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Let's change the subject and change our organization: an appreciative inquiry approach to organization change

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Takes a social constructionist view of organizational change focusing on how to engage the multitude of internal and external stakeholders. Argues that current models of change often leave people feeling demoralized and presents appreciative inquiry (AI) as an aproach to organization development that deliberately focuses attention on learning and dialogue about what gives life to an organization. Explains AI principles and the 4-D model for positive change. Provides some examples of this.

Career Development International
3/ 7 [1998] 314–319
© MCB University Press
[ISSN 1362-0436]

Organizational identities are embedded and emergent in conversation. Project planning discussions, strategic planning meetings, selection interviews, performance reviews and staff meetings are all conversations through which the identities of an organization, its products and services and its members are crafted. The efforts of change agents toward development – personal and organizational – can best be understood as interventions into the conversational processes and relational realities of the organization.

The language of organization development in the 1990s is saturated with relationally embedded words such as participation, involvement, empowerment, diversity and membership. It is readily recognized by organization development professionals that the greater the involvement of people in the process, the greater their commitment to change. That is, the more involvement people have in crafting change – personal and organizational – the more likely they are to carry it through to fruition.

From a social constructionist point of view, that posits knowledge, meaning and identity as socially generated, conscious involvement is an imperative. A constructionist view holds involvement and participation as givens. Organization stakeholders do participate, they are involved. The nature and quality of participation may not be as we would want it. It may not provide the results desired. It does, however, define the organization. To change an organization is to change the nature and quality of participation and interaction among the many organization stakeholders. It is to change who talks to whom about what. When this occurs customers and vendors become a part of the whole organization, rather than outsiders. Employees and managers have equality of voice, rather than hierarchically defined voice. Stories of success in one part of the organization are spread across the organization and become new standards of practice. Mutually valued processes, products, services and results emerge.

The question facing change agents, consultants, human resource practitioners and managers, is not whether to involve organization members and stakeholders in change but rather how to engage the multitude of internal and external stakeholders, all speaking different languages, in large scale efforts toward organizational change.

Total quality efforts, employee involvement teams and participatory management practices have been a step in the right direction. They have set the stage for an active, involved workforce. They have surfaced people's desire to contribute. And they have shown their own limits. First, they are representative rather than fostering full voice and expression among all stakeholders. Founded on small group theory that suggests the optimal size group is five to seven people, current efforts to engage the workforce involve some of the people, some of the time. In order to successfully reinvent an organization, all of the interested parties must be involved throughout the process. As the newsletter of an international window fashions company declares, "All voices, all opinions, all ideas".

Second, most of our current development models – personal and organizational – are deficit based. They engage organization members in a study of what is unsuitable, not working, not up to standard, and in need of a "fix". Problem-solving approaches to change management leave people feeling demoralized and hopeless about their future and the future of their organization. Successful development efforts depend on forms of involvement and participation that invite the best of people and their ideas to surface and to be put into practice. Successful change emerges when curiosity, creativity and inspiration are present.

Appreciative inquiry

Companies around the world are engaged in bold experiments with an innovative process of organization development called appreciative inquiry (AI). Developed by Dr David Cooperrider and colleagues at Case Western Reserve University and The Taos Institute, AI is based on the principle that organizations change in the direction of what they study. Inquiry – whether it is an organization survey, a question posed by a manager at the start of a meeting, or the study used to

redesign a work process – is fateful. It plants the seeds of the future.

Consider, for example, two ways you as a manager might welcome new employees. If you ask that they tell you of difficulties they encounter as they get acquainted with their new colleagues and new job, you are, no matter how well intended, planting seeds of difficulties; and you will most certainly hear about them. If on the other hand, you request that they seek to discover what contributes to their new work group's high levels of cooperation and success, you are planting seeds of learning about cooperation and team success. On a daily basis the agenda for organizational performance, learning and change is established through inquiry and dialogue.

AI deliberately focuses the attention, dialogue and learning of an organization's members and stakeholders on what gives life to the organization and its people when they are at its best. By assuming the best of people, organizations and relationships, AI leaves deficit-oriented approaches behind and offers affirmative processes for organization development.

Appreciative inquiry principles

AI, as an organization development intervention, reflects a set of principles drawn from current theory and research in the human and social sciences (Srivastva and Cooperrider, 1990). It recognizes the essential connectedness of all life and provides opportunities for the creation of relationally generated meaning and organizational practice.

The constructionist principle

Organizations are invented, enacted and maintained through processes of social interaction, and as a result are changed in the same manner. The constructionist principle places emphasis on language and relational processes for establishing meaning, identity and order. In *Realities and Relationships*, Gergen describes the foundation for the constructionist principle in AI,

> For constructionists, descriptions and explanations are neither driven by the world as it is, nor are they the inexorable outcomes of genetic or structural propensitites within the individual. Rather they are the result of human coordination of action. Words take on their meaning only within the context of ongoing relationships.

Language and relationships are our primary vehicles for constructing organizations, communities and our world. Language, communication and relationships are tools for creating realities, meaning and social order. Organizations are social constructions – repetitive patterns of communication and story telling.

The poetic principle

As conversational realities, organizations move in the direction of what is studied and talked about. Modern management and especially total quality management has us studying problems and their multiple causes. In doing so we give life to the repetitive cycle of problem solving and to deficit views of organizational life. Problem solving, cynicism, and deficit thinking have become management habits. AI provides an alternative in that it invites us to organize around what gives hope and joy rather than what creates fear and control. Organizations are guided by socially created and ever changing practices, not by unchangeable iron laws.

The dominant metaphor for organizations in a constructionist sense is that they are like a good book, there to be read and reread, interpreted and reinterpreted. Just as a book takes on its meaning in the act of reading, so does the organization take on its meaning in the act of telling its stories. Organizational stories are the habit patterns of the organization. They tell organization members what they must do and be in order to fit in and be successful in the organization. If we hear stories of distrust and turfism, then we will certainly find and possibly create our own cases of distrust and turfism. If, on the other hand, we hear stories about respect and collaboration across functional lines of business, then we learn that respect and collaboration are the workplace norms. AI assumes that as an organization's dominant stories change and evolve, so does the organization.

The anticipatory principle

Images held in stories, metaphors, pictures and artifacts guide organization action. The stories told about an organization's future are the best determinants of its future. Images, whether explicitly described or implicitly carried by organization stakeholders, command great power over the future. Eisler in *The Chalice and the Blade*, speaks about the role of imagery in making manifest the material world,

> Although we don't usually think of them this way, most social realities – schools, hospitals, stock exchanges, political parties, churches – are actualizations of ideas that once existed only in the minds of a few women and men. This is also true of the abolition of slavery, the replacement of monarchies with republics, and all the other progress we have made in the last few hundred years. Even physical realities – tables, books, pots, airplanes, violins – are

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> actualizations of human ideas. But for new ideas to be translated into new realities requires not only clarity of vision but also the opportunity to change old realities.

At any point in time the organization's future potential can be known through the stories told about it by stakeholders. In thriving organizations the frequency of positive, hopeful stories is greater than the frequency of negative, cynical stories. What we anticipate is what we enact and give life to as organization reality. For example, when a dominant organization story is one of poor management credibility it is very difficult for managers to enact credibility. People will seek actions that support the story of poor management credibility. The image of poor management credibility guides organization behavior until a more positive and compelling life force is invited to come forth. In the same way, when a dominant organization story is about extraordinary customer service, as it was in the early days of Federal Express, customer service guides interactions throughout the organization as well as with customers.

The simultaneity principle

Organization development has historically been thought of as a long-term process involving step by step diagnosis, feedback, action planning and implementation. AI assumes, invites and evokes the simultaneity of learning and change. When organized around topics of sincere interest and curiosity, AI evokes learning and change, through interviews and dialogues, aimed at organizational discovery, dream, design and destiny.

Modern management has given life to organizations as structures and systems. Modern management practices tend to be linear and sequential as in the plan-do-check-act sequence for quality improvement which conceptualizes change as the result of a series of actions occurring over a long period of time. In contrast, from a postmodern perspective, change is an ever-present organization reality. It does not need to be created, but merely evoked and brought forth. Patterns of thinking and repetitively enacted organization habits shift simultaneously when organization stakeholders engage in AI.

Rather than being the cause of organization change, AI is the vehicle for change to emerge. As a high-involvement process, it leads simultaneously to the reconfiguration of organizational meaning and relationships. It shifts the network of who talks to whom about what. The careful selection of topics for the AI process alters the organization agenda and enables more positive patterns of thinking and performance to emerge.

The positive principle

Organizations can grow, develop and evolve by focusing on what gives life. The positive principle suggests that we can create successful and sustainable organizations by attending to the affirmative, the positively compelling and that which stirs positive human sentiments. It directs us to focus on what we value and hope for, as well as what brings joy and wonder to organization life. Jung's writing suggests the possibility for growth stemming from a change of focus,

> I have often seen individuals simply outgrow a problem which had destroyed others. This outgrowing was seen to consist in a new level of consciousness. Some higher or wider interest arose on the person's horizon, and through this widening of his view the insoluble problem lost its urgency. It was not solved logically in its own terms, but faded out when confronted with a new and. stronger life tendency.

Under all the skepticism, cynicism and pessimism in today's organizations are hopes and dreams of a better world. It is possible and certainly more inspiring and enriching to discuss and to organize for hopes and dreams than to discuss and organize to overcome problems. Positive possibilities compel action freely given, while problems often require fear as a motivational force.

Change efforts afford the opportunity to evoke a wide range of human sentiments and actions. They open a window of time and space that is generative of new possibilities. What gets invited through inquiry and dialogue forms the basis of the new organization. Discussions of change as a flood of problems to overcome will indeed flood an organization with problems. Discussions of change as an organizational act of creativity, in response to market and global demands, provides a forum for creating a new organization interested and able to meet market and global demands.

The positive principle presents organization stakeholders with an ethical imperative – realizing that words create worlds – to choose carefully what is studied and discussed in the process of constructing the new organization.

The appreciative inquiry 4-D process

The 4-D model of AI is a process for positive change. Based on the assumption the change occurs through thoughtful inquiry and dialogue into affirmative life giving forces, the four phases of the process are: discovery, dream, design and delivery.

Discovery – appreciating what gives life

The discovery phase is a quest to identify positive stories and spread them throughout an organization. It brings into focus what gives life and energy to people, their work and their organization. It is based on the assumption that life-giving forces are indeed present in every situation, but our habits of organizing and talking often overlook the positive in favor of analyzing obstacles, resistances and deficits. The discovery phase shifts the balance of organizational attention from what is not working to what is working and what may possibly work in the future.

An all-too-common myth is that we learn from our mistakes. Actually, all we can learn from mistakes is what not to do again. Positive learning and innovation comes from studying, adapting and replicating what works. An ancient Taoist adage suggests, "if you respect and admire a quality in another, make it your own". The discovery phase is a quest to fill the organization's conversations with talk of positive possibilities.

The starting point of any AI is the selection of affirmative topics. As organizations move in the direction of what they study the choice of topics to study is significant and strategic.

Topics are stated in the affirmative and must be something the organization wants to learn about and enhance in their way of doing business. For example, a recent client raised concerns over turnover and wanted to use it as an inquiry topic. When I reminded them that topic choice is like planting seeds and asked if they really wanted more turnover, they quickly chose retention as one of their affirmative topics.

At the heart of AI is the appreciative interview: generally done as a mutual interview among organization members, it may also be conducted as a focus group process. Affirmative topics are turned into interview questions and an interview guide is created which explores a person's beginnings with the organization, what they most value about themselves, their work and the organization, their appreciative stories related to the topics and their hopes and dreams for the organization. Discovery involves the mass mobilization of interviews. Ideally, all members of an organization will be interviewed.

Dream – envisioning what might be

The dream phase is a time for groups of people to engage in thinking big, thinking out of the box, and thinking out of the boundaries of what has been in the past. It is a time for people to describe their wishes and dreams for their work, their working relationships and their organization.

The dream phase of the 4-D process encourages participants to consider what it is that their organization, whether a department, business unit or entire company, is being called to do. This phase connects the work of all the members of the organization to a greater purpose. The dream phase takes place in a large group meeting during which the data and stories collected in the discovery phase are shared. Wishes and dreams for the future of the organization are often acted out to further dramatize the positive possibilities envisioned for the organization.

Design – determining what will be

AI is a high-involvement process. The design phase provides an opportunity for large numbers of employees and stakeholders to come together to co-create their organization.

While the discovery and dream phases may be described as generating and expanding the organization's images of itself, the design and delivery phases are about making choices for the organization and its members. In the design phase, organization members and stakeholders including customers and vendors participate in crafting what are called "provocative propositions" or design statements.

Appreciative organization design is grounded in the data and stories collected during the discovery process. While the dream process encourages possibility thinking, the design process focuses on actionable possibilities. Provocative propositions, however, are intended to stretch the organization as it moves to realize them.

Successful organizations navigate the white waters of change in ways that maintain the positive image of the company in the stories of employees and stakeholders. Participation in the design process enables organization members to reorient and realign themselves quickly to the changing organization and business environment.

Delivery – planning what will be

Change occurs in all phases of the AI as it provides an open forum for employees to contribute and to step forward in the service of the organization. The delivery process specifically focuses on action planning at both the personal and organizational levels. During delivery sessions commitments are made to ensure the realization of the provocative propositions. Individuals commit to applications and action plans, small groups work on areas of collaborative effort and teams may be established for new initiatives.

Alignment on actions to be taken is high as a result of the extensive involvement of large numbers of people in the discovery, dream

and design processes. It is through the mass mobilization of interviews and large group meetings that the "sense of the renewed organization" emerges.

AI is a grounded process for organization development and thus the 4-D model takes shape differently in different organizations and contexts. The process may take place in one meeting, as was the case of a Brazilian food processing company that closed the plant for five days and invited 700 employees, customers and vendors to participate in redesigning the organization. The process may also take place over months, with each step involving progressively more people until the entire organization is engaged.

Imagine an organization whose 850 employees interview one another to discover stories of their company at its best and how they contribute to it. Imagine an organization where 250 labor union leaders and managers meet to discover the possibilities for partnership that will benefit the company, the unions and their respective members and stakeholders. Imagine an organization that brings hundreds of people together on line to share positive life affirming stories, and then to discuss and create global policies and practices. Imagine an organization where 1,500 people are interviewed and 500 come together to envision and design their company's future. AI engages the whole organization in discovering the best of what has been and dreaming about the best of what might be.

Powerful applications of appreciative inquiry

The applications of AI are varied, ranging from global organizing, corporate culture change, team building and leadership development to selection interviewing and performance management. While organizations benefit when using AI as a vehicle for organization change, comments from participants engaged in AI processes frequently comment on its tremendous personal application and benefits.

Organization culture change

The largest division of an international company used AI to engage 850 employees and some customers, vendors and community members in their Focus 2,000 process for organization culture change. Owing to the tremendous impact on both morale and company finances, the 4-D process is now being used for strategic planning on an annual basis.

At GTE, AI has been used as the central process for culture change, resulting in the receipt of the American Society for Training and Development Annual Culture Change Award.

Community transformation

A community development process called Imagine Chicago is using AI as their vehicle for the transformation of the city of Chicago. They are conducting one million interviews within the city – one for every household. After two years, results are apparent in the educational system, the relationships among city groups, government and business. Currently AI is being designed into the educational curriculum throughout the city. Similar projects have occurred or are under way in cities, states and countries around the world, including Imagine South Carolina, and Imagine Western Austraila.

Organizational renewal

A major health care cooperative applied AI to engage 1,500 people – staff, nurses, doctors, administrators and patients – in the creation of a renewal process. Interviews were conducted among 1,500 people; and 500 attended the Summit during which they envisioned, designed and committed to the organization's future. As a result, collaboration is at an all time high, there is a renewed sense of hope among employees and a steadily improving financial outlook for the organization.

Organization excellence

Corporations are using AI for enhancing organizational excellence in business units, departments and work groups. Teams selected from various business units choose their own topics, develop interview guides and conduct interviews within their own organizations. They then attend an Appreciative Learning Summit along with eight to ten other teams. During the summit teams share learnings with one another, and design and plan change within their own organization. The cross-functional learning is extraordinary.

Customer surveys

Companies are changing their survey strategies to include studies of their best customers and what satisfies them. As findings are collected and shared throughout the organization, significant increases in customer satisfaction and employee satisfaction occur. Employee morale increases as employees hear stories of satisfied customers. Stories from satisfied customers provide great insight into how to improve customer relations company-wide.

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Mergers and acquisitions

A major accounting firm used AI to manage successfully the integration of several acquisitions over a short period of time. The new company was designed during an Appreciative Summit based on interviews thoughout the merging business. At all levels of the organization, managers and employees from merging companies interviewed one another to discover the strengths of the partnership. Newly created business units and work teams used AI to discover their own hopes and expectations and to enhance relationships with customers and vendors. The affirmative involvement of hundreds of people contributed to the successful integration – both financially and culturally.

Employee relations and HR management

Companies are using AI for performance planning and appraisal, 360º feedback, selection interviewing and employee relations. When people are given opportunities to hear how they are valued and contributing to their work group and the organization, they feel better about themselves, their work and as a result want to do more. Mike Burns, vice-president, HR, Hunter Douglas Inc. offered the following thoughts on AI:

> For years, I have used the analogy of the "cup being half full rather than half empty" when helping folks look at the positive side of issues rather than the negative. When individuals (or groups) see things from the perspective of the "best that has been" and the "best of what is" and they frame their future vision into the "best of what could be", the transition is magical. The whole perspective becomes positive, the energy level increases and the cup goes from half empty to half full. For example, in the employment interview process (frequently a stressful situation for an applicant), I have found it helpful to ask about a peak professional experience from their past. This provides the applicant a chance to remember a very positive situation and to tell me about it. This gives me a great deal of insight into the candidate and helps set a positive tone for the interview.

Organizations can no longer afford to operate as if the needs of the business and the needs of the people doing business are at odds. They must begin to operate with the realization that people – employees, customers, and vendors – are not only the greatest resource for creating the organization's future, but they are the only resource. Human resource professionals, along with organizational leadership must look beyond the organizing principles, processes and change management practices of yesterday. They must seek out innovative processes that collectively and positively involve people in the design of their own future at work – AI.

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