

■ Leveraging Strengths to Bring Out the Best in Human Systems: An Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry

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Those of us drawn to teaching, advising, coaching and otherwise helping young adults to advance in their education and professional studies are in pivotal developmental roles. That is, we can have a positive impact on the so called development of that individual — the enhancement and application of knowledge, skills and attitudes to enable the person to reach for their potential and flourish in their lives. The purpose of this article is to challenge our status quo sense of what fosters human development and to suggest some new tools or ideas for our advising, coaching and teaching repertoire based on the strength-based, positive change revolution occurring in psychology and the management sciences.

Time to rethink how human systems change

A powerful alternative to our conventional ways of thinking about human (and human system) change is an approach called Appreciative Inquiry (AI).¹ Simply put, AI begins with (1) a rigorous and collaborative search to understand the individual's (or system's) greatest strengths, or success factors, in order to (2) imagine our highest hopes and greatest possibilities to (3) stimulate co-construction of the preferred future in order to (4) launch self-directed change and innovation. In various forms, AI is being adopted worldwide in for-profit, non-profit and community organizations to foster

rapid, transformational change at individual, group and total-system levels. I've stated that this represents a challenge to our conventional wisdom about how change (in individuals) can occur. Let me explain further.

In an interview with arguably the most noted management thinker of the last century, Peter Drucker, we asked him to summarize the most important lesson or idea from his lifetime of work that he would most want future generations of leaders to heed. Without any hesitation he told us (at the age of 94!) that, "The task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths ... making the system's weaknesses irrelevant." The more one reflects on this assertion, the more provocative it becomes. We know strengths help us perform, but can they help us transform, grow, or develop? Indeed, most, if not all, of our notions about growth and development seem to center on dealing with weaknesses. When we overcome them or turn them into neutral or plus factors, we say we have grown or developed. When we examine this further we begin to see how deeply socialized we are to the notion of beginning all levels of change with deficit (weakness) orientations.

Our fundamental approach to change is incremental, which is another way of saying "gap reduction." We are prone in most aspects of life to look first for what

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is wrong, broken or needs fixing. In organizational life, we have reified the notion of continuous improvement, or gap reduction, to the point of diminishing returns. While it can be a useful tool or method for organizational effectiveness, change programs based on the continuous improvement paradigm are surprisingly mediocre, if not poor. The research seems to put the success rates of this method of changing human systems at 25-30%. It is high time to re-think how and why we change, or develop, and when we do it effectively.²

Appreciative Inquiry as an alternative to deficit-based change

At the roots of this dominant, deficit-oriented approach to change is our most favorite tool or skill set — problem-solving. We are taught it beginning before formal schooling and those who become professionals master it! We are heavily socialized to look for a problem, define it, conduct a root cause analysis, search for solutions, etc. We are so prone to first look for what is wrong, what needs fixing, what is broken, etc. that the mere suggestion of considering what is working best, as an alternative starting point, brings accusations of being unrealistic, too Pollyannaish, having rose-colored glasses, or even being delusional. In fact, research suggests that an imbalance *in favor* of positive anticipatory images over negative ones is associated with personal health, organizational productivity and sustained well-being. This message flies in the face of common wisdom which might say a one-to-one ratio of positive to negative anticipatory images is pragmatic and realistic.

The idea that positive anticipatory images pull our behavior towards those images suggests that another way to think about change (at any level) is to *begin* with a search for those positive images (vs. search for problems or gaps). Most successful change stories, cases, or research studies will conclude that at some point, the critical mass or key stakeholders reached a point where they shared a common purpose, mission, vision or goal. This is a necessary ingredient for successful change. But where do these positive images, especially shared ones, come from?

Our experiences in applying AI lead us to conclude that shared positive images of a change goal come more from revisiting individual and collective strengths than from defining and pursuing problems.³ When we enable individuals or groups to revisit their strengths, then their ability and desire to generate

bold, transformational (non-incremental) change goals increases. So AI becomes an intentionally different way to approach change than what we typically do in problem-solving.

In its most practical form, AI is a type of study that selectively seeks to locate, highlight, and illuminate what are referred to as the “life-giving” properties of any organization or human system. In this sense, there are two basic questions behind any appreciative inquiry:

1. What, in this particular setting and context, makes *organizing* (teamwork, margins, throughput, exceptional customer experiences, etc.) possible?
2. What are the possibilities, expressed and latent, that provide opportunities for more effective, or value-congruent, forms of this *organizing* in the future?

The art of appreciation is the art of discovering and valuing those factors that give life to a phenomenon or occurrence. Through interviewing and storytelling, the best of the past is revealed to set the stage for effective visualization of what could be. AI searches for the best of “what is” (one’s experience up to now) to provide the basis for imagining “what might be.” The aim is to generate new knowledge, which expands the “realm of the possible” and helps members of an organization to envision together a desired future. Such future images, based on hope — a positive anticipatory image — and linked to actual experience of being at one’s best, are naturally compelling and attractive. They attract energy and mobilize intention. Individuals, groups and organizations cannot help but behave in ways to achieve these visions.

The underlying assumption of AI is not that organizing (or change, or development) is a “problem to be solved,” but rather that it is a “solution to-be-embraced.” When we stand in wonder, full of curiosity, about the miracle of organizing or the amazement of human action — when it is at its best — it calls forth a radically different process and language. This “AI” process includes: (1) *discovery* and valuing the best of what has been; (2) *dreaming* and envisioning what might be; (3) *designing* — dialoguing about what can be; and (4) delivering on a *destiny* — co-constructing what will be.

First, you Discover and value those factors that “give life” to organization when it is at its best. The chal-

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lence of valuing is to discover, for example, the ‘commitment’ of the organization and to find out when that commitment was at its highest. Regardless of how few the moments of high commitment, the task is to reveal stories about those “peak moments” and to discuss the factors or forces that created the possibility for them. The list of positive or affirmative topics for discovery are endless: high quality, integrity, teamwork, customer responsiveness, self confidence, partnering, technological excellence, sense of ownership, margins, zero defects, etc. In fact, we can ask any question in any organization; the choice is ours. Which question (topic) is most likely to reveal the steps toward the future we most want?

Second, you Dream what could be. When the best of what is has been discovered, the mind *naturally* begins to search beyond this; it begins to imagine new possibilities. Dreaming involves “passionate thinking” about positive images of a desired and preferred future state.

Next, you engage in dialogue about Design. Open sharing of exciting discoveries and possibilities builds consensus whereby members agree, “Yes, this is an ideal or vision that we value most and should aspire to.” Individual will - based upon a positive, anticipatory image - transforms to a collective will. AI helps create a deliberately supportive context for design conversations. It is through this sharing of ideals that social bonding and real, “shared vision” occurs.

Fourth, you co-construct a shared Destiny through innovation and action. AI establishes a momentum of its own. Because the dreams are grounded in past realities (best-past stories that always include cooperation), there is increased confidence to try to make things happen. Members naturally find new ways to move the organization closer to the shared ideal image — sometimes *without* any of the traditional change management techniques of action planning, task forces, project timetables and deliverables.

Key lessons about change

From this strength-based perspective of change, several key drivers of human or organization development emerge:

- *Words create worlds*: we tend to go in the direction of what we most frequently talk about. In fact, we create the world that we call “real” through our forms of relational discourse — our conversations,

symbols, metaphors, and stories. The organizational world in which we live achieves a sense of meaning largely as a result of the conversations — linguistic conventions — we co-create with one another and adjust to as “normal.” We each “co-author” our organizations, our careers and our family realities every day.⁴

- *Our Questions are fateful*: Change begins the moment we ask our very first question. Inquiry is intervention. The moment we begin to explore a topic, the moment we start to ask questions, even the moment we start to wonder about some social phenomena, we already change the “targeted” situation. The seeds of change are planted with the very first questions that we ask. Asking, for example, how to reduce lost and damaged baggage claims is very different from asking how to provide exceptional arrival experiences, as one major global carrier discovered. Each question leads you to engage different stakeholders and takes you to different outcomes. Neither question is better or worse, but each is fateful in how it cues the “respondent” to recall such moments, to create or maintain a discourse that tracks the antecedents of either baggage mistakes or effective arrivals, and their consequences. Every question into a social topic begins a conversation that creates, maintains or transforms a way of being and doing. There is no such thing as a ‘neutral’ question.

- *You can ask any Question, anywhere*: As we choose topics of inquiry, so we open new horizons of action. Human systems are open-ended, evolving networks of possibilities open to an endless variety of interpretive perspectives. This means that we can inquire into (study) anything in any organization: we can choose to notice the dynamics of stress, conflict, competition — or we can choose to look into the dynamics of hope, cooperation, competence, or joy. Virtually any topic is fair game. The question is, on what basis should we choose? Inquiry has the potential to be generative, to challenge assumptions, to foster reconsideration of the taken-for-granted, and promote fresh alternatives for action. There is nothing about the organizational world itself that dictates what there is to be studied or talked about. To pursue how to lessen low morale vs. how to create more moments of high enthusiasm is a fateful choice based upon where one most wishes to be in the future. Either question will lead to learning and change. *What we study should be guided as much by the world we want to co-create* as by an effort to test or verify some underlying law or pattern in the world.

- *As we Anticipate, so we go*: This idea seems to

be a counterintuitive hypothesis: if you want to change a human system, change the *future*. More specifically this principle suggests that perhaps the most potent vehicle for transforming human systems is our ongoing projection of a future image. What does a future image have to do with present behavior? The collective image of the future, as projected in ongoing conversations and categories of discourse, guides what there is to notice in the present and in that way guides action. Futurist Elise Boulding understood the power of future imagery and warned that a world of technocratic problem solvers may be truncating our capacity to create positive images. As a culture we need to cultivate “image literacy” — just like the best athletes — the capacity to form anticipatory images of the future so we can perform into them. Studies of Olympic champions and the best professional athletes reveal that they learn and master the skill of imaging the perfect performance better than most. Boulding fears that we are losing our image literacy, that capacity to “combine the materials of inner and outer experience worlds, drawn from all the senses to shape new patterns of ‘reality.’ Children do it all the time, but it is called daydreaming, and they are punished for it.”⁵

- *Positive Images pull positive action:* as we express hope, joy and caring, so we create new relations. It is important not to shy away from the “positive” in this formula. In the world of day to day relationships, negotiations, and coordinated activity it seems absurd to pretend that affect and emotion do not, or should not, play a role in how work (and change) proceeds. Humanistic psychology has outlined the power of positive regard and supportive affect. People and organizations are heliotropic; that is they tend to grow in the direction of the helio, or life source. To grow toward the light of a positive anticipatory image suggests that conversations embedded in hope, joy, inspiration and other positive affect are *key* (not by-products) to lasting change and enduring health. Simply put, the more unconditionally positive the questions we ask, the more opportunities to create and sustain a generative discourse. Experience of organizational change with AI suggests that people are deeply moved and committed when asked questions about those moments in their experience that were life-giving and hope-producing. Hopeful images of the future, when linked to past actual experiences, are compelling, attractive, and create social bonds when shared. Hopeful imagery attracts energy and mobilizes action and intention. Positive images in this

sense *lead to* positive actions, not the converse.

- *Stories connect:* Stories weave a connectedness that bridges the past with the future. The act of sharing stories of the best of the past (search for strengths in action) initiates a powerful interaction and relationship from which cooperation and desire to change ensues. Stories thus become catalysts for change. Because they operate on emotional and metaphoric levels, stories move us before we “know” why we are being moved. They reach us before we have a chance to put up our defenses. Stories — not lists and wall plaques - in organizations communicate deeply held values, turning points, and amazing acts that give texture to the culture, and the stronger that culture is, the longer lasting and more successful the enterprise. By engaging in others’ stories, we connect and we learn. The past, present, and future are not separate unconnected stages, but rather beginnings, middles and endings. . .of a story in progress. We constitute (and reconstitute) our lives as meaningful by seeing them and expressing them through stories.

What is the role of positive emotions?

There is one more key observation about this strength-based reframing of human system change and development. We have noted above that deep and lasting change comes from changing our anticipatory images of the future. In fact, positive images of the future may be so powerful that they guide us at the cellular level. Studies of the placebo effect, for instance, have demonstrated that images of health and well being might play an important part in actually releasing the mechanisms necessary for healing and recovery.⁶ For the last decade or so, the sub-field of Positive Psychology has demonstrated the positive effects of frequent and/or sustained experiences of positive emotion, a usual consequence of sharing stories about strengths, engaging in imagining positive future images, or interacting throughout the AI stages described earlier. Barbara Fredrickson, a major thought leader in this research, summarizes part of the findings in her “broaden and build” model.⁷ Under frequent and/or sustained experience of positive emotions, we broaden our response repertoires to situations and we build resilience to negative emotional outburst. Think of this in terms of individual counseling or advising. If we wish the client, student, subordinate, etc. to consider more or new alternatives for action, they are more likely to under conditions (in conversational space) that create positive emotions.

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Recent research in coaching interactions with fMRI technology helps explain this power of positive emotions.⁸ Given the coach's choice to begin a session with a conversation about the coachee's "ideal self" (preferred future) before addressing feedback data from 360 degree review surveys, or to go directly to the data feedback (gap analysis, basically) the coachee is more likely to experience Positive Emotional Arousal (PEA) or Negative Emotional Arousal (NEA), respectively. PEA triggers a parasympathetic nervous response while NEA triggers a sympathetic nervous response. In the parasympathetic dynamic, the individual embraces change, is open to new ideas, is interested in future possibilities, and open to learning, all rooted in a fundamental orientation of compassion toward others. In the sympathetic nervous response, blood pressure goes up, imagery parts of the brain shut down, and the focus is on the near-term survival or stress reduction. Thus at a very cellular level, our emotional state impacts our stance toward, and ability to engage in, change or developmental actions.

Implications for Coaching, Mentoring, and Advising

My hope and intention is that this discussion of a new way to understand how and why people change or engage constructively in their own development causes us to relook at how we engage in advising, coaching, or mentoring roles. Some specific, practical ways to validate these ideas for the reader could include:

- At the next meeting you preside over, sacrifice 5-7 minutes at the beginning and ask everyone present to each quickly share a story about the best thing that has happened to them at work since the last time you met. You go first to model the way. Without any analysis of the stories (just sharing and listening) notice what happens to the energy in the room as you begin with your formal agenda. You will be shocked at the visible shift toward constructive inputs and a mutual desire to be and work together!

- In working with individuals or groups, try to frequently bring them in contact with their strengths, best practices, or best experiences related to the matter at hand. You needn't avoid or eliminate discussion of problems or 'negatives' – simply reconnect them with strengths (individual or collective) to establish PEAs and the basis upon which positive possibilities can be imagined.

- Solicit stories more, and more. Instead of asking so many what or why or how questions that solicit lists of opinions, beliefs, etc., try to solicit stories about the topic or issue at hand, and then probe for underlying lessons, success factors, best practices. In so doing, the storyteller cannot help but project the success indicators into the future and begin wondering about new possibilities.

- Intentionally ask questions, solicit stories and otherwise choreograph your interactions to create an imbalance of positive anticipatory imagery over negative; at least 2:1. And note that research demonstrates even higher imbalances: 5:1 in family therapy; 6:1 for high performing teams!

- When you solicit someone's opinion about a suggestion, proposal, or plan, ask first, "What do you like or appreciate most about this, as is?" Wait, because it will take them by surprise and they will have to adjust their mindset, but they will respond. Then ask the more typical, "How would change or improve this to make it better?"

Conclusion

There are two main benefits from exploring and focusing attention on successes, assets, and moments of efficacy:

1. Our inquiry is self fulfilling: we see and create more of the positive that we are looking for;
2. Such inquiry is generative: it creates more hope and confidence in the human capacity to achieve potentialities.

When living within an appreciative framework, people and human systems develop an expansive competence, an ability to see the nascent potential and radical possibilities that expand beyond the boundaries of daily problems as they present themselves in conventional terms. Appreciative inquiry takes seriously the notion that how we live our life is a function of where we put our collective attention and asks an unsettling question: What happens if we turn our attention to what is most valuable, life-giving and vibrant in a human system?

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