Aligning Strengths through Appreciative Inquiry

By Nancy E. Stetson, Ed.D.

Since the mid-1980s, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has become both an increasingly popular approach to organization development and an individual mindset or philosophy—a way of being, seeing, and thinking; it is a shift from focusing on problems to focusing on possibilities.

Here's how David Cooperrider, who is based in the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University and is the chief architect of AI, defines it:

Ap-pre'ci-ate, v., 1. Valuing; the act of recognizing the best in people or the world around us; affirming past and present strengths, successes, and potentials; to perceive those things that give life (health, vitality, excellence) to living systems. 2. to increase in value; e.g., the economy has appreciated in value. Synonyms: value, prize, esteem, and honor. In-quire', v., 1. The act of exploration and discovery. 2. To ask questions; to be open to seeing new potentials and possibilities. Synonyms: discover, search, systematically explore, and study.

The assumption underlying AI is simple: every living system has a core of strengths that is often hidden and/or underutilized—what is known as its "positive core." AI helps people in the system search for and find the positive core. When the positive core is revealed and tapped into, it provides a sustainable source of positive energy that nourishes both personal and organizational change and, potentially, transformation.

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AI is the ongoing, continuous study of what gives life to a living system when it is functioning at its best. A basic premise of AI is that, whatever people focus their attention on (i.e., study, inquire into), they will create more of it. Like a search engine, what people look for determines what they find. So, instead of searching for problems or gaps and inadvertently creating more of them, people search for what is working really well in the system (e.g., their own "best prac-

tices"), so that they can create more successes.

AI proceeds with a study of an organization or other living system that is guided by three basic questions: What is X (the positive topic of inquiry), and when and where has X been at its best in this organization or system? What makes X possible? What are the possibilities that enhance or maximize the potential for X?

The tangible result of an inquiry is a series of statements that describe where the organization or system wants to be, based on the high moments of where it has been. Because the statements are grounded in people's real experiences and history, people know how to repeat their successes. AI is a generative process; it generates new possibilities through new and/or deeper working relationships.

Appreciative Inquiry has been used to facilitate extraordinary — sometimes transformational — changes in thousands of individuals, groups, organizations and communities in more than 100 countries around the world.

In 2003, OD Practitioner published a 20-year review of AI. The reviewers reported that AI was ranked as the best of the newer contributions to OD. Applications included: organizational change; social issues; team building; individual development; and global and international applications.

Many of these stories of success are posted at the international Appreciative Inquiry Commons website at http://appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu, with more being added all the time. The reviewers concluded that there was little doubt that Appreciative Inquiry had had a profound effect on the way OD was practiced.

The late management guru, Peter Drucker, said in an interview with Cooperrider, "The task of organizational leadership is to create an alignment of strengths in ways that make a system's weaknesses irrelevant."

Aligning Strengths, continued

AI is a way of creating an alignment of strengths. Appreciative Inquiry can be thought of as an appreciative approach to any existing OD process, like strategic planning, teambuilding, organization restructuring, employee evaluation, program review, coaching, teaching and learning, etc.

For example, an appreciative approach to employee evaluation would focus on a person's past and current successes, helping the person uncover and build on strengths. It would not focus on the employee's weaknesses and try to "fix" them. In other words, the supervisor would be trying to help the person, as Drucker suggested, to create an alignment of strengths, thereby making weaknesses irrelevant.

"...bowlers learned twice as much when they were completely focused only on their successes."

Here are three stories of success in three very different domains: BP ProCare (business development), bowling teams (athlete development), and Save the Children (community development).

BP ProCare is a chain of car repair and service stores. Several years ago, the chain received 79% customer satisfaction scores on a customer survey. They wanted to improve even further so they did the traditional thing: they convened focus groups selected from the 21% of customers who were not satisfied with their services. They asked the focus groups to tell them what they were doing wrong so they could "fix" it.

When the focus-group results were reported to employees, there was a lot of finger pointing, and employee morale dropped. An AI consultant was called in to "fix" the problem of low morale and the resultant lower customer service ratings.

However, because the consultant believed in an appreciative approach to change, he helped BP ProCare employees and customers focus on the positive topic of "Outstanding Customer Satisfaction Experience" so the employees could create more of those outstanding experiences. The AI consultant facilitated interviews that asked customers about their best experiences of those services, not their worst experiences.

Eight months later, 95% of ProCare customers reported that they were fully satisfied with the services they were receiving. The employees learned from their stories of success to perform even better.

University of Wisconsin researchers videotaped two bowling teams during several games. Each team studied their videotape so they could learn to get better. However, the tapes had been edited differently. One tape was edited so that it showed both when the bowlers made mistakes, i. e., gutter balls, and when they performed well, i.e., strikes. The other tape was edited so that it showed only when its members performed well.

The result: both groups improved. However, the team studying only when it performed well improved its score twice as much as the one that studied both mistakes and good performances. In other words, the bowlers learned twice as much when they were completely focused only on their successes.

In Vietnam, community developers were interested in improving nutrition for children. Using an appreciative approach to change, they went into villages where children were critically undernourished and looked for the healthiest child in the village. They then found the parents of that child and interviewed them, inquiring into what they were doing to help their child be healthy.

For instance, in one village, the community developers might find that the parents were feeding the healthy child crustaceans from the rice paddies, a source of protein. In another village, they might discover a totally different reason for the child's relative health. Whatever the story, they spread that story of success throughout the village so that others could learn from that one small story of hope. Thus, many Vietnamese children's lives were saved.

Some organizations are beginning to use an appreciative approach to employee development. For instance, in the selection or hiring process, candidates are asked to share a story about a time when they felt that

Aligning Strengths, continued

Continued from previous page

their knowledge, skills, abilities and talents were being most fully utilized by an organization or in a particular job, times when they felt they were at their very best.

Follow-up questions go deeper, inquiring about the conditions, factors and forces that helped support the candidates doing their best work. In a very short time, this reveals a great deal of information about both the candidates and about a culture that is supportive of excellence.

> *"...every community or organization has what are called "positive deviants."*

Then, once an employee is on board, the HR department or supervisor can assess the strengths of the new employee on a periodic basis, so that both HR and the supervisor can capitalize and build on the employee's existing and developing strengths.

Also, the supervisor or manager can periodically check in with the employee to find out what conditions exist when she or he feels their strengths are most fully being utilized in the current position; this also can provide some major clues about possibilities for movement into a new "great fit" position or enriching the employee's current position.

The formal appraisal process can also be appreciative. Employees can be asked to assess their own strengths and share their stories of success with the supervisor and colleagues in the department. The supervisor can share his or her perception of the employee's strengths; they each can learn from their stories of success. The appraisal process is also an appropriate time to ask the employee if he or she is getting the support they need in order to do their best work.

The power of an appreciative approach to change is built on the notion that every community or organization has what are called "positive deviants," those people who, regardless of the conditions or circumstances, make success happen. Often, it is because they are looking for strengths and successes, the "positive core" of the system—what's working—in order to create more of it, not what's broken in order to fix it. Consciously or unconsciously, they are wearing a lens or frame that allows them to see possibilities, rather than problems. They are then better able to create an alignment of strengths, thereby making weaknesses irrelevant.

When stories of success are spread throughout a living system—a community, organization, village, family, relationship, or individual—people learn from those stories and find the positive energy to create even more successes. ☙

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Appreciative Leadership: Seeing the Oak in the Acorn
(A book review)

A revolution may have just been ignited in the field of individual intelligence. Tojo Thatchkenkery and Carol Metzker (T&M), experts in organizational learning, have constructed a new model of mental processing for *individuals* that they call "appreciative intelligence."

Drawing on their own original research and recent discoveries in psychology and cognitive neuroscience, Thatchenkery and Metzker (T&M) explore, in *Appreciative Intelligence: Seeing the Mighty Oak in the Acorn*, (Berrett-Koehler, 2006) this new construct, a unique way of thinking that leads to success, however success is defined by the leader.

Appreciative Inquiry and Appreciative Intelligence are not the same things. Appreciative Inquiry is an organizational analysis approach and methodology, whereas Appreciative Intelligence is a mental ability found in an individual. The two share a common element, however, in that they both focus on what is valuable or positive. Appreciative Inquiry seeks to locate the core values or "life-giving forces" of an organization and strives to create processes to enhance what is already working right in such settings.

The presence of people with high Appreciative Intelligence can accelerate that process of identifying the core values, and the subsequent steps of designing and constructing concrete actions to help lead the organization in a desired direction. Appreciative Intelligence in leaders and stakeholders of an organization engaged in Appreciative Inquiry will help generate better outcomes that are sustaining and significant.

According to T&M, AI leads to four qualities—persistence, conviction that one's actions matter, tolerance for uncertainty, and irrepressible resilience. Appreciative Intelligence has three components of AI:

Reframing - the conscious or unconscious process of changing how one sees what is in the present to a new view of reality that leads to a new outcome

Appreciating the positive is the "process of selectivity and judgment of something's positive value or worth"

Seeing how the future unfolds from the present. - the ability to see possibilities that already exist in the present moment, but that must be revealed, unlocked, or realized.

So how can we assess our personal appreciative intelligence and then develop more of it? The book includes a "profile" or guide for assessing appreciative intelligence using questions that prompt an individual to recall certain stories of success. For instance, one question asks: "Describe a time you perceived something differently than others did, reframed a situation or product in a positive way, revealed hidden talent or skills in another person, or generated new possibilities for a challenge."

Once someone has developed a "profile" of their Appreciative Intelligence, she or he can put that knowledge into practice by practicing new behaviors and thought patterns. T&M offer four tools for doing this: (1) change your stories; (2) change your reflections; (3) change your questions; and (4) seek diverse ideas (talk to someone different). ❧

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