Appreciative Inquiry

Organization Development and the Strengths Revolution

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Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a theory and practice of inquiry-and-change that shifts the perspective of organization development (OD) methods by suggesting that the very act of asking generative questions has profound impact in organizational systems. Inquiry and change are not separate moments. Our questions focus our attention on what is "there" to be noticed. Reflecting its social constructionist roots (Cooperrider, Barrett, and Srivastva 1995; Gergen 1995), which suggest that *words create worlds*, AI offers a new change imperative by suggesting that we be aware of the negativity bias that pervades our investigations into organizational life and instead shift our focus to the good, the better, and the possibilities that often go undernoticed in our systems. Building on Gergen (1995) and Cooperrider and Avital (2003), Cooperrider and Godwin (2012) summarize, "AI posits that human systems move in the direction of the questions they most frequently and authentically ask; knowledge and organizational destiny are intimately interwoven; what we know and how we study it has a direct impact on where we end up" (740).

Leveraging the power of generative questions, AI changes the focus of what we typically study in organizational life, questioning the prevailing mindset that "organizations are problems to be solved," (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987). Instead, AI suggests that "organizations are mysteries and miracles of human relatedness; they are living systems, alive and embedded in ever-widening webs of infinite strength and limitless human imagination. Organizations, as centers of human connectivity and collaboration, are 'universes of strengths,'"

(Cooperrider and Godwin 2010, 10). AI invites change agents to look into their organizations with "appreciative eyes"—scanning the system for things for which to be grateful, seeking out what is next and what is possible, and focusing on *valuing those things of value worth valuing*. AI theorists posit that such a shift in our approach to organizational change is needed if we are to inspire our imaginative capacities to their fullest potential.

An entirely different approach to organization inquiry, transformation, and change emerges when such an appreciative approach is applied to OD work. Transforming our underlying metaphor of organizations transforms how we approach them as agents of change. If organizations are not problems to be solved but instead are conceptualized as alive—as living systems—then the fundamental question of change also shifts. Instead of seeking to answer *What is wrong here and how do we fix it*? We instead search for *What gives life to the living system when it is most alive*? *What is the positive core of this system— including all past, present and future capacity—and how do we magnify and engage this positive core with constructive, transformational intent*?

At its heart, AI is about the search for the best in people, their organizations, and the strengths-filled, opportunity-rich world around them. AI is not so much a shift in the methods and models of organizational change, but a fundamental shift in the overall perspective taken throughout the entire change process to "see" the wholeness of the human system and to "inquire" into that system's strengths, possibilities, and successes. The *appreciative paradigm* has emerged as a way to describe any OD change approach that attends to the *positive core* of relationships and organizations. It is a *causative theory* applicable to OD, transformation, and change methods. Examples of interventions with an appreciative perspective are discussed throughout this book.

AI practitioners discover that applying such an appreciative perspective increases the power, effectiveness, and sustainability of any classical OD intervention, from strategic planning and organization redesign, to team building and diversity, to coaching and personal growth approaches. AI is being used worldwide in both small- and large-scale change initiatives across every type of organizational sector (case studies, podcasts, and video clips are available at http://appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu). Given the vast usage of AI across the globe, Ken Gergen, a thought leader in social constructionism, reflects that, "The growth and application of Appreciative Inquiry over the past two decades has been nothing short of phenomenal. It is arguably the most powerful process of positive organizational change ever devised" (in Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, and Rader 2010, x).

This chapter begins by further defining AI, followed by a brief history of AI, and an overview of both the classic and emergent principles of AI. The AI 5-D model is then briefly reviewed, and AI is situated within the emerging field of positive organization development (POD). The chapter concludes with

a discussion of how AI is providing the grounding philosophy for the emerging three circles of the strengths revolution within the field.

DEFINING APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

To begin understanding Appreciative Inquiry (AI), it is important to first examine the very words themselves that is what it means to *appreciate* and *inquire*.

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ap-pre-ci-ate, v., 1. to recognize and like a favorable critical judgment or opinion; to perceive those things that give life (health, vitality, excellence) to living systems 2. to feel or express gratitude 3. to increase in value (e.g., the economy has *appreciated* in value) 4. to fully know of; realize fully. *Synonyms*: value, prize, esteem, honor.

in-quire, v., 1. to explore and discover 2. to question 3. to be open to seeing new potentials and possibilities. *Synonyms*: discover, search, systematically explore, and study (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros, 2008, 1).

Over the years, AI has been defined in many ways. It has been called a philosophy, an approach, a method, a process, and a way-of-being for engaging all levels of an organizational system in an inquiry into its *positive core*. The positive core is that which makes up the best of an organization and its people and all of its relationships. This positive approach leads to changes in the organization based on images of the best possible future as articulated and visualized by the people and stakeholders who make up the human system of the organization. The most commonly cited practitioner definition says:

> AI is the cooperative co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves the discovery of what gives *life* to a living system when it is most effective, alive, and constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves the art and practice of asking unconditional positive questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten its potential. AI interventions focus on the speed of imagination and innovation instead of the negative, critical, and spiraling diagnoses commonly used in organizations. The discovery, dream, design, and destiny model links the energy of the positive core to changes never thought possible. (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros 2008, 3)

Many articles, book chapters, and books have defined AI as an approach to organization dialogue, development, design, and learning. No matter how AI is defined, it is deliberate in its *life-giving search* to help organizational systems discover their positive core of what gives life to their system. The 5-D Process (described later in this chapter) for applying AI in organization systems is, like the classical OD process, dramatically transforms Kurt Lewin's action research model. The major difference is in the *appreciative* perspective and the role of the OD practitioner. Rather than the practitioner working to identify problems and deficits in an organization, AI involves the whole system in dialogues among members (including external stakeholders) of the organization. These conversations focus on lifting up all of the "life giving factors" inside and outside of a system, and are narrative rich. Instead of analysis of the information being done only by the OD practitioner, AI encourages narrative process and dialogue to learn about the best of the past to understand what relevant stakeholders want more of, and to use that as a basis for imagining the most preferred future for their organization. It is not a top-down approach, nor is it bottom-up; rather the approach is "whole," with all voices in the system working in concert during each phase. When the whole organization aligns with a positive image of the future based on discoveries from the storytelling, dialogue of strengths and opportunities, and images of the future, multiple projects are designed, agreed on, and implemented to create that future.

BRIEF HISTORY OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

The birth of AI came in 1980 via the coauthorship, thought leadership, and collaboration between Dr. David Cooperrider and his advisor, Dr. Suresh Srivastva. As a doctoral student, David was involved with a group from Case Western Reserve University working with the Cleveland Clinic in a conventional diagnostic organizational analysis in search of "What is wrong within this organization?" In gathering his data, David was amazed by the level of positive cooperation, innovation, and egalitarian governance he was finding in the organization. Suresh noticed David's excitement and suggested he follow his fascination and excitement and make it the focus of his inquiry.

David obtained permission from the Clinic's chairman, Dr. William Kiser, to reverse the diagnostic organizational focus and instead take a life-centric stance in his analysis of the Clinic. This analysis focused on the factors contributing to the most highly effective functioning of the Clinic when it was at its best in every way. The Cleveland clinic became the first large organizational site where a conscious decision to use an inquiry focusing on life-giving factors formed the basis for an organizational analysis. The term *Appreciative Inquiry* (AI) was first introduced and written as a footnote in the feedback report of "emergent

themes" by David and Suresh for the board of governors of the Cleveland Clinic. The report created such a powerful and positive stir that the board called for ways to use this method with the whole group practice. The momentum set the stage for David's seminal dissertation and AI's first theoretical articulation in a journal article calling for an appreciative paradigm shift for the field of organization and management thought (Cooperrider 1986; Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987).

The research, in brief, demonstrated a Heisenberg "observer effect" on steroids, how just the mere act of inquiry in human systems can change a whole organization. That realities shift as we put our attention on something, asking questions, gathering information, and paying attention to someone, is so commonplace by now that we forget that it might just be the most important first principle for a field devoted to human systems development and change. For some, this simultaneity between inquiry and change is an incidental phenomenon. It has a name. It has been dubbed "the mere measurement effect." However, as it relates to the generative task of AI, there is nothing at all minor about it. The Cleveland Clinic—under the leadership of Dr. William Kiser, who saw the power of AI to bring out the best in human beings—became one of the finest medical systems in the world. As Dr. Kiser later commented, AI created the goodwill, the collaborative mindset, and the positive practice environment to inspire an entirely new generation of extraordinary achievement at the Cleveland Clinic (see Cooperrider 1986).

AI was articulated first as a method for building generative theory. It was a call for "a scholarship of the positive," focusing our attention on "what gives life" to human and ecological systems when they are most alive (Cooperrider 2013). Quickly—beyond its use as a positive organizational scholarship and theory-building method—the applied power of AI was discovered, and soon it spread to many domains such as organization development, strengths-based management, applied positive psychology, evaluation studies, change management, coaching and counseling, corporate strategy, sustainable development, social constructionism, design thinking, organizational behavior, biomimicry, and learning theory. In his *New York Times* best-selling book, *Go Put Your Strengths to Work*, Marcus Buckingham (2006) points to the theory of AI was one of the important academic catalysts for the "strengths revolution" in management. Beyond the work of Cooperrider and Srivastva, the other two foundational sources of the strengths revolution in management included Peter Drucker's *The Effective Executive* (1966) and Martin Seligman's call for positive psychology (Seligman 1999). Together, AI, Drucker's management theory, and positive psychology have created a society-wide, positive-strengths movement, argued Marcus Buckingham, "because it works."

Now, nearly 30 years since that seminal work at the Cleveland Clinic occurred, AI has spread to become a global phenomenon. Today, many OD

practitioners and scholars are advancing the theory and practice of AI as part of a historical shift in the social sciences toward more constructionist, strengths-based, and positive approaches to research, OD, transformation, and change. Thousands of organizations are embracing this positive OD revolution by applying AI in for-profit, nonprofit, government, and social sectors. These range from global and government agencies, nongovernmental agencies, Fortune 100 organizations, nonprofits, and school systems to community planning organizations. World conferences on AI have been held in the United States, Nepal, Belgium, and South Africa.

Given the impact from almost three decades of practice in every corner of the world, we can assert with confidence that AI is both a way of being with a process that respects and affirms both the differences and similarities in gender, culture, and nationality. It is a way to talk generatively across differences and to find ways forward no matter how challenging the path. AI is an approach to OD that is highly culturally sensitive and adaptable across a wide variety of national cultures (Yaeger, Head, and Sorensen 2006). Whenever an appreciative approach is used, though, it is grounded in the fundamental principles of AI—to which we now turn our attention.

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY PRINCIPLES

Appreciative Inquiry (AI), in whatever form it takes, rests on a set of five principles originally articulated by David Cooperrider (1986): constructionist, simultaneity, poetic, anticipatory, and positive. These five original principles are central to AI's theoretical basis and practice for OD work that is generative and strengths-based. The defining article that first outlined these principles is "Appreciative Inquiry into Organizational Life" (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987). Besides these original principles, there are also five emergent principles, which include: wholeness, enactment, free choice, awareness, and narrative. Knowing these 10 principles facilitates the application and adaptation of the original AI 4-D cycle to any organization, from the interpersonal to the whole system level. Organizations that work to embed the AI principles into their culture have been shown to become generative and creative, leading to even more innovation in the use and form of AI itself.

The Five Original Principles

The five original principles detail the underlying beliefs that connect AI from theory to practice. Besides using these principles to guide organizational change efforts, applying these principles in one's life leads the OD practitioner to experience their relevance in creating strengths-based relationships and success in organizations and communities (Stavros and Torres 2005).

Constructionist Principle. Reflecting a social constructionist stance toward reality and knowledge creation (Gergen 1995), this principle states that knowledge about an organization and the destiny of that organization are interwoven. Rather than assuming one absolute truth, this stance suggests that truth is local, meaning that organizational members are continually co-constructing their own realities (Gergen 2001). Therefore, what we believe to be true about an organization, how we "know" it, will affect the way we act and the way we approach change in that system. It reminds us that organizational systems are never static entities; rather they are continually evolving and products of our collective co-constructions through our conversations and interactions. These constructionist dialogues predict the next moment.

Simultaneity Principle. Working in concert with the Constructionist Principle, this principle proposes that *inquiry is intervention*. This means that change begins simultaneously at the moment we first pose a question in a human system, not after we find an answer. Questions, whether positive or negative, become fateful because they are the catalytic force that sets the stage for the areas on which we focus our attention and energy. Therefore, one of the most impactful things an OD practitioner does is to ask questions. The questions we ask set the stage for what we "discover," and what we "dream" creates the narratives that lead to conversations about how the organization lives in the present moment and will construct its future, which is "design" and "destiny." Just as Heisenberg's (1949) principle holds true for the physical world, so it is true for our social systems; we create new realities during the process of inquiry. What we focus on appreciates, or grows, in value.

As Cooperrider and Godwin (2012) describe, an organization-wide survey on low morale produces ripple effects through the mere act of asking: "What are the causes of low morale?" This question concentrates attention on what or who is causing the low morale; it provides a more precise language for speaking about low morale, and provides a presumptive assurance if we "figure out the problem," then we can apply the "right" intervention to help the system return to a more normal state. However, one more expensive low-morale survey, even with all the good intentions, will not tell us how to create a supercharged, highly engaged workforce. If we want to learn about how to create an engaged workforce, we must ask questions about when people have felt most engaged and what engagement looks like to them.

Poetic Principle. The Poetic Principle acknowledges that human organizations are like open books to be interpreted. An organization's story is constantly coauthored by the people within the organization and those outside who interact with it. The organization's past, present, and future are endless sources of learning, inspiration, and interpretation, just as a good poem is open to endless interpretations. We can study *any* topic related to human experience in *any* human system. We can inquire into stress or the nature of positive emotions.

We can study moments of innovation or moments of failures. We have a choice because all aspects of humanity exist in every system.

Anticipatory Principle. This principle suggests that human beings act based on their "anticipation" of future events, and this anticipation affects themselves, the people, and systems in the organization. Leveraging the Simultaneity Principle with the power of questions and the Constructionist Principle with the power of co-construction, the Anticipatory Principle invites organization systems to ask questions that help them generate a collective understanding of the present and vision for a desired future. This image of a better tomorrow guides the current behavior of any person or organization. If we act from our expectations and we move toward what we anticipate, an important task for change agents is to help organizations articulate a powerful image of their ideal state, which becomes a beacon for the realization of that vision.

Positive Principle. This principle's premise is that the more positive and affirmative the images we carry, the more likely we are to move into these images. The Positive Principle supports the other four principles. Positive questions lead to positive images of the future, and positive images lead to positive, long-lasting actions (Cooperrider 1999). Taking an appreciative stance in organizational change helps positively impact the affective side of transformation by creating upward spirals of positive emotions in organizations (Fredrickson 2009). The positive emotions of hope, optimism, compassion, and awe generated by appreciative work literally strengthen a person or organization's ability to bring their positive images of the future into fruition (Fredrickson 2003).

The Five Emergent Principles

The five original principles have since been augmented by the principles of wholeness, enactment, free choice (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2010), awareness (Stavros and Torres 2005), and narrative (Barrett and Fry 2005). A summary of these are presented in Table 6.1. These emergent principles have elevated and extended the original principles, further helping OD practitioners apply an appreciative stance when leading organizational change work.

THE APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY 5-D CYCLE

If these principles represent the overarching gestalt of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) work, the 5-D cycle offers generative yet practical scaffolding upon which AI work is often built, as illustrated in Figure 6.1. Each of the Ds represents different activities and generative dialogues happening in a systematic manner throughout the organizational system. Regardless of the level of work within the system, from one-on-one coaching, to team building, to system-wide change, the 5-D model can be leveraged as a guide for creating positive change.

Table 6.1. Five Emergent AI Principles

| Principle	Meaning
Wholeness (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2010)	To include all parts of a system in creating the future. Important to recognize that an organization is a "whole" and all parts are interrelated.
Enactment (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2010)	When we act as if something is true in our organization, then it becomes true. If we want a more egalitarian organization, then use an egalitarian process to create it.
Free Choice (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2010)	People can choose how to engage and contribute in the change process; they then perform better and are more committed to the change.
Awareness (Stavros and Torres 2005)	Self-reflective awareness of the connectivity of original principles is needed to apply AI in daily living. Being aware of your thoughts, habits, and actions allows you to operate in an appreciative paradigm.
Narrative (Barrett and Fry 2005)	Stories have a transformative power in organizational life. Stories should be told and written to reflect the best realities and to live into these stories.
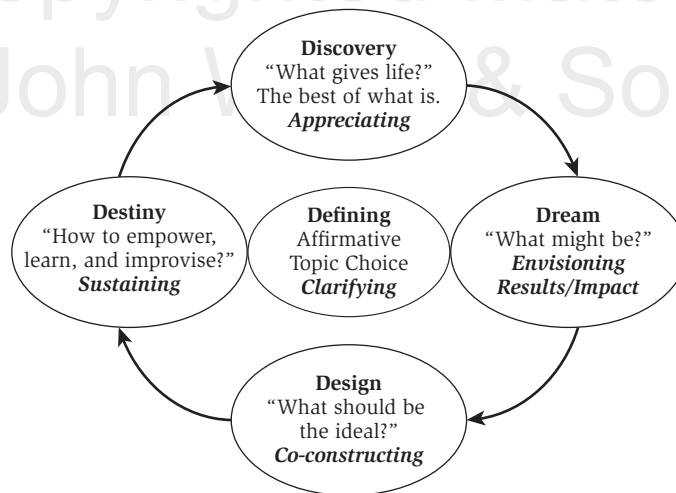
Figure 6.1. AI 5-D Cycle

Each phase is summarized briefly below, but many resources further articulate the details of these phases depending on the OD work one is leading. We recommend that you visit the AI Commons (www.appreciativeinquiry.case.edu) and the *AI Practitioner: The International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry* website (www.aipractitioner.com) that combined has hundreds of illustrations of AI in action.

The Defining Phase—What Is the Topic of Inquiry?

While the AI 4-D (Discovery, Dream, Design, and Delivery) cycle remains the simplest and the most often-used visual when describing the appreciative process, in OD work there should always be a conversation on *defining* the purpose of how and why AI will be used. Many OD practitioners have concretized this process by adding this fifth D, *Define*, to center the model to cover what OD practitioners typically call the "contracting" phase of the process. In this phase, the guiding question is, "What generative topic do we want to focus on together?" This phase often involves reframing or clarifying a pressing organizational issue into opportunity areas for further inquiry.

For example, when British Airways launched a change initiative that became the largest customer responsiveness program in the company's history (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005), the first step in the process was to define the generative topic in which they wanted to invest. While the topic initially presented as a problem of "How do we deal with *excessive baggage loss*," it ultimately evolved into "How do we create *outstanding arrival experiences*." The generative reframing of the topic was fateful, as it helped launch a discovery process into the existing moments of outstanding arrival experiences and a dreaming process of what outstanding arrival looks like, and so on. Ultimately, it became one of the most successful and well-documented change programs ever done at British Airways (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2010).

The Discovery Phase—What Gives Life?

In the *Discovery* phase, the goal is to inquire, learn about, and appreciate the best of "what is" in a person or organizational system via appreciative one-on-one interviews. The ability to collect strengths-based, life-giving (i.e., the Positive Principle), and future-oriented data (i.e., the Anticipatory Principle) is key to the Discovery phase. The guiding question for this phase is, "When we have been at our best, what were we doing?" The assumption is that every person or system has strengths, high-points, and positive things to be discovered (i.e., the Poetic Principle) and leveraged for the future.

The Discovery phase has several important aspects. First is the importance of lifting up individuals' stories (i.e., the Narrative Principle). Through sharing stories, the organization's members get in touch with their ideas and beliefs about

what makes a peak experience and understand how to create more of these positive experiences (i.e., the Constructionist Principle). According to research on the human brain, stories have the power of connecting the *left brain*, where reason and language reside, with our *right brain*, where our artistic nature, innovation, and creativity reside (Dew 1996). By tapping into the whole brain (i.e., the Wholeness Principle), we access our full range of ideas and emotions, giving a powerful base to our images of an ideal state. Five classic appreciative questions are:

1. *Reflecting on History and High Point Moments*: What is a peak experience of "x" or at "y" (customized to the focus of the inquiry)?

2. *Learning from Others/Search for Inspirational Practices*: What are best practices from others regarding "x" and how can we learn from what has worked elsewhere to inform what we want to do?

3. *Building on What We Value Most/Continuity*: No matter what changes about "y," what do we value most about ourselves, our colleagues, and our organization?

4. *Images of the Future*: Imagine it is five years in the future and the organization has become what you most want it to be, what does it look like?

5. *Three Wishes*: If you had three wishes for your organization, what would they be?

The "x" refers to a topic of inquiry such as a high-performing team and "y" could refer to the organization. AI interviews can go deep when interview partners are coached to listen with curiosity and probe their partners to share details about their experiences and visions for the future. The insights from this phase are typically culled and themed (often by a facilitator in collaboration with members of the organization) and then shared back to participants to help set the stage for the Dream phase.

The Dream Phase—What Might Be?

The *Dream* phase is an invitation for the participants to amplify the positive core of the system by imagining possibilities for the future (i.e., the Positive and Anticipatory Principles). For example, the conversation may center on what a high-performing team might look like, based on the list of themes created from the interviews in the Discovery phase. The guiding question for this phase is, "When we achieve our ideal state of success, what will it look like?" The Dream phase seeks to expand the organization's true potential and begins to "shift" the current status quo toward a desired future reality. This phase creates momentum, synergy, and excitement among the participants of "what can

be." Dreaming is a significant activity that leads to higher levels of creativity, commitment, and enthusiasm for the organization's future. It is in these higher levels that participants access the ideas and energy for identifying and articulating tasks and actions in the Design phase.

How data are gathered in this phase depends on the size of the organizational system. Typically, teams across the organization will engage in this process and then share their collective visions with the wider system. There is no methodological recipe to do this, you just have to decide how to work the process and what you want to discover in the Dream phase. For example, in the British Airways example, they "wanted to uncover and transport from station to station all the best practices that would support British Airways' world-class service" (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2010, 130).

The Design Phase—What Should Be the Ideal?

The *Design* phase focuses on leveraging the best of the past as discovered in the stories (continuity) to help move the system toward action steps for achieving (transition) their desired state as articulated in the Dream phase. The design steps vary depending on the complexity of the project, but include a two-step process: (1) brainstorming and (2) rapid-prototyping. First, the team, group, or organization brainstorms a list of activities and ideas of things they want to create in their ideal organization. These are activities and processes that can be planned and implemented in alignment with the dreams created in the previous Dream phase. A guiding question for this process is often, "How might we make our vision a reality?"

Once the brainstorming ideas are synthesized and prioritized, the focus then becomes on exploring the question, "What will these ideas look like in action?" While there are a variety of models and processes within the purview of OD practice that can be blended with an AI perspective to help answer this question, one of the most promising approaches has come from the field of design. As detailed by Coughlan, Suri, and Canales (2008), prototyping helps an organizational system concretize their ideas into tangible artifacts. Prototyping represents the Constructionist Principle in action, where an idea such as "We need a new employee-orientation program" gets co-created into an initial iteration of what that would look like (i.e., the elements of the program are sketched out, communication templates are mocked up, a calendar for the program is drawn out, etc.) for further evolution in the Destiny phase.

The Destiny Phase—How to Empower, Learn, and Improvise?

In this phase, the organizational members discuss how to *deliver* the dream and design by leveraging the strengths and resources lifted up during the discovery dialogues. Like the previous three phases, the *Destiny* phase (sometimes

it is also referred to as the *Delivery* phase) continues with a whole system dia-logue. The guiding question now becomes, "How do we continue to leverage our strengths to deliver on the promise dreams and ensure our system flourishes in the future?"

While there are many forms of the Destiny phase, this phase will depend on the complexity of the system and what are the expected outcomes of the 5-D application. Many systems will create an interval process where the 5-Ds are continuously used to access how projects are proceeding and update plans for the future. This review involves asking the system/group another discovery question: "Tell a story about the best things that have happened in this project since we began." This is followed by a dream question that refocuses them on creating an updated image of success; that is, "Imagine it is three months from now and the project has become wildly successful, what does that look like?" This can be followed by another *Design* process to continue moving the project forward with new iterations. Ultimately, the *Destiny* phase transforms the orga-nizational culture into an appreciative learning culture and the cycle continues.

While these phases for applying AI are fairly concrete and understandable—whether 4 or 5 Ds—the way those steps are carried out makes all the difference. In traditional OD processes, large-group planning often aims to produce a list of things that the group wants done expecting some senior-level people will make it happen. The AI process, however, must be "owned" by the "whole" of the organization so any external facilitator/consultant functions as coach or advisor. Of major importance in all of these phases is that some configuration of the whole is working together to bring about the lasting change they have identified as desirable. This might literally be the whole system of thousands of people coming together as in an AI Summit (see examples in Cooperrider, Godwin, Boland, and Avital 2012), or it may be representative members from across the system collaborating on behalf of the whole.

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AND THE ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT STRENGTHS REVOLUTION

Compared to the deficit-based management culture that dominates much of our organizational life, it is perhaps no surprise that the strengths-based movement that has emerged within the field of OD is being called a revolution. Since the 1940s, organizations have used the traditional deficit-based approach to solving problems. Traditionally, it starts with identifying problems, then diagnosing and analyzing the problems and ends with a plan to fix the problems. As detailed above, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) provides an alternative to this approach and challenges the traditional approach to a more affirmative, strengths-based way

to look for what is working well in the organization and what the organization wants more of in its future.

Strengths-based Principles

AI posits that organizations need not be fixed. Instead, they need constant reaffirmation and opportunities to be solution-seeking. More precisely, organizations as heliotropic systems grow toward the direction of what they most focus on, or put more precisely, what they most persistently ask questions about. Whereas traditional OD work has aimed at asking questions to identify problems, diagnose the underlying causes of those problems, analyze possible solutions, and plan how to lessen those problems, the appreciative approach starts the change process from a different paradigm, with a different set of questions. AI invites people to appreciate and ask about the best of what exists within their system, envision what might become in the future, dialogue about what should evolve, and innovate together to make their highest hopes become realities. Cooperrider and Godwin (2012) created a set of strengths-based principles, which are summarized in the left-side column of Table 6.2. We present the implications for OD practitioners in the right-side column.

Table 6.2. Principles of Strengths-based Approaches and Implications for Positive OD

Strengths-based Principle	Implications for Positive OD Practitioners
1. We live in worlds our inquiries create.	Be aware of the questions being asked within organizations as well as the ones you pose. The ROI on change initiatives is dependent upon what we inquire into: deficiencies or the best in life.
2. We excel only by amplifying strengths, never by simply fixing weaknesses.	Pay attention to the initial framing of your work and beware of the negativity bias inherent in our traditional OD approaches because excellence is not the opposite of failure.
3. Small shifts make seismic differences; strengths-based change obeys a tipping point.	Instead of focusing 80 percent on what's not working and 20 percent on strengths, it is important to put this 80/20 rule in reverse to harness the transformative power of the "positivity ratio."
4. Strengths do more than perform, they transform.	It is important to help organizations and the individuals within them to uncover the best within themselves and imagine "what is next" in order for them to create upward spirals.
5. We live in a universe of strengths; what we appreciate (see as having value) appreciates (increases in value).	Focus your attention and the attention of the organization on what they want to become more of, not less of. There are unlimited strengths in any organizational system to be found and amplified if we seek them out, including success, vitality, and flourishing.

These principles are informing a new epoch in our work as leaders of organizational change. Building on the strengths revolution (Buckingham 2006; Rath 2007) and fueled by AI, positive OD work entails three main stages: (1) the elevation of strengths, (2) the alignment or connected magnification of strengths, and (3) the creation of strengths-based organizations to become positive institutions—vehicles for elevating, magnifying, and refracting our highest human strengths outward to the world (Cooperrider and Godwin 2012; Cooperrider et al. 2008). As illustrated in Figure 6.2, these three circles of work are undergirded by the appreciative paradigm—the capacity to see beyond problems and see possibility and inquire into what gives life to a system when it is. These three circles, while not exhaustive, provide a framework for the many streams of scholarship informing the strengths-based approaches we are seeing gain traction today in OD.

Three Circles of the Strengths-Based Revolution for Positive OD

The focus of the first circle—Elevation of Strengths—leverages the theories and methodologies in domains such as positive psychology (Seligman
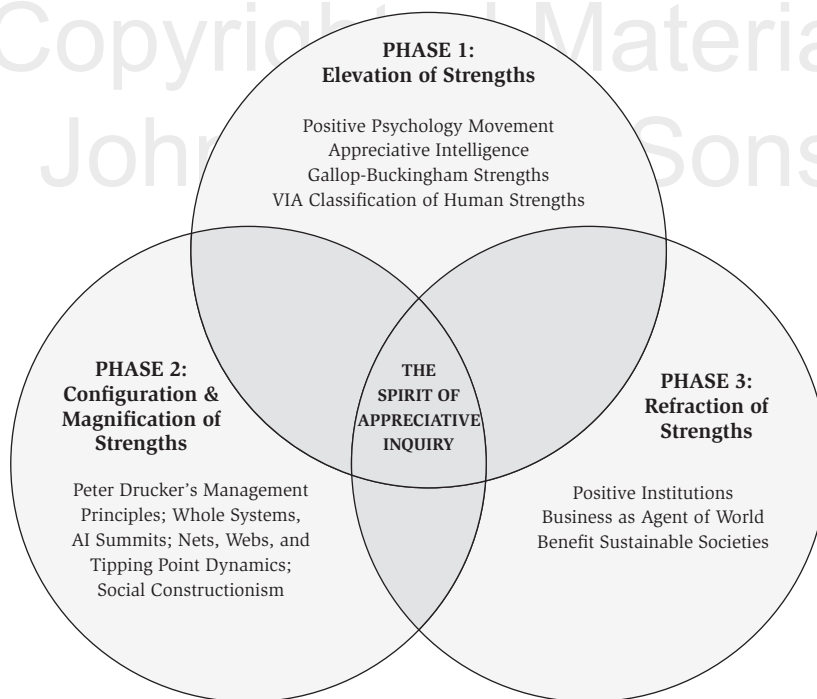

Figure 6.2. Strengths-Based Revolution for Positive OD

Source: From D. Cooperrider, "The 3-Circles of the Strengths Revolution," *AI Practitioner: International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry* (November 2008, 8), with permission.

2011; Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson 2005), appreciative intelligence (Thatchenkery and Metzker 2006), positive organizational scholarship (Cameron, Dutton, and Quinn 2003; Cameron and Spreitzer 2012), emotional intelligence (Boyatzis and McKee 2005), and strengths-based management (Buckingham 2006; Rath 2007). The guiding question of this level of work is: "What are the strengths of individuals within this system?"

To help answer this question, OD practitioners are benefiting from the growing array of tools being developed that lift up strengths and talents of individuals, small groups, and teams. From strengths-finders such as the Values in Action (VIA) (Peterson and Seligman 2004) and Strengths-Finder 2.0 (Rath 2007), to tools such as the Best Self Analysis (Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy, and Quinn 2005), the SOAR Profile (Stavros 2013), to appreciative coaching methodologies (Orem, Binket, and Clancy 2007), there are a wide assortment of instruments, frameworks, and processes at the modern OD practitioner's disposal to discover and lift up the individual strengths and assets that have often gone unnoticed, unlabeled, and underappreciated.

Elevating strengths lays the foundation for the work of the second circle, which involves creating an alignment and magnification of individual's strengths. The guiding question for this level of work is: "How do we take isolated strengths and amplify them to a new level?" The domains of work informing this circle of work include the anthropological power of narrative from the social constructionist realm (Miller, Potts, Fung, Hoogstra, and Mintz 1990), the Drucker-esque management philosophy that emphasizes the importance of the *alignments of strengths* (Drucker 1966), and investigations into high quality connections (Dutton and Heaphy 2003). One of the most powerful tools used in this sphere of work is the classic AI Summit methodology, which has been used to convene whole systems of hundreds to thousands of individuals (see examples in Cooperrider, Godwin, Boland, and Avital 2012). New technologies are making it even easier for the AI Summit to truly become a macro-management tool that aligns disparate parts of complex systems across time and space (Godwin, Bodiford, and Kaplan 2012). Other tools for aligning and magnifying strengths include the World Café model (visit: www.theworldcafe.com), Asset-Based Community Development (Kretzmann and McKnight 1994), Future Search (Weisbord and Janoff 1995), and SOAR (strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results; Stavros 2013)—the appreciative alternative that leverages and amplifies the "S" and "O" of SWOT.

The lifting up, magnifying, and aligning of strengths become the building blocks for the third circle—the creation of positive institutions, which "not only elevate and connect human strengths (internally) but serve to refract and magnify our highest human strengths into society" (Cooperrider and Godwin 2010, 738). This circle is perhaps the greatest realm of work affecting the future of OD, as it asks: "How do we co-create institutions that support both the creation and reflection of our best selves outward to the world?"

A myriad of terms have emerged to describe the work being done in this domain—sustainability, eco-efficiency, social entrepreneurship, social responsibility, triple bottom-line, and sustainable development, to name a few. Theoretical frameworks informing this work include stakeholder theory (Freeman 1984), the call for sustainable value (Laszlo 2008), and the search for business to act as an agent of world benefit (BAWB; Piderit, Fry, and Cooperrider 2007). From advances in biomimicry (Benyus 2002), to the BAWB world inquiry (see www.worldbenefit.cwru.edu/inquiry), tools for accomplishing these lofty aims include the bottom of the pyramid protocol (see www.bop-protocol.org) and the next generation AI Summit, or "the sustainable design factory" (Cooperrider 2008).

These circles are not necessarily linear. As detailed by Cooperrider and Fry (2012), organizations can also cultivate what they refer to as "mirror flourishing" by committing to sustainability and other initiatives that help to bring out the best of the individuals within them. They define mirror flourishing as "The consonant flourishing or growing together that happens naturally and reciprocally to us when we actively engage in or witness the acts that help nature flourish, others flourish, or the world as a whole to flourish" (8). When people see positive outcomes happening within their organizational system, it helps inspire them to bring their best selves to their work and their world. Positive institutions can lift up and align individuals' strengths, just as individuals' strengths can be aligned to create positive institutions.

SUMMARY

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was originally intended and used first as a qualitative research process—an appreciative way of exploring what is going right in a system to build future-oriented prospective theory (Cooperrider 1986). Over the years, AI has evolved to become part of the OD discipline as a philosophy and process that engages individuals across the organizational whole system in processes that create renewal and positive transformational change.

Today, AI is a global phenomenon that offers a way of being and a framework for organizational inquiry from an appreciative, strengths-based lens. Anchored in its principles, AI can be embedded into all levels of an organization, from an individual's life, to team dynamics, to entire systemic change initiatives. There are several ways to apply AI (via its 4-D or 5-D cycle). The AI 5-D cycle operates on the belief that the responsibility for transformation and change resides with the people. The shift begins with individuals within the organization taking responsibility for the process through story sharing and dialogue that is generative.

The impact of AI across organizations has been felt around the globe. A recent empirical study by Verleysen, Lambrechts, and Van Acker (2014)

suggests that "leaders of change would be well advised to help enact and sustain the principles of AI and 4-D cycle of AI" and that "AI is an effective way to increase psychological capital … which are conditions for co-creating new possibilities and effective systematic change" (21). There are many possibilities to transforming and creating a positive future for you, your department, organization, or industry. The probability that any of these comes into reality depends on how you embrace the possibilities; ask yourself: *What kind of future should we live into?*

Discussion Questions

1. Take a negative situation; using the AI philosophy and principles, how would you reframe the situation into a positive situation—something that you wish to learn about and have more of?

2. How are you seeing the three circles of the strengths revolution affecting the field of OD today? How are you working to lift up, magnify, and refract strengths in yourself and others through your work?

3. Reflect on how you might experiment with the impact of inquiry—how much do you track the impacts of different types of questions you ask? How does a deficit-based question lead to a different dialogue than an appreciative question?

4. How can you integrate the principles of AI with other OD methodologies to experiment with new approaches for creating positive organizational change?

Resources

AI History and Timeline: http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/intro/timeline.cfm

AI Video Clips and Interview Guides: http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/practice/video.cfm

Appreciative Inquiry: A Conversation with David Cooperrider: www.youtube.com/watch?v = 3JDfr6KGV-k

David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry in the Stiller School of Business, Champlain College: www.champlain.edu/appreciativeinquiry

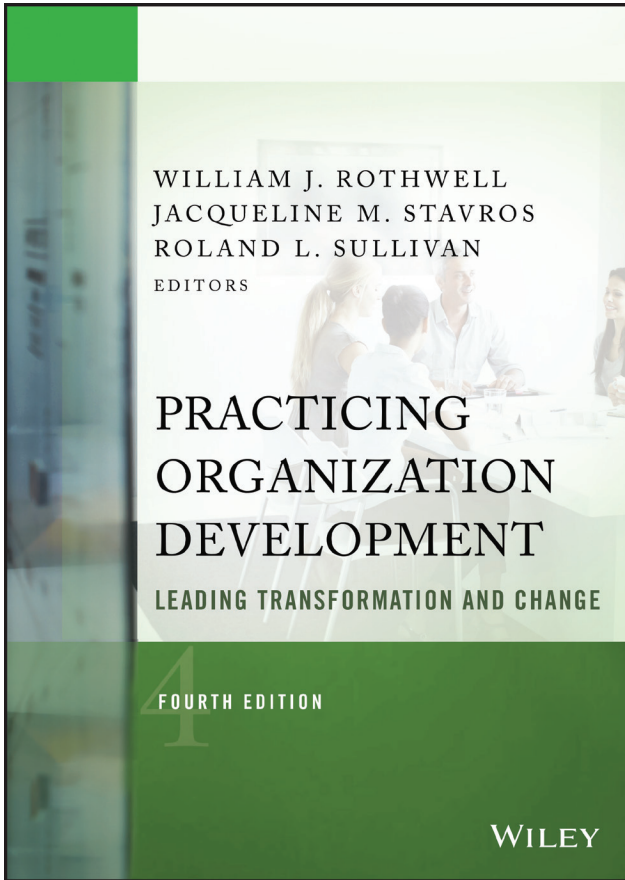*Appreciative Inquiry Practitioner—The International Journal of AI*: www.aipractitioner.com/

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