



Appreciative Inquiry

An important tool for transforming your business

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The work of a doctoral student from Case Western Reserve University could radically transform your organization. The student, now a graduate, is Dr. David Cooperrider, who began studying the human side of the Cleveland Clinic as his doctoral research project in the early 1980s. At a point in his research, he became more interested in what was going right than what was going wrong. While his initial focus had been on deficits in the organization, he became fascinated by the cooperation and innovation in the organization. This shift in focus led to the birth of something called Appreciative Inquiry (AI). This article explains AI, explores its relevance to revolutionizing how an enterprise is led and presents an approach for applying the 4-D Model to creating sustainable change.

Appreciative Inquiry Defined

AI is an emerging, evolving approach to organizational change that is rooted in the premise that enterprises move in the direction they pay attention to. If an enterprise pays attention to its failures, it will create more of the same. The reverse is also true. If an enterprise explores its moments of excellence and its successes, it will generate more of the same. This is a dramatic shift for most of us trained in deficit-oriented change models where we devote much attention to problem identification and remediation. AI calls us to identify the roots of successes so that they can be replicated.

AI is rooted in a theoretical perspective called social constructionism. A brief summary of the theory will suffice for the purposes of this article. Social constructionism focuses on the power of positive images and holds that language does not merely describe and define, but rather that it is a powerful tool of creation. Further, the belief is that members of organizations create meaning through their dialogue — they use the power of the tongue to create the organization's future (adapted from "Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination," by Jane Magruder Watkins and Bernard J. Mohr). Social constructionism requires that dialogue move from a discussion of deficits to an exploration of vitality, health and organizational success.

Heliotropism is the other theoretical underpinning of AI. This theory holds that all living systems move toward that

Appreciative Inquiry's Five Generic Processes

- Choose the positive as the focus of inquiry.
- Inquire into moments of excellence or exceptionally positive moments.
- Share success stories and identify affirming or life-giving forces in the organization.
- Create a shared vision of a preferred, desirable future.
- Create that future using innovation and improvisation.

which gives them life. AI requires organizations to identify and strategize toward their greatest successes. This is a highly simplified synthesis of complex theoretical frameworks. "The Essentials of Appreciative Inquiry: A Roadmap for Creating Positive Futures," by Magruder Watkins and Mohr, provides an excellent synopsis for laypeople.

The Relevance of AI in Transforming Your Business

What can the work of a sociologist from Ohio possibly mean to your business? It can mean three important things. First, that you have a viable method for creating sustainable improvements in performance and productivity. Second, that you can implement tested tools for changing the language and imagery that have ultimately created your business. And third, that you can make the transition from deficit-based leadership and analysis to a leadership posture that is affirming and positive.

Beginning with the first proposition presented in the previous paragraph, the 4-D Model of AI gives you a method that can be applied to everything from revving up sales to creating collaboration to process redesign. The model enables you to inquire into exceptionally positive moments and capture the life-giving forces in your organization. Wherever you apply the model, you will have a reliable method for creating sustainable change.

Now we will move to the second proposition — that you can

change the language imagery that has shaped your organization. Applying AI changes not only the dialogue in the enterprise, but also the language used by leaders. It will call you to a higher level of accountability when discussing everything from receivables to staff performance to customer satisfaction. Leaders become better able to begin from the positive and ask questions that frame the issues from an affirmative bent. Remember, social constructionism instructs us that language is a powerful means of creation.

Finally, we come to the third proposition — that leaders no longer need to rely on deficit-based models of change or organizational development.

There are five generic processes typically applied in AI. They are as follows:

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These processes can be applied to large and small systems transformations. The processes can be used in tandem with the 4-D Model or as an alternative.

Applying the 4-D Model

The decision to employ AI requires leaders to re-evaluate their approaches — not just toward how to transform an enterprise, but also to their own unique leadership styles. This presupposes a high level of emotional intelligence, particularly the first two components of emotional intelligence: self-awareness and self-management. A keen understanding of self and the ability to skillfully play to one's strengths are necessary if one is to lead large- or small-scale transformations.

Employing AI also requires a conscious decision to focus on the positive — on what is best. This can be quite a stretch for leaders wedded to deficit-based approaches to addressing organizational dilemmas. It compels leaders to reframe issues so that the language used begins the powerful process of positive creation. For example, the issue may be that revenue is declining in one of your locations. Rather than framing it as “revenue is declining,” the issue is framed as “the organization can examine the factors that were present when revenue generation was at its highest and recreate those conditions.” This

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presents the revenue issue as an opportunity to both examine instances of success and also as an opportunity to increase revenue based on strengths previously evidenced when the organization was more profitable. When an issue like declining revenue is reframed, a world of new opportunities emerges. They include the opportunity to build deeper relationships with existing customers, develop mean-

ingful incentives for employees and identify the right product/service mix.

The model, defined by Cooperrider, is as follows: discovery, dream, design and destiny. It is powerful in its simplicity and does not require extensive external consultation or facilitation. Organizations can groom their own AI experts to be able to guide them through the five generic processes or the 4-D Model. The Center for Appreciative Inquiry, based in Las Vegas, teaches a week-long seminar for those interested in learning how to facilitate AI processes in their organizations. Case Western Reserve University also offers an intensive seminar on the topic taught by Cooperrider.

The discovery phase begins the process by focusing attention on identifying excellence, the very best of what exists in the organization. This can be accomplished in any number of ways. Interviews are typical. A cross-section of employees can be queried using a pre-designed interview guide. Facilitated workshops that allow participants to visually and creatively depict the best of who they are is another option for this phase. Ultimately, the goal is to help people tap into the times when they have experienced the organization at its very best.

Let us say that you are embarking on the transformation of your office technology dealership. In the discovery phase, you may gather all employees together and break them into small groups. The groups would be charged with creatively depicting an answer to this question: “When is our dealership at its very best? What do we look, sound, act and feel like when we are functioning at our best?”

Participants will be charged with delving deeply to define and isolate moments of excellence for the organization. What they will find are the exceptionally positive moments that may have been overlooked or obscured by a focus on the negative. Capturing this valuable information begins the process of infusing new vitality into the enterprise.

The next phase, dream, enables people to effectively challenge the status quo by imagining a preferred future. It expands the organization's potential by focusing on leveraging

moments of excellence. This is when people begin to discuss possibilities, positioning and potential. They create radical, provocative propositions that are developed to create the optimum organization. It is during the dream phase that everyone is asked to take innovation to the highest level. They are asked to challenge commonly accepted wisdom and create an almost ideal future for the entire enterprise. Creating a preferred future requires challenging assumptions, ignoring deficits and imagining the unimaginable. Jeffrey H. Dyer et al contend that imagining completely different alternatives can lead to truly original insights (adapted from “The Innovator’s DNA,” by Jeffrey H. Dyer et al, published in *Harvard Business Review*, December 2009). The dream phase creates the space for this type of imaginative, innovative work.

Continuing with the previous example, once your employees have identified moments of excellence, they are then tasked with creating their unique vision for the organization. Give them all of the kindergarten art tools that you can find and allow them to create with reckless abandon. Or, simply allow them to use whatever is available. In a recent session, a group found a piano at the retreat facility. They wrote and sang a song that captured their dream — not only of the values they hoped the organization would embody, but also the products they wanted to develop and bring to market within the next year.

The third phase, design, is where members of the organization become architects of their own enterprise. In their dreaming, they identify what should be the ideal and in their designing they collaborate on building that imagined future. Not only is energy directed toward developing provocative propositions about what the organization will be, but it is also devoted toward defining the infrastructure required to support the dreams articulated in the prior phase. Close attention is paid to leadership, strategy, structures, human resource utilization and organizational culture. The collaborative construction that happens at this phase answers one question: “How can we make it happen?” This is what moves the entire organization into the realm of positive action.

This is the time when the organization comes together to craft all of the systems required for enduring success. Any number of outcomes may emerge. It is at this point that sacred cows are slaughtered and taken to market. You may opt to dismantle many bureaucratic structures in favor of a team-based organization. Or you may decide to eliminate bar-

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riers between service providers and customers. You may decide that your human resource function is not employee-oriented and abolish the entire department. What happens during this phase is entirely contingent upon the organization in question and its aspirations for itself and all of its members. This is a particularly exciting phase because stakeholders are actively engaged in creating new, vibrant, viable structures that make the dream a reality.

It is in the final phase, destiny, that stakeholders band together to implement and sustain the new structures that they have designed. Everyone works to ensure that their work at the macro and micro levels is aligned with the dream and subsequent provocative propositions. This is when new structures, systems, services, practices, products and processes are integrated, implemented and refined. An “appreciative eye” is required for success at this phase. In other words, it is important to constantly be in search of moments of excellence, demonstrable successes and the learning that emerges from the implementation of the new structures.

It is the destiny phase that allows the organization to sustain the change. This happens because all stakeholders in the enterprise are creating ways to deliver on the promise of the dream. They are focused on making the provocative propositions for their area come to fruition. Not only is fluid communication critical at this stage, so is the commitment to ongoing action. A commitment to innovation, continuous learning and continuous quality improvement are essential in this phase.

Conclusion

AI is an ingenious tool for creating sustainable organizational transformations. It enables an organization to move beyond deficit-based thought and action and into a more affirming, energizing focus on excellence. Drawing on successes enables an organization to systematically plot for more of the same. In addition to changing the energy in the enterprise, it will also change the outcomes. ■

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