



# Appreciative Inquiry

## Models for Transforming the Enterprise

By Joanne L. Smikle

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY, THE ORGANIZATIONAL effectiveness practice originated by David Cooperrider, Ph.D., has powerful implications for human resource leaders responsible for large-scale organizational transformations.

The approach challenges deficit-based approaches to which most are accustomed and posits that a transformation based on an organization's past successes has a greater likelihood of sustainability. Appreciative inquiry positions all members of an organization to be active participants in its growth, change, renewal and maximized performance.

This article outlines two approaches to appreciative inquiry and highlights implications for human resource leaders.

### Theoretical Foundation in Brief

Rooted in social constructionism, appreciative inquiry holds that language is a powerful means of creation that can be used to direct an organization toward a positive, productive future. Social constructionism teaches that the very questions we ask about our organizations are fateful in that they begin to direct our discovery. Asking why performance and retention are poor in a business unit will yield different energy and results than asking how to maximize positive aspects of the work environment to foster healthy retention and the highest levels of performance.

The first question, why performance and retention are poor, begins with a deficit-based inquiry. It immediately calls attention to problems, not possibilities. The second question, how to maximize the positive aspects of the work environment, begins with an inquiry that is affirming. Hence, the difference between an appreciative approach to organizational transformations and a traditional approach.

The second question illuminates another element of the theoretical foundation of appreciative inquiry. That is heliotropism. This theory holds that all living organisms – and organizations are indeed organisms – naturally gravitate towards that which gives them life. The second question, on maximizing the positive, moves the focus of the inquiry toward life-giving forces already present in the

enterprise. The energy and attention are turned to the direction most likely to yield positive, sustainable results.

Appreciative inquiry teaches that organizations move in the direction of their inquiries. In other words, organizations that constantly inquire about problems will only surface more problems. By direct contrast, an organization that inquires about its successes will consciously and unconsciously find more of the same. Cooperrider holds that organizations are miraculous, not problematic, in their very nature.

### Models for Transforming the Enterprise

Traditional approaches teach us to examine the organization, its component parts, issues and members through a deficit-based lens.

The typical deficit-based approach looks like this:

1. Identify the problem, issue or need.
2. Identify and analyze the range of root causes.
3. Develop a range of solutions for addressing the problem.
4. Implement the solutions.
5. Evaluate successes and failures.

While the traditional deficit-based approach often works, appreciative inquiry offers another

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way to tackle transformations. An appreciative change model is quite different. Cooperrider's 4-Ds provide an alternative approach to transforming an enterprise:

1. Discover the best of the organization and its members.
2. Dream or imagine what could be possible.
3. Design the components of the preferred future.
4. Deliver on the promises articulated in the Dream and Design.

The 4-D Model asks people to, in a facilitated setting, reflect on what the organization and its people do best. They are asked to give serious thought to identifying all the elements of excellence that have defined the organization. Next, they are asked to identify a compelling dream for the organization. They can express the dream in any number of ways – photos, drawings, skits or other creative expressions.

The work continues in the design or actual creation of the preferred future. It is here that people put together the components required to make the dream come true. They answer the provocative questions about who they intend to become and how they will transform. Finally, their destiny is assured when they deliver through implementation.

This is not a one-day, action-packed retreat. Instead it is an intense endeavor that requires serious commitment to dismantling and rebuilding in a manner consistent with whatever is best in the organization.

This is a collaborative process that enables people to own the organization, its achievements and its future. It fosters positive relationships and builds on moments of excellence and successes that can positively unite an organization. While the traditional deficit-based approach

can certainly involve many members of the organization, the focus is markedly different, as are the results.

A small private hospital was faced with the dilemma of less than stellar results in its marketing and admissions departments. It served a niche market of female psychiatric patients in need of residential treatment. The senior leaders had tried all sorts of incentives and contests that were not yielding results. They had tried threats of layoffs.

They spent countless hours trying to determine what was wrong with the people, the sales model and even the treatment programs.

Yet there were still no significant results in admissions. The CEO mentioned the persistently low census to a consultant engaged to assist with organizational strategy issues. As it happened the consultant had been reading about appreciative inquiry. The consultant asked if he could test some of the theories he had been learning. The CEO agreed.

The department was demoralized but willing to try a different approach. Over several months they went through the 4-D Model.

Results were not immediately apparent. Several things were revealed in the process. The first was that the right people have to be in the right positions. One of the key admissions team members was technically qualified for the position but seriously disinterested and dissatisfied. She would have preferred an external marketing position.

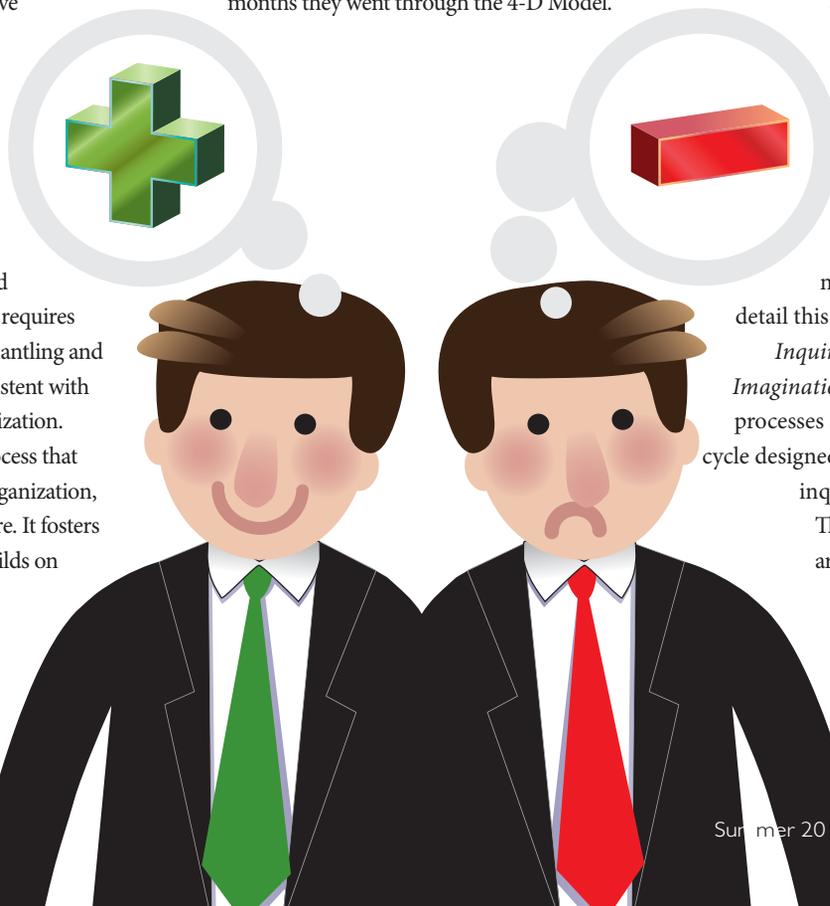
The second revelation was that this model, like any and every other, requires a critical mass and a champion. It became clear that the design to destiny process required consistent monitoring to ensure people honored their commitments. A critical mass of people interested in creating a preferred future kept the energy and enthusiasm for both the process and the outcomes alive.

As the design and destiny processes progressed, the departments designed two procedures that began to make a significant difference in how they captured and followed up on leads. They also discovered ways to collaborate more effectively.

They restructured staffing assignments so team members could play to their strengths. The 4-D Model is the classic approach to appreciative inquiry. Jane Magruder Watkins and Bernard Mohr developed their five generic processes as another way of implementing the concept. They detail this approach in *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*. They refer to their five processes as an appreciative inquiry cycle designed to integrate appreciative inquiry into an organization. The five generic processes are as follows:

1. Choose the positive as the focus of inquiry.

... continued on page 10



2. Inquire into moments of excellence or exceptionally positive moments.
3. Share stories that are affirming and highlight life-giving forces.
4. Create shared images of a preferred future.
5. Innovate and improvise to create the preferred future.

Just as with the 4-Ds, the implementation of the five generic processes happens through many collaborative, facilitated sessions. Both the 4-Ds and five generic processes lend themselves to customization and modification. Both can be facilitated by an internal stakeholder or an external consultant. Both can be done with large systems or individual business units. While appreciative inquiry certifications are popping up all over, they are certainly not required to skillfully utilize the processes. Case Western Reserve University offers several excellent executive education courses on the topic.

Critical to both approaches is that the focus be on what is right in the organization, not on what is wrong. Both approaches enable the organization to engage in continuous learning.

### Implications for Human Resource Leaders

Implementing appreciative approaches can be rewarding, challenging, exciting and frustrating. Initially it can be very difficult to break the focus on deficits and shift the energy to moments of excellence. Many leaders struggle with abandoning the traditional problem identification model. They will, often unconsciously, try to steer the process back to defining deficits. This is to be expected. The appreciative approach challenges core assumptions about the organization and how

best to address its change processes. In many organizations it also challenges core values that put too much weight on criticism, corrective feedback and conformity.

Human resource leaders have the opportunity to introduce a process that leverages strengths to ensure shareholder, customer and employee value for the enterprise. Implicit is a belief in the principles girding appreciative inquiry. It is critical you subscribe to the basic belief that language creates and organizations grow in the direction they explore. Once you adopt these central tenets, it is possible to become the beacon in your organization.

Appreciative inquiry has potential to revolutionize how performance management and measurement are handled. If the concept were fully embraced, evaluations would be based on cultivating individual and collective strengths with the potential to further the dream or create the preferred future. The entire performance management process would be dismantled and reconstructed so that it focuses on moments of excellence, tools for leveraging strengths and collaborative processes that ensure individual and collective successes.

Coaching will change dramatically in organizations that embrace appreciative inquiry. The focus will be on helping individuals identify their own moments of excellence. They will then be challenged to replicate skills and competencies evidenced during those moments to consistently deliver behavior congruent with that excellence. They will be asked to analyze their work based on successes they have created for themselves and their business units. A coach skilled in appreciative inquiry will also ask the person being coached

to examine language and imagery they use when referencing the organization, the work, the products, systems and services.

If a human resource executive is to be taken seriously when introducing these concepts, they must first build a track record of appreciative inquiry successes. What better place to start than in the human resource department? Test applications of different models by using them to transform practices in your own area. Not only will you build skill-facilitating the processes, you will also be able to credibly discuss how it added value to a business unit. Further, you will develop an expertise you cannot get by simply reading theories.

### Conclusion

Both the 4-D Model and the five generic processes provide useful frameworks for launching appreciative transformations. They call attention to demonstrated successes which can be analyzed and replicated. Human resource leaders have the opportunity to launch the models in their own domains and then other business units throughout the enterprise.

This provocative, collaborative process gives the organization a rubric for generating more of what works. It engages members at a deeper level with a laser sight on replicating moments of excellence. Appreciative inquiry opens the door to vast possibilities for individuals, teams and business units. This is possible because it is a generative process that does not dwell on deficits. Rather it defines, describes and demonstrates successes at the macro and micro levels. It aligns the entire organization around proven strengths. Use appreciative inquiry as a generative, collaborative method for launching sustainable change initiatives. □

Adapted from *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: For Leaders of Change*, by David L. Cooperrider, Diana Whitney and Jacqueline M. Stavros.

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