psychology to help understand why AI has been so powerful in large-scale OD efforts. One of the significant findings is that the study of optimal human system states does not just signal what enables thriving, peak performance, or full spectrum flourishing. That is only part of the story. The bigger story is that optimal states—and the study thereof—actually propel and empower even more change capacity. They generate upward spirals. In our studies at Apple, the U.S. Navy, the remarkable growth of the United Nations Global Compact, and with companies, such as Tata, IBM, and Microsoft, we have discovered that the OD efforts that rise above the norm excel by amplifying strengths, never by simply fixing weaknesses (Cooperrider, 2012). Moreover, numerous lab and field studies show that there may be a crucial *generativity ratio* between focusing on strengths versus deficits. A natural field study of 10 major enterprise-wide change efforts ended up having clusters or groupings of mediocre change efforts in comparison with a set of other organization-wide change initiatives that exceeded expected outcomes. What was the differentiator? The researcher discovered something of an 80/20 rule. The study showed that instead of focusing 80% on

what is not working and 20% on strengths, that the most exceptional change efforts put this deficit-leaning 80/20 tendency into a radical reverse (Robson, 2015). The study, with over 54,000 data points, demonstrated that there was at least +4:1 ratio in the more strength-focused, and ultimately, highest performing change initiatives. Moreover, this general finding is consistent with the empirical evidence in over a dozen other scientific studies on realizing our higher potentials (cf. Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002).

Interestingly, this research has also opened up what we believe are important *critiques* of AI. For example, is AI simply about looking at the world through rose tinted glasses, or is it so overly biased toward the “positive” that it ignores difficult, painful, conflicting, or even catastrophic realities? And in terms of the debilitating reverberations of this pandemic—looming bankruptcies, organizations filled with toxic stress and fear, and tough decision making often behind closed doors—Isn’t it an oxymoron to be appreciative while experiencing unprecedented states of angst and disruption?

We would like to address this line of critique while asserting our confidence in this: AI might just reach its highest potential for impact in organizations and human systems in the midst of pandemic, crisis, or tragedy. In our very recent pilots—in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic with leaders at Progressive, Swagelok, and the Cleveland Clinic—we are witnessing more deeply developmental OD dialogues than we ever anticipated.²

Appreciative Inquiry in a Broken World

In a new book on building resilience with AI, a pyramid-like model of AI was built that is useful here. It portrays three levels of AI from the least to most profound, from its easiest levels to its more mature and more complex enactment (Cooperrider, 2018). Figure 1 illustrates our experiences with AI, from easiest to most profound.

At the lowest rung—and perhaps the easiest and earliest domain to practice AI—is the *AI into the extraordinary*, the best in human experience, those moments of “positive deviance” that literally take us way above the average. AI into the extraordinary is the simplest in terms of awakening the appreciative eye. At the second and more difficult rung, is the capacity to do AI during times of *the ordinary*—at those times that are so taken-for-granted that we often fail to apprehend, appreciate, or even attempt to search for everything that is giving life to those scenes we are so accustomed to. Here, we are talking about the capacity for seeing the life-giving dynamic in those seemingly ordinary and insignificant events, where there are no starbursts, no mountaintop experiences. Thank goodness, then, for the example of our artists, the ways they see, and the many layers of meaning that they help each one of us see and appreciate. Consider how Vincent van Gogh helps us see the extraordinary in an ordinary tea cup, or in a simple and unpretentious vase of flowers. William Wordsworth, as another example of this second level of appreciative maturity, encourages the cultivation of appreciative intelligence in the midst of the ordinary. He writes, “While with an eye made quiet by the power/of harmony, and deep power of joy/we see into the life

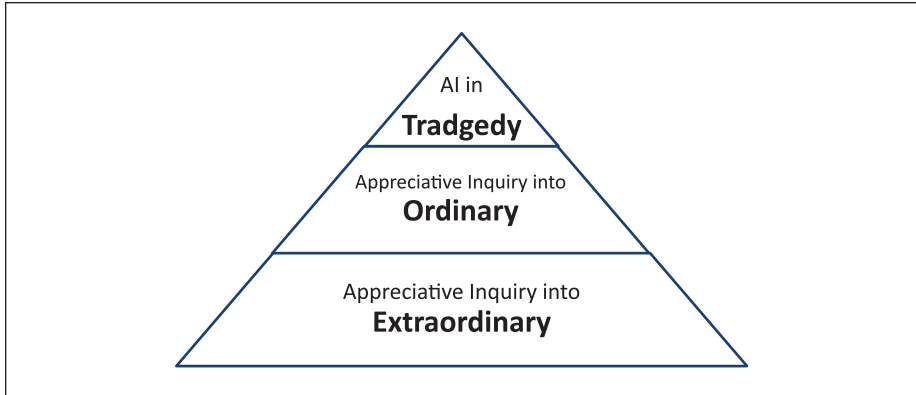


Figure 1. Levels of appreciative inquiry (AI).

of things” (Wordsworth, 2003, p. 236). At the top of the pyramid there is a third developmental level for the practice of AI—and it’s the least understood. This is the kind of AI sensitivity, skill, or literacy as lived by someone such as Victor Frankel, evidenced in his enduring classic “Man’s Search for Meaning.” This third level of elevated AI capacity is not an AI into moments of excellence nor is it about meaning making in the ordinary, but *AI in the midst of tragedy*. Victor Frankl, as we all know, was tortured in Nazi concentration camps where everything was taken from him and others. And yet, in the midst of his inquiries, he saw resources, relationships, and regenerative possibilities that literally gave life to many. Frankl documented numerous examples of the generative power of choosing to look for the life-promoting meaning in the midst of extreme suffering. He manifested a belief originally put forward by Rollo May (1975, p. 100) that “Human freedom involves our capacity to pause between stimulus and response and, in that pause, to choose the one response toward which we wish to throw our weight.”

What we would like to underscore here is that AI is not about being or thinking positively or negatively. Its call is to transcend this polarity. It is not about positive versus negative human experience, but the choice to *inquire into what is life*. The task of AI is the penetrating search for what gives life, what fuels developmental potential, and what has deep meaning—even in the midst of the tragic. In so many times of disruption, there is always the *radically increased potential* to summon our better humanity. That is why the best in human systems can *burst* forth just as life, even a blade of grass can bust out all over, even after a heavy cement highway has been placed over it. Resilience, even in the midst of tragedy, CAN grow. It is not a noun, not a thing, but a verb; something that can be built and forged in the crucible of crises. Resiliencing is the developmental act where corporate culture and values can be vivified and extended into a better “new normal” with their meanings made alive, instead of merely espoused. There are many heroic and often spiritually advanced examples. We might think of a Martin Luther King, or a Nelson Mandela, or a Gandhi. Consider too Helen Keller and

her deeper reflection that, “Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it” (Keller, 1903, p. 5)—and she, of course, could not see the “overcoming” with normal eyes.

A Time for Embracing the Change Paradox

What AI does then, in terms of a theory of change, is that it embraces one of the most difficult and meanest paradoxes of changing. It argues that we change best when we are strongest. As human beings we can change best and in the most capacity filled ways when we experience the combined power of *every relevant resource*, even the tiniest seed of hope, available to us across the entire strengths spectrum. These resources occur outside and inside any given system, and include social and cultural assets, technical and economic ones, psychological and spiritual strengths, ecological strengths of nature, and the strengths of moral models and collaborative creativity. And if we change best when we are strongest, or have access to everything needed for resourcing our change capacity (encircling the change agenda in a kind of “surround sound of strengths”) then the reverse is also true. This is the difficult paradox inherent in situations where change, resilience, and renewal are needed most, for example, when a person is in a dark depression, or there are immanent threats of a company facing bankruptcy, or a community dealing with a mass shooting—or society facing a pandemic. At precisely, those moments when we feel the weakest or trapped in deeply cynical conversations (Bright et al., 2014), we are being asked to change! This mean paradox should be reversed, shouldn't it?

Well that is exactly what AI can help you do.

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Notes

1. Portions of this commentary are adapted from an original Blog titled “Appreciative Inquiry in a Broken World” (see <https://davidcooperriderai.co/appreciative-inquiry-in-a-broken-world/>).
2. For sample questions and design flow you can adapt for an online AI summit, see <https://weatherhead.case.edu/centers/fowler/news/>

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