A Review of *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change*
by Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2003).

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is typically associated with organizational development. Books on the subject are often categorized as business texts. AI is also closely associated with the Positive Psychology movement that is revolutionizing the way people "live, work, and organize" (p. 85). Yet, AI is clearly a form of Action Research that employs mixed methodology with components similar to those employed by focus groups and nominal groups. Whitney and Trosten-Bloom actually recommend the use of focus groups to arrive at the "Affirmative Topic Choice" that signals the starting point for AI and serves as the foundation for the process.

The essential difference between AI and other forms of Action Research is the word "appreciative," indicating the foundation of AI is affirmative, positive, and forward-looking. It "is not a search for positive as opposed to negative, or good as opposed to bad. AI is a search for what nourishes people for better performance and organizational excellence, what excites, organizes, and inspires employees, customers, suppliers, and the organization's community" (p. 68).

Appreciative Inquiry "helps people, communities, and organizations discover and realize their highest potential" (p. 25). Freedom of choice among participants is another tenet. Just like volunteers, members of the organization are allowed to choose if, how, and when they will take part in the AI process. Because of free choice, this system even works at preliminary stages of organizational development. The authors provide an example of one pre-organizational community effort that failed to garner support until it was called an "initiative" and employed AI's positive practice.

The system relies on analysis of narratives, or stories, which are collected in the form of interviews. Appreciative interviewing, according to the authors, is "the heart" of AI (p. 60). "Stories bring Appreciative Inquiry principles and practices to life" (p. 107). Unlike other forms of qualitative research that involve outsiders in data collection and analysis, appreciative interviews are conducted by members of the organization among themselves. Interviewing is a fundamental component of AI because conversations – whether characterized as inquiry, dialogue, discussion, or

debate – "make real and tangible the highest potentials of an organization and its people" (p. 78). People are *respected*, and their stories are collected and valued. All questions are framed as positive statements that "inspire storytelling about organizations at their best" (p. 60): "its remembered past, enacted present, and imagined future" (p. 67).

Appreciative Inquiry also differs from typical forms of Action Research in that it involves <u>every</u> stakeholder, rather than selected individuals. When the entire organization is engaged in dialogue, "false assumptions fall away." Members "realize that others are not exactly as they imagined them to be, and respect grows for differences in background, practice, and vision" (p. 71). Feedback does not just go up the chain to decision-makers; rather, it is shared throughout the organization for creative implementation of best practices. AI "enables leaders to create natural human organizations – knowledge-rich, strength-based, adaptable learning organizations" (p. 19).

Too often, the authors argue, organizations are unable to solve their problems "because of their habit of focusing on problems rather than possibilities" (p. 11). AI requires that organizations instead identify their core competencies and build on their strengths. A brainstormed list becomes a book of dreams. Inventorying "causes and consequences" gives way to drawing a verbal image of the organization at its best. Quantitative measurement and implementation strategies lose their emphasis when members recognize the "capacity for ongoing change" (p. 17). Transformation is much easier to effect by focusing on strengths and possibilities rather than problems and weaknesses.

Unlike common fact-finding and strategic planning models that focus on why things fail, AI is "fully affirmative" (p. 10). Appreciative *inquiry* differs from keeping an appreciative *perspective*: "Appreciative perspective focuses on recognition, values, and affirmation, while Appreciative Inquiry implies a search, a willingness to discover, and an openness to learn" (p. 12).

The authors explain the AI system has boundless application, in that it can be used to

- "transform a situation, a relationship, an organization, or community" (p. 18);

- "guide a conversation, a large group meeting, or a whole-system change effort" (p. 7); and,

- "serve as a framework for personal development or coaching, partnership or alliance building, and large-scale community or organization development" (p. 7).

The message is clear throughout the book: "Whatever the purpose, the Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle serves as the foundation on which change is built" (p. 7). Yet, the "paradox of AI is that it does not aim to change anything" (p. 15).

The Appreciative Inquiry research process follows a loosely structured, yet specific, path based on a framework and guidelines established through the research of David Cooperrider. AI is "improvisational" (p. 14) because, once the purpose for inquiry is identified, the process can take participants in unlimited directions. "In many cases," the authors claim, "the most remarkable outcomes are unplanned and unexpected" (p. 14). Improvisation "creates an imperative for invention and continual learning" (p. 15). Cooperrider believes 95% of possible implementations of AI have been created in the twenty-five years since he first published the model.

The basis of Appreciative Inquiry is the 4-D Cycle: Discovery ("appreciate what is"), Dream ("imagine what might be"), Design ("determine what should be"), and Destiny ("create what will be") (pp. 6-10). The cycle revolves around a "Positive Core," described as the "most positive potential" of an organization (p. 6). Some organizations adapt the cycle to fit their culture, such as the example of Cap Gemini Ernst & Young's trademarked *ePositive Change*: Define, Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver.

Like the evaluation models proposed by Blanchard and Thacker[1] and researchers at the The Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University <www.wmich.edu/evalctr/>, Appreciative Inquiry is a never-ending, cyclical, and sometimes recursive process. When some groups reach the fourth stage, "Destiny," they begin the AI process again. The method does not disavow that organizational problems exist. Yet, AI consistently "has proven itself as a process for enhancing an organization's capacity for accelerated, positive change" (p. 90).

Appreciative Inquiry works because it is liberating and empowering, both individually and collectively. Knowing that one person or one organization can change the world is phenomenal, and AI provides that empowerment. Through its six inherent freedoms – to be known in a relationship, to be heard, to dream in community, to choose to contribute, to act with support, and to be positive – AI is liberating because it "breaks the cycle of depersonalization" (p. 240).

Whitney has been associated with Cooperrider since he began promoting AI as an organizational development process, which likely explains why this book has a zealous undercurrent. The authors close with an invitation for readers to "join the revolution for positive change . . . to make our world a better place, one organization at a time" (p. 252).

Most of the book is an example-rich, step-by-step, procedural overview of the Appreciative Inquiry process. To illustrate essential components of the system, the authors use engaging stories of field application, including a discussion of their use of AI to explore itself after nearly twenty years of field-based practice. Using an in-depth analysis of one organization in case-book format throughout the book provides the reader an opportunity to immediately reinforce theory with application. For balance, however, the authors should have discussed situations where AI has not been successful.

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[1]Blanchard, N. P., and Thacker, J. *Effective Training: Systems, Strategies and Practices*, 3rd ed. Saddleback, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2007.

The book supplies ample stimuli for tangential reading through in-text references to other philosophies. Chapter notes reflect the authors' selection of high-quality resources for related theories of organizational development and positive psychology. The authors refer readers to an associated Web site for up-to-date news and ancillary information.

Like most books in the organizational change genre, this volume is easy to read. Mechanically, the design, typography, and construction of the book are of excellent quality. The text fills each page, unlike many volumes that "fluff" the text (and price) by excessively widening margins. The authors' writing styles are similar enough to maintain the same syntax and voice throughout. However, inconsistent editing for grammar is distracting. The book's index is significantly incomplete. For example, there is no entry for "positive core" – AI's central component.

Are you ready for the challenge? I encourage anyone who is looking for a new approach to organizational reform to read this book and try Appreciative Inquiry.

As for me, I see a pattern developing in my reading: Peter Drucker --> David Bohm --> Peter Senge --> David Cooperrider --> ?. I wonder who will be the next great organizational change guru to inspire me? Based on the pattern, his name will be Peter!

Note: The remainder of this document contains my synthesized notes from the book. This is one way I assimilate new concepts, so it was created for my personal use, with the expectation I will amplify my notes through further study.

I did not attempt to follow any style guide or indicate in the text everywhere I quoted directly from Whitney and Trosten-Bloom. Instead, I inserted annotations in the document as I created it, using the wordprocessor's "comments" feature. Therefore, please do not rely on the text to accurately reflect the statements of Whitney and Trosten-Bloom unless you see in-text citations.

While you are welcome to use this information in your own study, these notes were created for my personal use. For that reason, I do not give permission for the text to be shared outside the scope of the HRD 667 course at the University of Southern Maine in the Spring Semester, 2008. Thank you for understanding.

Getting Started with Appreciative Inquiry

Obviously, the first steps for implementing AI within an organization are deciding whether AI is appropriate for the organization and then enlisting support among senior leadership. The authors recommend involving "as diverse a group as possible" in making the decision to implement AI (p. 105). Engage group members in a quasi-AI process by asking them to explore whether AI is appropriate for the organization and, if so, why. Allow group members to discuss methods for implementing AI that make sense within the current organizational culture. Encourage the group to take advantage of already-scheduled activities, such as strategic planning or production re-engineering.

Once AI is adopted and senior decision-makers are on-board, activities that set the stage for implementation are as variable as the organizations to which AI is applied. Some "hit the ground running" with just a goal in mind, planning as the process is engaged. Other organizations prefer to begin AI with a detailed map, including methods for measuring results and clearly defined leadership roles and responsibilities in place.

Regardless of the speed or direction an organization takes, certain initiatory measures are required. An Advisory Team must be selected, and the authors recommend members be "from a variety of functions, levels, and disciplines that collectively represent the entire organization" to "promote depth and breadth of thinking" (p. 109). While Advisory Team members should be those who have influence among both formal and informal leadership, the authors suggest choosing "informal leaders – people who command the respect of those participating" in the AI process (p. 109).

The Advisory Team may require training on more than the AI philosophy and process, including the techniques of an appreciative interview. The Team should prepare a statement of the AI project's scope and begin building awareness and support. Plans for introducing members to the AI process and successfully engaging them must precede invitations for full-on member participation. The authors again

recommend plans for introduction of AI be developed by a diverse group of individuals. Throughout the AI process, the Advisory Team has several specific, on-going responsibilities: keeping project-related communication flowing across the entire organization, integrating the activities and resources of each group in such a way the groups work in alignment, and coaching team members to ensure the project's success. Because of the latter responsibility's importance, the authors offer coaching tips.

When introducing AI principles to the Advisory Team or any other preliminary participants, the authors stress "always include an appreciative interview – however brief. Mini-interviews give people a taste of the power – the affect ... and the intimacy" of AI (p. 106). The four most-common types of interview are one-on-one, group, electronic, and cross-organization (especially useful in mergers and partnerships).

The AI process begins with answering four essential questions (pp. 14, 24).

- What is your overall change agenda?

    - What are you trying to accomplish?

    - What is your purpose?"

- What form of engagement will best suit your needs?

    - Will it be a core team or an organization-wide summit or ...? (Eight forms are detailed in the text, with instructions to experiment once one form is chosen in order to adapt the form to the organization, rather than *vice versa*.)

    - What is most appropriate, given your change agenda, your organization culture, time frame, and resources?

- What is your overall inquiry strategy, or "carefully thought out plan for how an initiative will unfold over time" (p. 47)? (A rudimentary decision tree is located on pages 48-49).

- Having identified the purpose and form of engagement, what decisions and steps must you take along the way to ensure the project's success?

- How will you introduce decision-makers to AI as a process for change, establish a supporting infrastructure, and engage participants in the process (p. 48)?

- What steps will you take at each phase of the 4-D Cycle?

Over and over, the authors remind that "human systems move in the direction of what they study," which makes the choice of topic a critical event (pp. 7, 60, 62-64, 142). Good AI topics share four characteristics: positive – state in the affirmative; desirable – desire to grow, develop, and enhance; stimulate learning – curiosity and quest for proficiency; and stimulate conversations about desired futures – linking to the organization's AI Change Agenda.

Once the positive topic is selected, consistently affirmative questions should be selected in order to elicit positive responses. "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" (p. 61). Good appreciative interview questions are uplifting, with an emotional quality that guides participants toward introspection. Thus, good questions are personal and help forge intrapersonal connections. Additionally, good questions have a logical flow, draw on life and work experiences by inviting stories instead of opinions or theories, are sometimes ambiguous and give free rein to imagination, and suggest action.

The authors suggest four "core" questions, especially for use in mini-interviews used to teach appreciative interviewing (p. 140):

1. Tell me about a peak experience or high point in your professional life . . . a time when you felt most alive, most engaged, and really proud of yourself and your work.

2. Without being humble, what do you most value about

       a.   yourself, and the way you do your work? What unique skills and gifts do you bring to this team and organization?

       b.   your work?

       c.   your team?

       d.   your organization and its larger contribution to society or the world?

3.   What are the core factors that give life to this organization when it is at its best?

4.   If you had a magic wand and could have any three wishes granted to heighten the health and vitality of this organization, what would they be?

The authors provide suggestions for conducting a good appreciative interview:

- Prepare by knowing the questions, their logic, and their sequencing so reading is avoided.

- Choose the right environment; allow the participants to set the pace.

- Have a preliminary conversation to prepare the interview partner, then take time to establish a personal connection before beginning the interview.

- Have written versions of the questions in case the interview partner is not comfortable with spoken English (reading is sometimes easier).

- Express interest, caring, and attention. If the interviewer wants more details about a certain comment, she should ask. Likewise, an interviewer should acknowledge whenever the interviewee's statements inspire him.

The 4-D Cycle

The Discovery phase centers on the appreciative interview process: planning and communicating the inquiry strategy, crafting questions and the interview guide, training interviewers, gathering stories through interviews, identifying themes, disseminating stories and best practices recommendations, and making meaning of the collected data. Sharing stories and meaning-making promote deeper levels of dialogue and exploration that leads to the next phase, Design.

During the Dream phase, AI participants build on information gathered in appreciative interviews and begin to envision the organization's future. Members acknowledge "the best of what has been" and encourage each other to "imagine it even better" (p. 179). AI promotes the assumption that their images/visions of the future affect how people move forward. Positive imagery, built through members' collective expression of dreams, leads to positive performance. The authors warn against investing resources and emotions in fixed images, since potential stagnation could occur. As the dream develops, it must be clarified. The authors recommend creation of an "organizational dream map" from themes that arise from dream dialogues (p. 190).

The third traditional phase of AI is Design, where organizational values and ideals discovered and dreamed are given form. Ideas arising from appreciative the Dream phase are connected to the Change Agenda established at the beginning of the AI process. The primary question addressed in the Design phase is "How do we describe our ideal organization?" (p. 205). The authors recommend publishing the answers in tangible documents that are affirmative, provocative, narrative statements of beliefs "that constitute the ideal organization" (p. 206). Design "involves sorting, sifting, and serious choices about what will be" through engaging "large groups of people in conversations about the nature of organizing and about the kind of organization that will enable the realization of their values and dreams" (p. 197). The authors maintain, "We live in a designed world, a world created by human thought, word, and deed. Language is the human design tool . . . everything is designed in conversation" (p. 198).

The final phase of traditional AI, Destiny, is described as three-dimensional: The first dimension is recognizing and celebrating learning and transformation in the process thus far. The second dimension is initiating "cross-functional, cross-level projects and Innovation Teams" that "launch a wide range of goal-driven, action-oriented changes" (p. 217). In the third dimension, learning that arises from AI is systemically applied throughout the entire organization – programs, processes, and people. By this point in the process, the organization should be energized by changes in people's lives. "Success is in the air" (p. 218). Two decisions are critical in the Destiny phase: how to learn about transformations that have already occurred (e.g., surveys, storytelling sessions, or mini-AI's); and how to continue supporting the success of the AI project. Rather than managerial edicts, the authors recommend self-organized teams, consisting of volunteers, develop plans for moving the organization "toward its newly articulated Dream and Design" (p. 221).

The measure of success for AI "is whether an organization has enhanced its capacity for positive change" (p. 251). Sustaining the results of AI requires continued commitment from within the organization at all levels. Transformation requires "ongoing and continuous redesign of core processes, systems, and structures to make them consistent with the organization's positive core, dreams, and designs for the future" (p. 223). This may require a formal infrastructure, expanding the role of self-organized teams, or additional training (e.g., new-hire orientation and leadership development) and application AI (e.g., customer and/or employee satisfaction surveys and team-building).

The Eight Principles

The AI process is based on eight principles the authors describe as "essential beliefs and values about human organizing and change" (p. 51). They are clearly a dynamic philosophy of organizational change management. The principles arise from three positive-oriented, socially interactive processes for "discovering and crafting life-

affirming, guiding images of the future" (p. 51). The three themes are social constructionism, image theory, and grounded research.

Social constructionism "posits that human communication is the central process that creates, maintains, and transforms realities" (p. 51). Language is not a powerful tool on an individual basis, yet it is "the vehicle by which communities of people create knowledge and make meaning" (p. 56). Words matter because they "not only make a difference, they literally bring things to life" by creating "the world as we know it" (p. 56). Because organizations live through language, and change occurs through language, AI "brings together people from all levels and functions of an organization," who would not necessarily normally interact, "to learn from one another and with one another [and] build relationships for going forward and expanding their collective wisdom" (p. 57). This occurs through shared stories, and it provides the theoretical basis for appreciative interviews. The authors propose engaging all stakeholders and implementing AI through small group or one-on-one activities is "essential to constructive organization change" (p. 52).

Image theory maintains that individuals' images of the future influence their decisions and actions in the present. The authors draw on image theory to support AI's "unique focus on images and stories of the future" (p. 52). The authors propose "one of the most untapped resources for organizational change is the collective image, held in the stories and dreams of members" (p. 52). Visual representations and formal vision statements are common; yet, "images are most often narrative accounts. They are the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves." These verbal images are "formed in conversation" and "reside in day-to-day dialogue among individuals and groups of people" (p. 65).

Grounded research methodology argues that "all research is intervention" (p. 52). Integrating the grounded research theory that direct observation by those involved in data-gathering is the best method for collecting and interpreting information, AI "engages members of an organization in theor own research – inquiry into the most life-giving forces in their organization, the root causes of their success, and discovery of their positive core" (p. 52). The positive core is the "wisdom, knowledge, successful

strategies, positive attitudes and affect, best practices, skills, resources, and capabilities of the organization" (p. 67).

Originally, AI had five principles, but Whitney and Trosten-Bloom have added three in this book. While the principles are not unique to AI, together they form a potent guide to developing and managing the change process. The eight Principles are described as follows (pp. 54-55; note that portions of the following are quoted from the text but not necessarily identified in order to reduce confusion):

1. Constructionist – "Words create worlds." Reality is a subjective, socially created construct created through language and conversations.

2. Simultaneity – "Inquiry creates change." The moment someone intervenes by asking a question, change begins. Questions that are unusual, require persistent reflection, synthesize information, or explore a paradox can stimulate ideas, innovation, and invention while evoking hopes and dreams for the future.

3. Poetic – "We can choose what we study." Organizations provide unlimited opportunities for study and learning. The choice of subject makes a difference, describing – even creating – the organization's world. All stories shared through appreciative interviews during the AI process can be interpreted and re-interpreted in the context of a chosen subject or frame of reference. Metaphors are as powerful as stories.

4. Anticipatory – "Image inspires action." Because human systems move in the direction of their images of the future, a more-positive image begets more-positive present-day action. Organizations exist because people are drawn to them and, through the organization, share their hopes and dreams for the future. Because the future is unpredictable, humans create images of where they believe they are going, then organize their lives according to those images.

5.   Positive – "Positive questions lead to positive change." Large-scale changes requires large amounts of positive affect and social bonding that provide momentum. Positive questions amplify the positive core, magnifying the essence of the organization at its best, and provide momentum for long-lasting and more-effective change.

6.   Wholeness – "Wholeness brings out the best." Gathering all stakeholders in large group forums stimulates creativity and builds collective capacity. If not the entire organization, a microcosm of it needs to be gathered in the same room at the same time to initiate the AI process and begin the journey toward change. The experience of wholeness brings out the best in people, relationships, communities, and organizations. The whole story is never singular. It is often a synthesis, a compilation of multiple stories, shared and woven together by the many people involved.

7.   Enactment – "Acting 'as if' is self-fulfilling." To create change, one must live the part; that is, act as if change has already occurred.

8.   Free Choice – "Free choice liberates power." Free choice stimulates excellence and positive change while building enthusiasm and commitment. Individuals choose to contribute according to their own abilities and interests, leading to better performance through commitment to a self-selected goal. Treating all members as volunteers who have freedom to choose the contributions they most desire liberates personal and organization power.

Related Powerpoint Presentations:

Basics of AI: www.odnetwork.org/events/conferences/conf2004/followup/110PRE.pdf

Using AI in Strategic Planning:
www.odnetwork.org/events/conferences/conf2003/followup/104FASA.pdf