

# The Power of Appreciative Inquiry

## A Practical Guide to Positive Change

Diana Whitney & Amanda Trosten-Bloom

Foreword by David Cooperrider

Second Edition

### Also by the Authors

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*Positive Family Dynamics*  
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*The Appreciative Organization*, Revised Edition  
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*Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change*  
Berrett-Koehler, 2005

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*Advances in Appreciative Inquiry* (DVD)  
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## CHAPTER 1

# What Is Appreciative Inquiry?

We are no longer surprised when clients ask, "Appreciative what? What do you mean by Appreciative Inquiry?" After all, the words are a somewhat unusual, if not paradoxical, addition to a business vocabulary that revolves around strategy, structure, problems, and profits. After learning more about the power and potential of Appreciative Inquiry, however, our clients declare, "We want to do Appreciative Inquiry, but we will definitely have to call it something different for it to catch on in our organization."

Appreciative Inquiry is the study of what gives life to human systems when they function at their best. This approach to personal change and organization change is based on the assumption that questions and dialogue about strengths, successes, values, hopes, and dreams are themselves transformational. In short, Appreciative Inquiry suggests that human organizing and change at its best is a relational process of inquiry, grounded in affirmation and appreciation. The following beliefs about human nature and human organizing are the foundation of Appreciative Inquiry:

- People individually and collectively have unique gifts, skills, and contributions to bring to life.

- Organizations are human social systems, sources of unlimited relational capacity, created and lived in language.
- The images we hold of the future are socially created and, once articulated, serve to guide individual and collective actions.
- Through human communication—inquiry and dialogue—people can shift their attention and action away from problem analysis to lift up worthy ideals and productive possibilities for the future.

Words create worlds, and the words Appreciative Inquiry are no exception. Clients have named their Appreciative Inquiry initiatives The Zealots Program, The Power of Two, Value-Inspired People, and in the case of Hunter Douglas, Focus 2000. In each case the company brand has endured—along with the words Appreciative Inquiry. As people understand more about the principles of Appreciative Inquiry and begin to experiment with its practices, they realize how radically positive and subtly different it is from business as usual. To fully describe and understand Appreciative Inquiry, consider the meaning of each of the two words.

### Appreciation: Recognition and Value Added

Appreciation has to do with recognition, valuing, and gratitude. The word appreciate is a verb that carries a double meaning, referring to both the act of recognition and the act of enhancing value. Consider these definitions:

1. To recognize the best in people and the world around us.
2. To perceive those things which give life, health, vitality, and excellence to living human systems.
3. To affirm past and present strengths, successes, assets, and potentials.
4. To increase in value, as in “the investment has appreciated in value.”

Indeed, organizations, businesses, and communities can benefit from greater appreciation. Around the globe, people hunger for recognition. They want to work from their strengths on tasks they find valuable. Executives and managers long to lead from their values. They seek ways to integrate their greatest passions into their daily work. And organizations strive regularly to enhance their value to shareholders, employees, and the world. But Appreciative Inquiry is about more than appreciation, recognition, and value enhancement. It is also about inquiry.

### Inquiry: Exploration and Discovery

Inquiry refers to the acts of exploration and discovery. The spirit of inquiry is the spirit of learning. It implies a quest for new possibilities, being in a state of unknowing, wonder, and willingness to learn. It implies an openness to change. The verb inquire means:

1. To ask questions.
2. To study.
3. To search, explore, delve into, or investigate.

Inquiry is a learning process for organizations as well as for individuals. Seldom do we search, explore, or study what we already know with certainty. We ask questions about areas unfamiliar to us. The act of inquiry requires sincere curiosity and openness to new possibilities, new directions, and new understanding. We cannot “have all the answers,” “know what is right,” or “be certain” when we engage in inquiry.

To continue to succeed, organizations need more inquiry. They need less command and control by a few and more exploration of possibilities among many. They need less certainty in their usual plans and strategies and a greater capacity to sense and adapt quickly as their world changes. They need leaders who can acknowledge what they don’t know and who will enthusiastically ask provocative and inspiring questions.

For Appreciative Inquiry to be effective, however, not just any questions will do. Questions must be affirmative, focused on topics

valuable to the people involved, and directed at topics, concerns, and issues central to the success of the organization. When appreciation sets the direction for inquiry, the power of Appreciative Inquiry is released.

### The Catalytic Effect of Appreciative Inquiry

Like the elements hydrogen and oxygen—which combine to make water, the most nurturing substance on earth—appreciation and inquiry combine to produce a vital, powerful, and catalytic effect on leadership and organization change. By tapping into accounts of organizations that are functioning at their best, Appreciative Inquiry unleashes information and commitment that together create energy for positive change.

Hierarchies all too often exclude those people most significantly impacted. Appreciative Inquiry turns those hierarchies into knowledge-rich, relationally inclusive, self-organizing enterprises. This change is powerfully illustrated by British Airways. After September 11, 2002, most airlines needed to cut costs and reduce headcount as demand for air travel declined drastically. British Airways Customer Service in North America was no exception. However, their prior experience using Appreciative Inquiry led them to involve people in determining how best to reduce the workforce. People explored one another's career hopes and dreams, suggested options, and volunteered for sabbaticals, job sharing, and part-time positions. Appreciative Inquiry created a context for people to be included and heard throughout the difficult and challenging time.

Appreciative Inquiry turns command-and-control cultures into communities of discovery and cooperation. For example, a year into our work with one long-term client, we asked an employee to tell what had happened. This is what he said:

Before Appreciative Inquiry if the R&D group wanted to run a prototype on my machine, they would go to my supervisor, who would review the schedule and tell me when to do it. Now, they come to me directly and together we work out the best time to do it.

This organization moved beyond authoritarian styles of management, liberating people to create together what they knew was best for their customers, the business, and themselves.

When we began working with GTE, an organization that had earlier laid off thousands of employees, morale was at an all-time low. Conversations at all levels in the organization were about "ain't it awful," "what's wrong around here," and "why it won't get any better." We created a process that invited employees to use Appreciative Inquiry to make the organization a better place to work—and they did. Thousands of employees were trained in the Foundations of Appreciative Inquiry, Front-Line Leadership Using Appreciative Inquiry, and Appreciative Union-Management Relations. After their training, front-line employees at GTE self-organized a wide range of initiatives, including changes in customer satisfaction surveys, studies of call center best practices, and appreciative processes for employee recruitment, orientation, and retention. After the many organic changes that took place, GTE won the American Society for Training and Development Excellence in Practice Award (Managing Change) in 1997.

Finally, Appreciative Inquiry renews leaders as well as organizations and communities. Rick Pellett, president and general manager of Hunter Douglas Window Fashions Division, describes profound personal shifts in perception as a result of leading the Hunter Douglas initiative:

The work I did here began to change me, almost right away. It got me asking questions—not just about the company but about my life.

The questions we were asking and the dreams we were dreaming opened doors for me. They invited me to consider where I was heading, and whether it was the future I really wanted to live. They compelled me to take action to correct things that I'd simply chosen to live with for years and years.

I recognize that this experience wouldn't create the same kind of "awakening" in everybody that it touched. But for me, it was revolutionary. And for many of the other hard-core, quick-deciding, bottom-line leaders that rise to the top in corporate America, it just might be life changing, for the better.

## The 4-D Cycle

How does Appreciative Inquiry work? The process used to generate the power of Appreciative Inquiry is the 4-D Cycle—Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny (Figure 1). It is based on the notion that human systems, individuals, teams, organizations, and communities grow and change in the direction of what they study. Appreciative Inquiry works by focusing the attention of an organization on its most positive potential—its positive core—and unleashing the energy of the positive core for transformation and sustainable success. This is the essential nature of the organization at its best—people's collective wisdom about the organization's tangible and intangible strengths, capabilities, resources, and assets.

The 4-D Cycle can be used to guide a conversation, a large group meeting, or a whole-system change effort. It can serve as a framework for personal development or coaching, partnership or

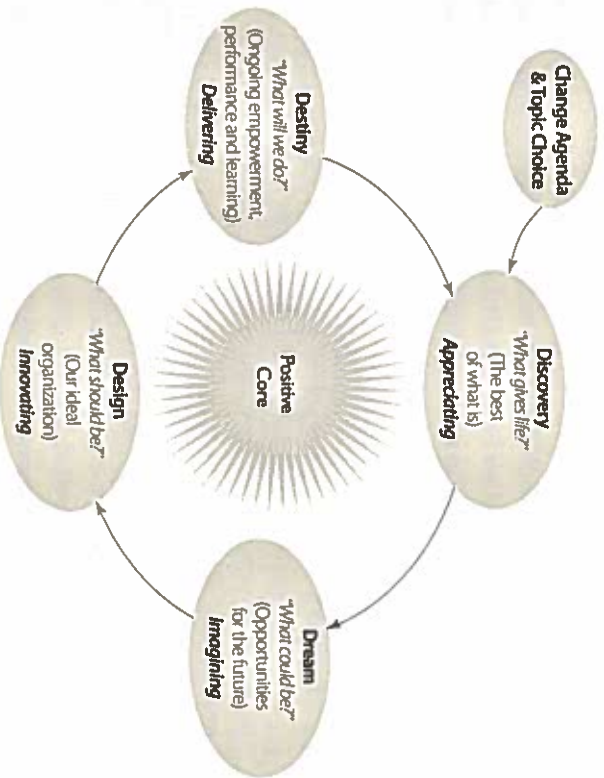


Figure 1. The Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle

alliance building, and large-scale community or organization development. Whatever the purpose, the Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle serves as the foundation on which change is built.

### Affirmative Topic Choice

The 4-D Cycle begins with the thoughtful identification of what is to be studied—Affirmative Topics. Because human systems move in the direction of what they study, the choice of what to study—what to focus organizational attention on—is fateful. The topics that are selected become the organization's agenda for learning and innovation.

Affirmative Topics are subjects of strategic importance to the organization. They may be aspects of the organization's positive core that if expanded would further the organization's success. They may be problems that if stated in the affirmative and studied would improve organizational performance. Or they may be competitive success factors the organization needs to learn about in order to grow and change.

Once selected, these affirmative topics guide the 4-D Cycle of Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny. A thorough explanation of how to choose affirmative topics, criteria for good topics, and many sample topics can be found in Chapter 6, "Affirmative Topic Choice."

### Discovery

Discovery is an extensive, cooperative search to understand the "best of what is and what has been." It is typically conducted via one-on-one interviews, though it may also include focus groups and large-group meetings. In any form, Discovery involves purposefully affirmative conversations among many or all members of an organization, including external stakeholders, "best-in-class" benchmark organizations, and members of the organization's local community. A detailed description and comprehensive guide for the Discovery

phase is provided in Chapter 7, "Discovery: Appreciative Interviews and More."

The Discovery process results in:

- A rich description or mapping of the organization's positive core.
- Organization-wide sharing of stories of best practices and exemplary actions.
- Enhanced organizational knowledge and collective wisdom.
- The emergence of unplanned changes well before implementation of the remaining phases of the 4-D Cycle.

### *Dream*

**Dream is an energizing exploration of "what might be."** This phase is a time for people to collectively explore hopes and dreams for their work, their working relationships, their organization, and the world. It is a time to envision possibilities that are big, bold, and beyond the boundaries of what has been in the past. The Dream phase is both practical and generative. It amplifies the positive core and challenges the status quo by helping people envision more valuable and vital futures, better bottom-line results, and contributions to a better world. Typically conducted in large-group forums, Dream activities result in alignment around creative images of the organization's most positive potentials and strategic opportunities, innovative strategic visions, and an elevated sense of purpose. A detailed description and comprehensive guide for the Dream phase is provided in Chapter 8, "Dream: Visions and Voices of the Future."

### *Design*

**Design is a set of Provocative Propositions, which are statements describing the ideal organization, or "what should be."** Design activities are conducted in large-group forums or within a small team. Participants draw on discoveries and dreams to select high-impact

design elements, then craft a set of provocative statements that list the organizational qualities they most desire. True to the principles of Appreciative Inquiry, Provocative Propositions are written in the affirmative. They expand the organization's image of itself by presenting clear, compelling pictures of how things will be when the organization's positive core is boldly alive in all of its strategies, processes, systems, decisions, and collaborations. A detailed description and comprehensive guide for the Design phase is provided in Chapter 9, "Design: Giving Form to Values and Ideals."

### *Destiny*

**Destiny is a series of inspired actions that support ongoing learning and innovation, or "what will be."** This is the final phase of the 4-D Cycle. The entire cycle provides an open forum for employees to contribute and step forward in the service of the organization, and change occurs in all phases of the Appreciative Inquiry process. The Destiny phase, however, focuses specifically on personal and organizational commitments and paths forward. In many cases, Appreciative Inquiry becomes the framework for leadership and ongoing organization development. Therefore, in the Destiny phase, many organizations begin the Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle anew.

Destiny activities are often launched in large-group forums and continue as small-group initiatives. The result of destiny is generally an extensive array of changes throughout the organization in areas as diverse as management practices, HR processes, measurement and evaluation systems, customer service systems, work processes, and structures. A detailed description and comprehensive guide for the Destiny phase is provided in Chapter 10, "Destiny: Inspired Action and Improvisation."

### **What Is Distinctive About Appreciative Inquiry?**

As an approach to organization change, Appreciative Inquiry borrows from the strengths of many other practices in the field of

organization development. From Harrison Owen, creator of Open Space Technology, we learned about the power of self-organizing processes. From the groundbreaking work of the “mother” of Whole-Scale® Change, Kathleen Dannemiller, and her colleagues at Dannemiller Tyson Associates, we borrowed many practices for designing and facilitating large-scale meetings.

From organizational learning guru Peter Senge—and his colleagues in the Society for Organizational Learning—we came to value the practice of dialogue for awakening the flow of collective meaning making and enhancing organizational learning. And from Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, creators of Future Search, we understand the importance of bringing all the stakeholders together to focus upon and create the future.

While honoring the contributions made by these and other leaders in the field of organization development, we believe that Appreciative Inquiry offers the field a radically new direction in principle and in practice. Grounded in the theory and practice of social construction, Appreciative Inquiry is an invitation to a positive revolution in change. It is distinctive in three significant ways: it is fully affirmative, it is inquiry based, and it is improvisational.

### *It Is Fully Affirmative*

As a process of positive change, Appreciative Inquiry is fully affirmative. Moving through the 4-D Cycle builds upon the organization's track record of success and inspires positive possibilities for the future to be expressed and realized. Unlike other change methodologies, Appreciative Inquiry does not include deficit approaches to organizational analysis, such as root cause of failure, gaps, barriers, strategic threats, or resistance to change. All Appreciative Inquiry activities, practices, and processes focus on the organization at its best—past, present, and future.

Too often, organizations are prevented from fully knowing or drawing upon their positive potential because of their habit of focusing on problems rather than possibilities. The result, accord-

ing to David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, is decreased organizational capacity:

Problem analytic methodologies are based on deficit discourse. Over time, they fill the organization with stories, understandings, and rich vocabularies of why things fail. Compulsive concern with what's not working, why things go wrong, and who didn't do his or her job demoralizes members of the organization, reduces the speed of learning, and undermines relationships and forward movement.<sup>1</sup>

A classic example of AI's commitment to the affirmative is the case of British Petroleum's ProCare, a U.S. auto repair business. At the end of its first year of operation, ProCare's customer surveys showed that 95 percent of all customers were 100 percent satisfied—an astonishing statistic, as anyone in the auto repair industry will confirm. ProCare was not satisfied, however. They decided to conduct customer focus groups. Unfortunately, they asked only the 5 percent of dissatisfied customers about their dissatisfaction. Then, on the walls in every station, they posted vivid descriptions of the identified causes of dissatisfaction. Within a short time customer satisfaction ratings dropped, along with employee morale and retention.

After hearing about the success gone astray, a team of Appreciative Inquiry consultants made suggestions to help the failing business. They recommended that focus groups be conducted with the customers who were 100 percent satisfied. With great skepticism and a moderate amount of curiosity, the leaders of ProCare agreed. The results were stunning. Customer satisfaction ratings reversed once again, this time for the better, as people began to learn and replicate the root causes of their success. The fully affirmative stance of Appreciative Inquiry created a rich learning environment and paid off by restoring high levels of customer satisfaction.

### *It Is Inquiry Based*

At the heart of Appreciative Inquiry is the “art of the question”—the ability to craft unconditionally positive questions and to interview

tens, hundreds, even thousands of people with questions of organizational relevance and vitality.

Organizational life is a continuous stream of questions and analysis. What caused this downturn in productivity? How can we reduce overtime? Why did you do it that way? Who needs to be involved in this decision? How can we increase revenue while containing costs? Appreciative Inquiry confirms that all questions are important, but the nature of our questions is particularly important. Appreciative Inquiry posits that organizations move in the direction of what they consistently ask questions about, and that the more affirmative the questions are, the more hopeful and positive the organizational responses will be.

The starting point and essential component of any Appreciative Inquiry process is the appreciative interview. Appreciative Inquiry would not be Appreciative Inquiry without appreciative interviews. Without appreciative interviews there is no inquiry, no openness to learn, and little potential for transformation. There is only an appreciative perspective. There is an important distinction between an appreciative perspective and Appreciative Inquiry. An appreciative perspective focuses on recognition, values, and affirmation, whereas Appreciative Inquiry implies a search, a willingness to discover, and an openness to learn.

To understand the difference, let's look at the processes two organizations used to establish employee alignment on shared values. The first organization is actually a composite of many. We would describe it as having an appreciative perspective. A small group of people, consisting of the executive team and several employees with high potential, met and articulated the company's values. They printed a beautiful document defining the values and describing their importance to the business. They wanted all employees to be informed, to understand, and to be rewarded for performance in alignment with the values. To roll out the values, they launched a communication campaign and implemented a values-based recognition system. Employees were given "values cards" to carry in their wallets and posters of the "values statements" for their office walls.

Most employees hung the posters, but few learned or felt valued in the process.

The second organization, the American Red Cross, decided to use Appreciative Inquiry to seek out and identify their living values. They were sincerely interested in discovering and learning about the values enacted on a daily basis by their members. To learn what values guided the service provided by their members, they conducted over three thousand appreciative interviews about values in action. They collected thousands of heartwarming and inspiring stories about the challenging, committed, and compassionate work of the American Red Cross. The stories were clustered, and the ten most frequently lived values were identified. At a national conference, two thousand members heard stories of the Red Cross's living values and saw videos of themselves and their colleagues telling stories of their values in action. As members shared stories and watched the videos, the organization's collective knowledge increased.

In the spirit of inquiry, all members had the opportunity to be interviewed and share their stories in this living values process. Thousands participated and were inspired, recognized, and honored for their values-based work on behalf of the American Red Cross.

### *It Is Improvisational*

As an approach to change with endless variation, Appreciative Inquiry is improvisational. It is not a singular methodology because it is not based on one firmly established way of proceeding. Like great jazz improvisation—a metaphor proposed by consultant Frank Barrett—each Appreciative Inquiry is a new creation, an experiment that brings out the best of human organizing. It begins with a clear purpose. But from there, who knows precisely what will happen? In many cases, the most remarkable outcomes are unplanned and unexpected—they emerge as the organization's unique version of Appreciative Inquiry unfolds.

And like musical improvisation, Appreciative Inquiry is loosely structured, based on a set of principles and generally following the

framework of the 4-D Cycle. This book is filled with stories that illustrate a variety of ways that individuals and organizations have used the 4-D Cycle to meet their unique goals, with surprising and positive results. But even the 4-D Cycle itself can be adapted to different cultures and situations. For example, social activist Mac Odell—whose work with thousands of women throughout rural Nepal demands great improvisation—added three more Ds: Do It Now, Drumming, and Dancing. Similarly, the international consulting firm Cap Gemini Ernst & Young's Appreciative Inquiry process, branded ePositive Change, has five Ds: Define, Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver.

As an improvisational approach to change, Appreciative Inquiry is guided by a series of questions:

- What is your overall Change Agenda?
- What Form of Engagement will best suit your needs?
- What is your overall Inquiry Strategy?
- What steps will you take at each phase of the 4-D Cycle?

In Chapter 2, "A Menu of Approaches to Appreciative Inquiry," we expand upon these questions and highlight some of the many ways Appreciative Inquiry has been used.

Green Mountain Coffee Roasters' (GMCRC) answers to these questions led them through a highly successful experiment with Appreciative Inquiry. What was their Change Agenda? To increase the effectiveness of existing business process teams—and in turn reduce overall operating costs. What Form of Engagement did they choose? They created a new approach to inquiry. They trained five intact business process teams in Appreciative Inquiry and set them loose to initiate their own process-related inquiries. Several times during their three-month period of Discovery, one or more of the inquiries seemed to veer off their original course. Each time this happened, a mixed group of executives and operations staff adapted and revised the process, ensuring its continued relevance and success. In the end, using Appreciative Inquiry, GMCRC achieved a 25

percent reduction in operating costs as well as organization-wide input on ongoing strategic initiatives.

The improvisational character of Appreciative Inquiry makes invention and continual learning imperative. Professor and Appreciative Inquiry thought leader David Cooperrider believes that only 5 percent of the possible practices, applications, models, methodologies, and approaches to Appreciative Inquiry have been created. We hope this book helps you learn the basics so you will be able to design your own Appreciative Inquiry initiatives and add to the growing body of knowledge on positive change.

### From Deficit-Based Change to Positive Change

Appreciative Inquiry is a bold shift in the way we think about and approach organization change. The ultimate paradox of Appreciative Inquiry is that it does not aim to change anything. It aims to uncover and bring forth existing strengths, hopes, and dreams—to identify and amplify the positive core of the organization. In this process, people and organizations are transformed. With Appreciative Inquiry, the focus of attention is on positive potential—the best of what has been, what is, and what might be. It is a process of positive change.

In contrast, most other approaches to change are deficit based—focused on problems and how to overcome them. Success depends on a clear identification and diagnosis of the problem, the selection of an appropriate solution, and the implementation of that solution. In our experience, deficit-based change can work—it has for years—just not as effectively as positive change.

Appreciative Inquiry is an invitation to shift from a deficit-based approach to change to a positive approach to change. Our experiences, spanning twenty-five years of organizational consulting, reflect this shift. Early in our careers, we confidentially gathered information about our client systems, diagnosed organizational problems, and designed processes whereby our clients would correct what was wrong. Periodically, while employing these

well-established approaches to change, we would see glimpses of alternatives. And so we experimented.

We experimented with engaging organizational members in their own action research. While consulting on the merger of SmithKline Corporation and Beckman Instruments, we established research teams made up of line managers, front-line employees, and HR staff to study the best practices of each organization. Sixty people conducted interviews and focus groups with thousands of participants. We facilitated their sharing of stories and data and the identification of five core competencies. We took the experiment further by having them design and lead a week-long workshop on the five core competencies. Three thousand employees worldwide participated in these workshops as part of the merger integration.

At the same time, we began to focus people and organizations on possibilities—on what they wanted to do and to be, and on the collaborative creation of their work processes and services. At the Visiting Nurse Service of New York we brought teams of administrators, nurses, medical assistants, social workers, and patient advocates together to learn from each other and collectively envision and define their processes for service delivery. We facilitated their success by keeping their eyes and their conversations focused on what worked and what they hoped and wished could be.

The positive results of these experiments guided us toward new assumptions and new ways of working that we now describe as positive change. This transition from deficit-based change to positive change is illustrated in Table 1.

As you can see, the move from deficit-based change to positive change alters what is studied—from problems to the positive core. The shift alters who is involved and who has access to information—from some of the people to all of the people. Finally, it alters the results—from a best solution to the problem to the boldest dream of positive possibility. And it shifts the capacity gained in the process—from the capacity to implement and measure a specific plan to the capacity for ongoing positive change.

For us—as for many of our colleagues—there is no going

Table 1. The Shift from Deficit-Based Change to Positive Change

	Deficit-Based Change	Positive Change
<b>Intervention Focus</b>	Identified problem.	Affirmative topics.
<b>Participation</b>	Selective inclusion of people.	Whole system.
<b>Action Research</b>	Diagnosis of the problem. Causes and consequences. Quantitative analysis. Profile of need. Conducted by outsiders.	Discovery of positive core. Organization at its best. Narrative analysis. Map of positive core. Conducted by members.
<b>Dissemination</b>	Feedback to decision makers.	Widespread and creative sharing of best practices.
<b>Creative Potential</b>	Brainstormed list of alternatives.	Dreams of a better world and the organization's contribution.
<b>Result</b>	Best solution to resolve the problem.	Design to realize dreams and human aspirations.
<b>Capacity Gained</b>	Capacity to implement and measure the plan.	Capacity for ongoing positive change.

back. Having made the transition from deficit-based change to positive change, we are committed to working from our strengths, to helping people around the globe discover and work from their strengths, and to building vibrantly successful organizations in which the human spirit soars.

### But What About Problems?

Isn't it unrealistic to deny them? Aren't you asking us to ignore problems or to act as if they don't exist? These are some of the most frequently asked questions about Appreciative Inquiry. Let us be clear. We are not saying to deny or ignore problems. What we are saying is that if you want to transform a situation, relationship, organization, or community, focusing on strengths is much more effective than focusing on problems. In Chapter 4, "Appreciative Inquiry in Action: From Origins to Current Practice," we offer numerous stories about organizations and communities that benefited signif-

cantly by using Appreciative Inquiry to shift their attention from problems to possibilities.

We often work in situations fraught with anxiety, tension, and stress: union-management relations, merger integration, and cross-functional conflict. Frequently, when we turn people's attention from "what is wrong around here" to "who are we when we are at our best," conflict turns to cooperation.

We do not dismiss accounts of conflict, problems, or stress. We simply do not use them as the basis of analysis or action. We listen when they arise, validate them as lived experience, and seek to reframe them. For example, the problem of high employee turnover becomes an inquiry into magnetic work environments or a question of retention. The problem of low management credibility becomes an inquiry into moments of management credibility or inspired leadership. The problem of sexual harassment at work becomes a question of positive cross-gender working relationships.

The capacity to reframe problems into affirmative topics is central to Appreciative Inquiry. Chapter 6, "Affirmative Topic Choice," offers a description of how to do this, along with several compelling examples.

### Why Does Appreciative Inquiry Work?

The Buddha once said, "Life is suffering." Problems are like suffering—they're always present. But suffering and problems are not the only qualities present in life or organizations. In addition to suffering, there is joy. In addition to problems, there are successes, hopes, and dreams. Appreciative Inquiry redirects the focus of analysis. This simple shift in attention allows people and organizations to rise above and move beyond the conditions in which the problems originally existed.

Appreciative Inquiry works because it treats people like people, not like machines. As humans, we are social. We create our identities and our knowledge in relation to one another. We are curious. We like to tell stories and listen to stories. We pass on our values,

beliefs, and wisdom in stories. We like to learn and use what we learn to achieve our best. And we delight in doing well in the eyes of those we care about and respect. Appreciative Inquiry enables leaders to create natural human organizations—knowledge-rich, strength-based, adaptable learning organizations.

We know this in part through experience and in part through our research. We wondered why Appreciative Inquiry had worked so well—so we did an inquiry. We interviewed people and conducted focus groups. We asked them to tell us stories of Appreciative Inquiry at its best—how it influenced them and why it worked. What we discovered surprised and delighted us. Appreciative Inquiry works because it liberates power. It unleashes both individual and organizational power. It brings out the best of people, encourages them to see and support the best of others, and generates unprecedented cooperation and innovation.

The people we interviewed told us that Appreciative Inquiry works for six reasons, briefly outlined here and described in detail in Chapter 12, "Why Appreciative Inquiry Works":

- *It builds relationships, enabling people to be known in relationship rather than in roles.* As one participant put it, "Appreciative interviews are energizing every time you do them. They build relationships and give you a chance to connect. This tells people that they are important and that they belong." Many people told us of the satisfying and productive friendships they made in the process of Appreciative Inquiry—among co-workers, among managers and line employees, and among customers and members of the organization.
- *It creates an opportunity for people to be heard.* Recognition, mutual respect, and morale all go up when people feel heard. One manager described his experience by saying, "My people were finally recognized as contributors. We'd been considered the black hole in the organization for years. Through our work with Appreciative Inquiry, we were really seen and heard for the first time."

- *It generates opportunities for people to dream, and to share their dreams.* Repeatedly people were glad to be asked to describe their dreams. And they got even more excited when they discovered that their dreams were shared by others. In the words of one Appreciative Inquiry enthusiast, "Sharing our stories and our dreams is the best vehicle for positive change that I have ever experienced. I will retire now knowing that I helped create a better company and a better world."
- *It creates an environment in which people are able to choose how they contribute.* When people are free to volunteer based on their interests and passions, their capacity to learn and contribute is significantly increased. Understanding the value of free choice, one director sent the following memo to his staff: "As you know, Appreciative Inquiry is not mandatory. On the other hand, if it does not fit your style, do not obstruct what others are choosing to do. We need to be talking about the process and sharing our approaches so we can all keep learning and gain confidence."
- *It gives people both discretion and support to act.* One participant commented, "We had always had support to take action on behalf of the organization, but now—suddenly—people were making resources available and paying attention to what we were doing. They backed us up and made it possible for us to follow through on—and finally do—the things that we knew needed to be done."
- *It encourages and enables people to be positive.* As one employee commented, "It isn't always popular to be positive! People make fun of you and tell you that you're Pollyannaish. Appreciative Inquiry turned my positive attitude into an asset rather than a liability. It gave me things to look forward to here at work."

Throughout this book, we illustrate our explanations of Appreciative Inquiry with the story of one company—Hunter Douglas Window

Fashions Division (Hunter Douglas)—and its use of Appreciative Inquiry. The company is introduced in Chapter 4, "Appreciative Inquiry in Action: From Origins to Current Practice." The story continues in Chapters 5 through 10. At the end of each of these chapters you will find vignettes about Hunter Douglas, describing how they carried out each phase of the Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle. Together with other case studies and examples, the Hunter Douglas story provides clear and substantial evidence that Appreciative Inquiry works. More importantly, perhaps, it shows you how it works.

Table 4. Inquiry Strategy

Phase in 4-D Cycle	Decisions to Be Made
Getting Started: Involves producing decision makers	Is Appreciative Inquiry appropriate for us?
Discovering: Involves producing a process for change, establishing a supporting infrastructure, and engaging participants in the process.	What is our Change Agenda? Who will serve on our Advisory Team? What training does our Advisory Team need? What Form of Engagement will we use? What will our Inquiry Strategy be? How and when will we introduce the process throughout the organization?
Affirmative Topic Choice: Involves selecting the topics that establish the organization's course for learning and transformation.	Who will select the topics? Which topics will we study?
Discovery: Involves crafting the Appreciative Inquiry Interview Guide(s), conducting interviews, and making meaning of what has been learned.	Who will craft the questions? The Interview Guides? Whom will we interview? Who will conduct interviews? How many each? What training will our interviewers need? Who will make meaning of the data? How? How will we communicate stories and best practices? Whom should we involve? What experiential activity will we use to reveal our images of the future? What will be the outcome of our dream?
Design: Involves collaborative identification of the organization's social architecture and crafting Provocative Propositions—descriptions of the ideal organization.	What are we designing? Who needs to be involved? How do we describe our ideal organization?
Destiny: Involves unleashing self-organized innovation, through which the future will be made real.	How will we gather stories about what we have achieved? How will we celebrate? What are our parameters for self-organized action? How shall we self-organize? How will we support ongoing success?

## CHAPTER 3

## Eight Principles of Appreciative Inquiry

When it comes to Appreciative Inquiry, principles and practice go hand in hand. The practice of Appreciative Inquiry is informed by a series of eight principles—essential beliefs and values about human organizing and change. These principles, in turn, evolve as successful practice reveals new and different understandings of how positive change works.

The eight principles of Appreciative Inquiry are as unique as the practices to which they have given birth. Derived from three generalized streams of thought—social constructionism, image theory, and grounded research—the principles suggest that human organizing and change is a positive, socially interactive process of discovering and crafting life-affirming, guiding images of the future. Let's briefly consider these three streams of thought and their implications for Appreciative Inquiry.

*Social constructionism* posits that human communication is the central process that creates, maintains, and transforms realities. Initially introduced by sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their classic work, *The Social Construction of Reality*,<sup>9</sup> it is

more recently developed by founders of the Taos Institute: Kenneth Gerger, Mary Gerger, Diana Whiney, David Cooperider, Suresh Srivastva, Sheila McNamee, and Harlene Anderson. This tradition serves as the theoretical foundation for appreciative interviews, many Appreciative Inquiry small-group activities, and the notion that bringing all the stakeholders together is essential to constructive organization change.

*Image theory*, according to Elise and Kenneth Boulding in *The Future: Images and Processes*,<sup>10</sup> suggests that the images we hold of the future influence the decisions and actions we take in the present. Their work and that of Dutch sociologist Frederik Polak, in his book *The Image of the Future*,<sup>11</sup> give Appreciative Inquiry its unique focus on images and stories of the future. Image theory implies that one of the most untapped resources for organizational change is the collective images held in the stories and dreams of members of an organization.

*Grounded research* methodology is based on an openness to understanding a culture, society, or organization through the eyes of its inhabitants. It suggests that participant observation is the best means of data gathering for those who wish to understand and describe living cultures. It puts forth the idea that all research is intervention. Building on the notion that inquiry is intervention, Appreciative Inquiry engages members of an organization in their own research—inquiry into the most life-giving forces in their organization, the root causes of their success, and discovery of their positive core.

As you begin working with Appreciative Inquiry, you will find the principles helpful in two important ways. First, when introducing or teaching Appreciative Inquiry, they will help you describe the subtle differences between Appreciative Inquiry and other approaches to organization change. Second, when designing Appreciative Inquiry initiatives, they will guide you in inventing activities and processes that both meet the needs of your organization and maintain the integrity of Appreciative Inquiry.

In Table 5 (following) you will find a summary of the eight

principles. A quick scan of the summary will give you a general understanding. Following the table is an in-depth view, with each principle defined and its meaning and significance illustrated with rich quotes. The first five principles are derived directly from the early writing of Srivastva and Cooperider.<sup>12</sup> We have added three principles, which evolved from the experience of applying Appreciative Inquiry to large-scale organization and community change efforts.

### Principle #1: The Constructionist Principle

#### *Words Create Worlds*

The Constructionist Principle places human communication and language at the center of human organizing and change. It posits that meaning is made in conversation, reality is created in communication, and knowledge is generated through social interaction. In essence, it states that knowledge is a subjective reality—a social artifact resulting from communication among groups of people.

Further, the Constructionist Principle suggests that words, language, and metaphors are more than mere descriptions of reality. They are words that create worlds. Toltec teacher and shaman Don Miguel Ruiz writes that words are the vehicle through which the world is manifest:

Your word is the power that you have to create. Your word is the gift that comes directly from God. The Gospel of John in the Bible, speaking of the creation of the universe, says, "In the beginning there was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Through the word you express your creative power. It is through the word that you manifest everything. Regardless of what language you speak, your intent manifests through the word.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Joseph Jaworski, chairman of the American Leadership Forum, reflects upon the power of language to create social change and ultimately reality itself:

Table 5. Summary of the Eight Principles of Appreciative Inquiry

Principle	Definition
1. The Constructionist Principle.	<i>Words Create Worlds</i> Reality as we know it is a subjective rather than objective state. It is socially created through language and conversations.
2. The Simultaneity Principle.	<i>Inquiry Creates Change</i> Inquiry is intervention. The moment we ask a question, we begin to create a change.
3. The Poetic Principle.	<i>We Can Choose What We Study</i> Organizations, like open books, are endless sources of study and learning. What we choose to study makes a difference. It describes—even creates—the world as we know it.
4. The Anticipatory Principle.	<i>Images Inspire Action</i> Human systems move in the direction of their images of the future. The more positive and hopeful the images of the future are, the more positive the present-day action will be.
5. The Positive Principle.	<i>Positive Questions Lead to Positive Change</i> Momentum for large-scale change requires large amounts of positive affect and social bonding. This momentum is best generated through positive questions that amplify the positive core.
6. The Wholeness Principle.	<i>Wholeness Brings Out the Best</i> Wholeness brings out the best in people and organizations. Bringing all stakeholders together in large group forums stimulates creativity and builds collective capacity.
7. The Enactment Principle.	<i>Acting "As If" Is Self-Fulfilling</i> To really make a change, we must "be the change we want to see." Positive change occurs when the process used to create the change is a living model of the ideal future.
8. The Free-Choice Principle.	<i>Free Choice Liberates Power</i> People perform better and are more committed when they have freedom to choose how and what they contribute. Free choice stimulates organizational excellence and positive change.

As I considered the importance of language and how human beings interact with the world, it struck me that in many ways the development of language was like the discovery of fire—it was such an incredible primordial force. I had always thought that we used language to describe the world—now I see this is not the case. To the contrary, it is through language that we create the world, because it's nothing until we describe it. And when we describe it, we create distinctions that govern our actions. To put it another way, we do not describe the world we see, we see the world we describe.<sup>14</sup>

According to the Constructionist Principle, the power of language is not as an individual tool but rather as the vehicle by which communities of people create knowledge and meaning. According to leading social psychologist Kenneth Gergen, "What we take to be knowledge of the world grows from relationship, and is embedded not within individual minds but within interpretive or communal traditions."<sup>15</sup> Knowledge—that which is considered good, true, and meaningful—is a broad social agreement created among people through communication.

In *An Invitation to Social Construction*, Gergen explains the theory and practice of social constructionism, offering four assumptions that further describe the relational nature of meaning making:

- The terms by which we understand our world and our self are neither required nor demanded by "what there is."
- Our modes of description, explanation, and/or representation are derived from relationship.
- As we describe, explain, or otherwise represent, we also fashion our future.
- Reflection on our forms of understanding is vital to our future well-being.<sup>16</sup>

Words matter—they not only make a difference, they literally bring things to life, creating the world as we know it.

### *The Constructionist Principle in Practice*

Organizations first emerge through language. They reside in stories and come to life in conversations. And organizational change occurs through language, storytelling, and human communication. The practice of Appreciative Inquiry is notably a constructive approach to change in that it brings people—all stakeholders—together to collaborate and discover, dream, and design the organization they most value and desire. It is a highly interactive process, sometimes described as both top-down and bottom-up. It brings together people from all levels and functions of an organization to learn from one another and with one another; to build relationships for going forward and expanding their collective wisdom.

The many specific ways people come together through the practice of Appreciative Inquiry include selection of affirmative topics, appreciative interviews, meaning-making sessions, dream dialogues and activities, crafting provocative propositions, and selection of inspired actions. In essence, each step in the Appreciative Inquiry process affords opportunities for people who do not generally come together to do so—and in the process to transform the nature of organizing.

### *A Story About the Social Construction of Reality*

Recognizing that meaning is made through relationships, leaders in Nevada decided to use Appreciative Inquiry to merge state and county child welfare services. Their goals were to build positive, cooperative relationships among people who had previously competed for resources, and to collaborate to design an integrated service delivery system. They engaged all of their stakeholders—social workers, secretaries, foster parents, grandparents and youth, counselors, legislators, lawyers and judges, adoptive parents, and group home managers—in the dialogue through a series of AI Summits. As people who seldom talked to one another connected via appreciative interviews, the path to integration became ever more apparent. As they shared their dreams, the image of one organiza-

tion and an integrated service delivery system became clear. And together they designed an integrated service delivery system based on their shared values of family preservation, child well-being, and one-stop service delivery. In this case, words created worlds. They made a positive difference in the lives of thousands of children and their parents.

### **Principle #2: The Simultaneity Principle**

#### *Inquiry Creates Change*

The **Simultaneity Principle** holds that change occurs the moment we ask a question. In the words of therapist Marilee Goldberg, “The moment of questioning is also the moment of choice, which usually holds the greatest leverage for effective action and positive change.”<sup>17</sup> This suggests that inquiry and change are simultaneous, that inquiry is intervention—and perhaps the most effective means to transformation.

Questions, whether they are posed to oneself or to another, can create identities and give hope where none existed before. Therapists have long recognized the provocative potential of questions to give form to identities, relationships, and patterns of living. According to Goldberg:

Questions are the primary means by which doing, having, accomplishing, and growing are catalyzed—and often even made manifest—in our lives. Because questions are intrinsically related to action, they spark and direct attention, perception, energy, and effort, and so are at the heart of the evolving forms that our lives assume.<sup>18</sup>

Viktor Frankl, noted psychiatrist and concentration camp survivor, attributes his capacity for survival in part to the internal questions that beset him. While others were asking, “Will we survive?” Frankl was caught by the question, “Has all this suffering, this dying round us, a meaning?”<sup>19</sup> As a result of this question, Frankl inhabited a very different world from that of many of his comrades. Even in

a concentration camp, his was a world of meaning and possibility, while theirs was one of life and death.

Likewise, Goldberg suggests that the questions held by clients, articulated in their stories and enacted in their relationships, hold the key to their change. Question-centered therapists work with this awareness, listening to understand and help clients reframe their life-organizing questions:

These therapists appreciate that clients' questions—internal and external, conscious and unconscious—exert a profound influence on confining them to the worlds they want to leave, and hold keys to help them move into the worlds they desire to inhabit.<sup>20</sup>

Questions can stimulate ideas, innovation, and invention. New knowledge, theories, and inventions have frequently evolved from unusual questions—questions that require persistent reflection, consideration of paradoxical possibilities, and synthesis across diverse disciplines. Many scientists and inventors tell of the question that haunted them, begging for resolution until the answer emerged and along with it a new idea or invention.

Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, for example, resulted from consideration of what seemed at the time to be an inconceivable, even paradoxical, question: How can sacred texts be produced in large numbers to be made available to the masses? Familiar with block printing (an advanced yet slow and costly process for reproducing handwritten texts), Gutenberg continued to ponder his question day and night. When concerned friends insisted that he take a break and join them at the annual wine festival, he agreed to go. With the question still in the forefront of his thinking, he found the answer when he saw a wine press. Within days he had created the first prototype printing press. History tells the rest of this story.

### *The Simultaneity Principle in Practice*

Contrary to the common belief that organizational change occurs through planned, long-term intervention, the Simultaneity Prin-

ciple posits that inquiry is intervention. Human systems—organizations and people—move in the direction of what they study, ask questions about, inquire into, and explore with curiosity.

The practice of Appreciative Inquiry is based on the idea that the seeds of change are implicit in the first questions we ask. Given this, in Appreciative Inquiry we no longer concern ourselves with the reliability of a question to produce right or wrong answers. Instead, we consider the direction indicated in the question, and its capacity to enhance lives. As William Martin, modern interpreter of the Tao Te Ching, states:

Your conversations help create your world. Speak of delight, not dissatisfaction. Speak of hope, not despair. Let your words bind up wounds, not cause them.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, the practice of Appreciative Inquiry involves the art of crafting and asking questions that elicit affirmative possibilities. The practice of appreciative interviews, of focusing on questions that inspire storytelling about organizations at their best, evokes hopes and dreams for the future and generates life-giving possibilities. This is the heart of Appreciative Inquiry.

### *A Story of Inquiry as Intervention*

Staff members of the Cathedral Foundation, from CEO to secretary, had lost enthusiasm for their work. As a social service organization dedicated to the care of the elderly, they provided services such as Meals on Wheels and elder day care. They decided to use Appreciative Inquiry for strategic planning. In the course of their Appreciative Inquiry strategic planning process, they changed the focus of their inquiry, and hence their organization, from How do we care for the elderly? to How do we create a positive experience of aging? By making this change, they cleared the way for significant diversification and the addition of new services with significant and far-reaching effects. Enthusiasm rekindled as they collectively committed to their new mission.

### Principle #3: The Poetic Principle

#### *We Can Choose What We Study*

The Poetic Principle suggests that organizations are like open books—endless sources of learning, inspiration, and interpretation. Like great works of literature, poetry, or sacred texts, organizations are stories that can be told and retold, interpreted and reinterpreted, through any frame of reference or topic of inquiry. The choice of what to study is ours and ours alone. Thus, we can choose to study virtually any topic related to human organizing—customer dissatisfaction or customer delight, debilitating bureaucratic stress or inspiring democratic processes, cross-functional conflict or cooperation, employee frustration or joy at work.

Further, the topics we choose to study are fateful. They not only determine what we discover and learn—they actually create it. Questions about joy and enthusiasm at work evoke stories, images, and experiences of joy. Conversely, questions about stress lead to stories, images, and experiences of stress.

One of the strongest ways the topics we focus upon influence our world is through the metaphors we choose to describe human organizing. We say, for example, that organizations are like machines, natural ecosystems, families, battlegrounds, or networks. Each metaphor, as an analog for organizing, rapidly stimulates a vivid set of images and evokes a unique way of being. Parker Palmer, a Quaker activist and teacher, proposes that metaphors take us from language to life, and our use of metaphors goes beyond naming experience to become our experience:

Metaphors do much more than describe reality as we know it. Animated by the imagination, one of the most vital powers we possess, our metaphors often become reality, transmuting themselves from language into the living of our lives.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, metaphors prescribe culture. According to noted psychologist Rollo May, “They show people how to learn, organize, create, and change.”<sup>23</sup> They create the world in which we ultimately choose to live.

### *The Poetic Principle in Practice*

Organizational life is expressed as a narrative, a grand story, coauthored by its various stakeholders. Each person or stakeholder group brings a different story, a different piece of the interpretive puzzle. Like poets carefully choosing words to evoke sentiments and understandings, organizational stakeholders choose the language, topics, and metaphors to describe and make meaning of their organizations. Sometimes their words and metaphors will serve cooperation, customers, and competitive advantage. Sometimes they will stimulate conflict, dissatisfaction, and loss of business. In all cases, their choices reverberate throughout the organization through both stories and actions.

The practice of Appreciative Inquiry starts with the selection of Affirmative Topics. This places strategic significance on the choice of success-oriented and life-giving language and metaphors for organizing. Based on the notion that human systems move in the direction of what they study, topics are selected strategically to move the organization in the direction of the highest ideals and values of its stakeholders.

#### *A Story of Fateful Topic Choice*

In early 2002, organization development consultant Donna Stoneham agreed to help the University of California, Berkeley (UCB) and the city of Berkeley develop an ongoing collaborative relationship. Together with a twelve-person planning team composed of city and university representatives, she began what became a six-month process of creating partnership. At the initial retreat, a group of seventy-five people from the city and the university explored the topic of partnership. Through a combination of appreciative interviews, meaning making, and dreaming, the group determined points of effective partnership that already existed between the two organizations. One of the project leaders later reflected on this initial retreat:

By selecting the topic of partnership, we opened the door for a different kind of conversation—and a different kind of experience. To my surprise, we discovered that there were places where our similarities intersected. This helped us to begin seeing one another as allies rather than adversaries. It encouraged us to form powerful new relationships both within and between our organizations.

This meeting had a humanizing effect on both organizations and paved the way for further conversation among a larger community of stakeholders. Ongoing conversations about partnership succeeded in enhancing collaboration, as demonstrated by the following new joint initiatives that the group established:

- A law enforcement collaborative to promote crime prevention strategies and programs and to identify and share resources.
- “Town and gown” meetings to create regular opportunities for the UCB and city staffs to get together on an informal basis, to get to know one another, and to discuss common issues.
- An initiative to identify and evaluate joint housing and financing opportunities for all incomes and family types.
- A Southwest Berkeley Health Initiative to increase city and UCB participation in addressing health disparities in southwest Berkeley.
- An initiative to explore opportunities for joint procurement between the city and the campus.

Their topic choice was fateful. It encouraged previously unimaginable levels of collaboration and partnership, which significantly enhanced the quality of life for both city and university stakeholders.

#### Principle #4: The Anticipatory Principle

##### *Images Inspire Action*

The Anticipatory Principle suggests that images of the future guide and inspire present-day actions and achievements. It says that orga-

After: miracle question

nizations exist in part because people are drawn to and share images and projections of the future, which is full of inevitable and unpredictable surprises. Cybernetic scientists recognize this as uncertainty, complexity theorists describe it as chaos, Native Americans call it the Great Mystery. Simply put, the element of surprise and the presence of the unknown have always and will always exist. Given this element of surprise, all we can possibly know about the future comes from what we hope, dream, and imagine. In short, we create images of where we believe we’re going—and then we organize to those images.

Dutch sociologist Frederik Polak suggests that images of the future influence action at all levels of social life:

At every level of awareness, from the individual to the macro-social, imagery is continuously generated about the “not-yet.” Such imagery inspires our intentions, which then move us purposefully forward. Through their daily choices of action, individuals, families, enterprises, communities, and nations move toward what they imagine to be a desirable tomorrow.<sup>24</sup>

Thus success or failure hinges in part on the images we hold of the future. Fear-based images can incite widespread panic—as in the 1929 run on the American banking system. Conversely, clear, sustaining, and motivating images can mobilize powerful, positive, collective action—as in the 1960s American–Soviet space race. In writing about postmodern organizations, professor and theorist William Bergquist contends that “the continuation of any society depends in large part on the presence in the society of a sustaining and motivating image of its own collective future.”<sup>25</sup>

What then do we mean by images of the future? How are they created? And where would an organization’s collective image of its future be found? Images are sensory-rich descriptions of potential, elaborations of possibility, and explanations of the unknown. They are, according to author Linda Jones, “prophecies—spoken words that advance us and move us forward.”<sup>26</sup> As such, they are more stories than pictures. While some images are portrayed visually, and

are sometimes even referred to as visions, images are most often narrative accounts. They are the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. Formed in conversation, they reside in day-to-day dialogue among individuals and groups of people.

### *The Anticipatory Principle in Practice*

Organizational images of the future are created and exist in conversation among the many stakeholders of the organization. They reside in the inner dialogue—the informal communication—of the organization. Conversations around the watercooler, in break rooms, over coffee, and in cafeterias hold the key to an organization's collective images of the future and its potential for success.

The practice of Appreciative Inquiry ensures that an organization's inner dialogue is full of rich accounts of past successes and vivid images of future potential. Through inquiry into the positive core, dream activities, and the crafting of Provocative Propositions, it interrupts images of the status quo and stretches the organization's collective imagination. It provides opportunities for new images of the organization's future to be created and unfolded over time, like a flower growing toward the sunlight.

### *A Story of Image Inspiring Action*

The founders of the United Religions Initiative had originally planned to call the global interfaith organization the United Religions. It was intended to parallel the United Nations in both scope and stature. This was indeed a bold vision—an image that attracted two hundred fifty people to a global summit to dialogue about the vision and values for such an organization. In the course of these early discussions, it became apparent that—while the image of United Religions did attract many people—it appeared to others to lack humility. And so the idea and image of a United Religions Initiative was born. The original plan was to hold the name *Initiative* throughout the first five years—while thousands of people worldwide were involved

in crafting a charter and designing the organization. Then, in June 2002, when the charter was signed, the organization would become the United Religions.

Two interesting things happened along the way. First, even as people were crafting the charter and designing the organization, others began taking action to build bridges between people of different religions and faiths—and to foster interfaith peace building in their parts of the world. The image of an “initiative” inspired people to initiate action on behalf of an organization that had yet to be created. Second, as the deadline for signing the charter grew closer, spontaneous discussions emerged about the name of the organization going forward. The name United Religions Initiative carried with it the image of action: of always initiating and never growing stale. There was a consensus among founders around the world that the United Religions Initiative—rather than the United Religions—was the organization that was about to be born. And so it was.

### **Principle #5: The Positive Principle**

#### *Positive Questions Lead to Positive Change*

The Positive Principle is not so abstract; it grows out of years of experience with Appreciative Inquiry. Simply stated, the Positive Principle says that **positive questions lead to positive change**. Based on their research into Appreciative Inquiry in team building, management professors Gervase Bushe and Graeme Coetzer elaborate:

The more positive the questions we use to guide a team building or organization development initiative, the more long lasting and effective the change effort.<sup>27</sup>

Put most simply, momentum for change requires large amounts of positive affect and social bonding—hope, inspiration, and sheer joy in creating with one another. Thousands of interviews about passion for service or magnetic work environments have a different capacity to sustain positive action than a study about low morale or process inefficiencies.

Positive questions bring out the best in people, inspire positive action, and create possibilities for positive futures. But why do positive questions unleash enthusiasm and flourishes of positive change within human systems? They do so because they amplify the organization's positive core. They magnify the essence of the organization at its best—its remembered past, its enacted present, and its imagined future. Given opportunities to study, learn, and dream about the positive core, people and organizations feel hopeful, get excited, and naturally gravitate toward what works.

An organization's positive core, write David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, is the wisdom, knowledge, successful strategies, positive attitudes and affect, best practices, skills, resources, and capabilities of the organization.<sup>28</sup> It is a source of life-giving potential, consisting of the organization's creative, life-affirming qualities, capabilities, and resources.

Some of the many ways an organization's positive core may be expressed include:

Business best practices	Positive emotions
Core competencies	Product strengths
Elevated thoughts	Relational resources
Embedded knowledge	Social capital
Financial assets	Strategic opportunities
Innovations, patents, and copyrights	Technical assets
Organizational achievements	Values
Organizational wisdom	Visions of possibility
	Vital traditions

Paradoxically, the positive core both exists in and of itself, and it unfolds and evolves as a result of an Appreciative Inquiry. Inquiry and attention both strengthen and augment the positive core. Writer Henry Miller observed, "The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself."

### *The Positive Principle in Practice*

The more we inquire, the more we bring the positive core to life—ultimately shifting people's attention away from problems as the motivation for change toward unfolding gifts, capabilities, potentials, dreams, and visions. At the heart of the practice of Appreciative Inquiry is the quest to discover what gives life to an organization when it is at its best. In this sense the practice of Appreciative Inquiry is positive, or fully affirmative. Appreciative Inquiry is not a search for positive as opposed to negative, or good as opposed to bad. It is a search for what nourishes people for better performance and organizational excellence, what excites, energizes, and inspires employees, customers, suppliers, and the organization's community.

The practice of Appreciative Inquiry reflects the positive in numerous ways, most significantly through the discovery and mapping of the positive core. Affirmative topics are chosen, appreciative interviews conducted, and the data used to identify all that is good, successful, capable, and desirable about the organization.

### *A Story About Mapping the Positive Core*

Jane Farthing, senior consultant for Cap Gemini Ernst & Young, was given the responsibility to help two large federal agencies merge their libraries. The project was significant and the time allotted scant by comparison. With only two days to bring together the staff of these two organizations, she considered how Appreciative Inquiry might best serve them. Ultimately she facilitated the two groups in conducting appreciative interviews with one another, and then together they mapped the positive core of their joint library system. People who had little interest in being part of a joint system were initially taken aback. Over the course of the two days, skepticism gave way to outright enthusiasm and delight as they recognized each other's capacities along with their integrated resources. At the end of the two-day session, they laminated their positive core map—a mosaic of all their strengths, resources, skills, assets, and capacities—and put it on display as a

visual reminder of the best of who they are and all that they have jointly to offer their customers.

## Principle #6: The Wholeness Principle

### *Wholeness Brings Out the Best*

The Wholeness Principle posits that the experience of wholeness brings out the best in people, relationships, communities, and organizations. As quantum physicist David Bohm suggests, wholeness—the whole story, the whole system, and the whole person—is essential to a well-lived life:

It is instructive to consider that the word “health” in English is based on an Anglo-Saxon word “hale” meaning “whole”: that is, to be healthy is to be whole. . . . All of this indicates that man has sensed always that wholeness or integrity is an absolute necessity to make life worth living.<sup>29</sup>

The experience of wholeness is one of understanding the whole story. It comes about when people are able to hear, witness, and make sense of each other's differing views, perspectives, and interpretations of shared events. The spiritual teacher and author of *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, Rachel Naomi Remen, reminds us that different people have different stories about the same event:

Stories are someone's experience of the events of their life; they are not the events themselves. Most of us experience the same event very differently.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the whole story is never a singular story but is often a synthesis, a compilation of multiple stories, shared and woven together by the many people involved.

The Wholeness Principle leads participants to focus on higher ground rather than common ground. The experience of wholeness and healing emerges not in the discovery of commonalities but rather in understanding, accepting, and enjoying differences. The sense of understanding the whole story—with all its differences and

distinctions—brings with it a kind of contentment that does not require agreement. Thus, it creates a context in which people can safely focus on issues of higher purpose and greater good for the whole. Former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev articulates the importance of transcending differences to serve a higher purpose:

Ours is a time of acute problems and unprecedented opportunities. We shall be able to accomplish our historic task of developing our inheritance only if, irrespective of our political opinions, religious beliefs, or philosophies, we try to understand and help one another and act in concert for a better future.<sup>31</sup>

### *The Wholeness Principle in Practice*

In a practical sense, wholeness means engaging the entire organization in the process of change by getting all stakeholders—or at a minimum, some microcosm of the organization—in the room at the same time. When the whole system is in the room, trust ensues and a can-do attitude prevails. As one workshop participant put it:

Wholeness evokes trust. When everyone is there you don't have to feel suspicious about what the others will do—there are no others. It is collectively empowering. There is no one else who must approve your plan. You know that whatever you collectively decide can be done.

Involving the whole system also inspires uncommon action on behalf of the whole. In the experience of Benedictine University professor James Ludema:

The unique perspective of each person, when combined with the perspectives of others, creates new possibilities for action: possibilities that previously lay dormant or undiscovered.<sup>32</sup>

The practice of Appreciative Inquiry brings a whole system together, and through appreciative interviews, it breaks down barriers and creates a setting for building respect, overcoming stereotypes, and renewing relationships. Large-group Appreciative Inquiry meetings of people in conflict—whether the conflicts are functional,

cultural, generational, religious, political, or other—provide opportunities for healing. When people meet each other in whole-system dialogue, false assumptions fall away. They realize that others are not exactly as they imagined them to be, and respect grows for differences in background, practice, and vision.

### *A Story of Wholeness and Productivity*

In a culture where negative comments and toxic behaviors received the lion's share of attention, John Deere Harvester Works wanted to achieve higher performance through flexible, self-directed teams. They achieved this by engaging two hundred fifty wage and salaried employees in a five-day Appreciative Inquiry Summit. During this time, employees broke through their cynical attitudes and moved beyond Solid, Stable, Still John Deere. With the whole system in the room, they were able to renew and establish highly productive collaborative relationships, significantly reduce product development cycle time, and create a shared sense of confidence about future performance.

## Principle #7: The Enactment Principle

### *Acting "As If" Is Self-Fulfilling*

The Enactment Principle suggests that transformation occurs by living in the present what we most desire in the future. Put more simply, **positive change comes about as images and visions of a more desired future are enacted in the present.** A well-known expression of this idea comes from Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi's assertion: "Be the change you want to see." As a social activist, Gandhi lived his belief that the only way to create a just, nonviolent world in the future is through just, nonviolent action in the present. His life was a living model, an enactment of his deepest beliefs and dreams for the future.

In the 1960s, civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. led the American people toward greater justice, equality, and respect for all. As he did so, he continually reasserted the belief that the only way to change the world is to live the difference:

As you press on for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using only the weapon of love. . . . Darkness can not drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate can not drive out hate; only love can do that.<sup>33</sup>

From a spiritual perspective, the present is all there is. We are advised to *be here now*, to *be present*, and to *live in the moment*. Encouraging her dancers to be fully present as they performed, dancer and choreographer Martha Graham taught: "All that is important is this one moment in movement. Make the moment vital and worth living. Do not let it slip away unnoticed and unused."<sup>34</sup>

President Franklin D. Roosevelt understood the concept of living one's dreams today. Presiding over a nation deep in the throes of its worst-ever economic depression, FDR challenged the American people with a vision of possibility. In his inaugural address he urged the nation to courageously enact its desired future of work and justice for all, rather than simply waiting for the return of prosperity. He went on to affirm the future he would lead:

In this nation I see tens of millions of its citizens—a substantial part of its whole population—who at this very moment are denied the greater part of what the very lowest standards of today call the necessities of life.

It is not in despair that I paint you that picture. I paint it for you in hope—because the Nation, seeing and understanding the injustice in it, proposes to paint it out. We are determined to make every American citizen the subject of his country's interest and concern; and we will never regard any faithful law-abiding group within our borders as superfluous. The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.<sup>35</sup>

Choosing to enact the future, FDR led the country in implementing radical New Deal policies that provided work for millions of unemployed Americans. In the process, he helped restore the self-respect and discipline that enabled the nation to move forward

and beyond the immediate and seemingly insurmountable challenges of the time.

### *The Enactment Principle in Practice*

The notion of enactment—of living one's dreams today—is a simple yet paradoxical practice. For decades, members of Alcoholics Anonymous have effected change by “acting as if” they are the people they want to be. They act as if they are courageous rather than indulging their fear; they act as if they are generous rather than submitting to selfishness.

Effective organizational change requires that the processes used for change be a living example or enactment of the desired future. In other words, the ends and means of a process for change must be congruent. To again paraphrase Gandhi, organizations must be the change they want to see.

The practice of Appreciative Inquiry creates numerous opportunities for organizations to enact their more desired cultures and leadership styles. For example, if organizations want people engaged in the business, they must act as if high participation and commitment are the norm—by inviting everyone to participate in appreciative interviews and by soliciting informal leadership for all aspects of the Appreciative Inquiry initiative. If they want people to speak up and hear one another, they must act as if all voices are equal—by creating forums for everyone to share interview stories and insights. If they want to level hierarchies, they must act as if rank and authority do not command decision making—by including people from all levels and all functions on their Appreciative Inquiry Advisory Team.

### *A Story About Acting As If*

In late 2001, the city of Denver's Traffic Engineering and Traffic Operations groups were preparing to merge. They wanted a process that would dissolve boundaries between the two previously separate groups and create a new, high-functioning, fully integrated organi-

zation. They formed an Advisory Team, with equal representation from both parts of the organization, to plan and implement an AI Summit. From the beginning, advisors spent time getting acquainted, creating a shared purpose, and partnering across boundaries to achieve that purpose. Weeks before the summit, directors from other parts of the organization began asking what had happened. Looking in from the outside, it seemed that the new organization had already achieved its goal of unity! By acting as if they were one organization—in order to plan to become one organization—the desired integration occurred much faster and more easily than expected.

### Principle #8: The Free-Choice Principle

#### *Free Choice Liberates Power*

The Free-Choice Principle posits that **people and organizations thrive when people are free to choose the nature and extent of their contribution**. It suggests that treating people as volunteers—with freedom to choose to contribute as they most desire—liberates both personal and organizational power.

What does it mean to treat people as volunteers? The words *volition* and *volunteer* are both rooted in the Latin word *velle*, which means “to wish” or “to choose.” Thus, volunteers are people who choose to contribute based on their urge for fulfillment, desire to make a difference, or hope for a better world. To treat people as volunteers is to create a democratic work environment with processes for people to choose how and when to participate based on their strengths, interests, values, hopes, and dreams.

Free choice builds enthusiasm and commitment to the organization and fosters high performance. When people have free choice, organizations excel. Free choice is foundational to what management consultant Jane Selling calls a Membership Organization. In her book of the same name, Selling recommends that employees be considered members who choose to work in the organization—even if they must do so for economic reasons. She elaborates on the benefits of free choice:

In a Membership Organization, the members individually and collectively work beyond participation. There is a mindset of high personal responsibility, shared accountability, and member connectedness, making it possible for a more level working community to exist. The concept of membership stimulates enrollment in the organizational purpose, facilitates acceptance of a shared urgency for top performance, and expands opportunities for contribution and success for every individual and group within the workplace community.<sup>35</sup>

Organization development consultant Tom McGehee also emphasizes the benefits of free choice when he describes Creation Companies. According to McGehee, people in Creation Companies join teams and contribute as volunteers, yielding a number of long-term benefits to the organization:

Whenever possible, a Creation Company lets people work wherever they want and correct themselves. People usually choose to work for the best leaders and on the best opportunities. This has the advantage of identifying where the best ideas are, the best projects are, and the best leaders are. Think of it as an internal free market.<sup>36</sup>

Free choice for each person liberates power and high performance because it is an essential aspect of being human. According to psychologist Rollo May, making choices is central to human existence and identity:

A man or woman becomes fully human only by his or her choices and his or her commitment to them. People attain worth and dignity by the multitude of decisions they make from day to day.<sup>38</sup>

Human dignity and the dignity of work derive from choices. As Geoffrey Bellman, author of *Your Signature Path*, says, "Each moment of our lives, we are choosing what we want and don't want, will do and won't do, like and don't like."<sup>39</sup> When people are given opportunities to choose what they want to do, they can more freely respond to their intuitive calling and fulfill their full creative potential.

And indeed it is through the choices we make that we distin-

guish ourselves, contribute our gifts to the world, and leave our legacy. In the words of CEO Max DePree:

Of what is hope composed? Certainly part of the answer is the ability to make choices. To be without choices is a great tragedy, a tragedy leading to hopelessness or cynicism. The ability to make choices leads to other consequences. What do we choose? How do we choose? Our choices after all set us apart and shape our legacy.<sup>40</sup>

The Free-Choice Principle teaches us to consistently create opportunities for choice, to give people options, and to encourage them to choose their work based on their intuitions, interests, strengths, and highest callings.

### *The Free-Choice Principle in Practice*

The field of change management has evolved significantly in the twenty-five years we have been practicing. We have witnessed a shift from top-down processes to complete employee participation. We watched as organizations went from "let's take it slow and pilot the process" to "let's get everyone involved as quickly as possible." Both of these shifts expanded employee involvement—but not necessarily employee commitment. Mandating that everyone take part in a change initiative can often backfire. Without room for choice, people may feel pushed and resist, no matter how desirable the change.

The practice of Appreciative Inquiry is distinguished from other approaches to change by the amount of choice it offers people. In many cases people are granted complete freedom to choose if, how, and when they will engage in the process. People may choose to participate in the initial selection of Affirmative Topics or in interviews—and then drop out. Or conversely, they may choose to become engaged in a project that sings to them as action teams are formed—long after Discovery is complete. In short, people can and do choose to participate when they become curious, stimulated, or inspired by a task, activity, or dream for the future.

### *A Story About Customer Liberation*

On the last day of a three-day AI Summit, a customer stood up in a self-organized session and invited people to brainstorm the next steps for one of her projects. The request, and her act of free choice, seemed to be outside the purpose of the summit; it seemed to have nothing to do with the summit sponsor's business. She had been invited to the summit as a customer stakeholder—to help the client system work on its organizational design. Sponsors were surprised by her proposal but decided to let it ride—supporting nearly a dozen members of the organization in joining her in an hour-long working session. Reflecting, the organization's leader said, "Her project had nothing to do with us—and yet, it had everything to do with us. We needed input on that project and never would have gotten it outside of this setting. Now our thumbprint is on what she does going forward, and our goodwill has been forever registered in her memory banks."

### **Conversations That Matter—**

#### **The Eight Principles in Summary**

Taken together, the Eight Principles of Appreciative Inquiry point to one simple message: Appreciative Inquiry is about conversations that matter. Our first impulse was to call this section "conversations that make a difference," but reflection led us to the current title. The phrase "conversations that matter" explicitly illustrates the power of Appreciative Inquiry to bring things to life—to literally make matter. It also implies that Appreciative Inquiry conversations are about what matters most to people. At their best, conversations—inquiry, dialogue, discussion, and debate—make real and tangible the highest potentials of an organization and its people.

The power of such conversations may be most evident through their absence, such as in traditional organizations where communication is a one-way street. Following an established chain of command, people at the top talk about and create the organization's future with one another, and then roll it out to those reporting to

them—all the while hoping for a committed workforce that will follow through. They generate visions, values, and strategies—and then systematically tell and sell their plans to the members of the organization and its stakeholders.

In this system of communication, the majority of the organization's workforce, customers, and stakeholders are expected to swallow whole the information and ideas that have been conveyed. Those who are closest to the work and closest to the customers are excluded from the creative process, without a voice. In the end, these one-way conversations breed demoralized, uninformed, and uncommitted employees who produce low-quality products, miss targets, and treat customers the way they are treated by their supervisors.

In contrast, with the practice of Appreciative Inquiry, these conversations transform one-way, top-down communication into open, whole-system dialogue. AI dramatically shifts who talks to whom about what, involves genuine two-way inquiry and dialogue among improbable pairs of people—for example, senior managers and machine operators, customers and employees, functional departments and their merging counterparts—and focuses people's energies and efforts on what they value. In so doing, Appreciative Inquiry expands the realm of positive possibilities.

Throughout this book you will read stories about conversations that matter in businesses, governments, and not-for-profit organizations around the globe. You will see how these eight principles combine to form a highly improvisational practice of positive change—one that can move people and organizations from despair to possibility.