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Appreciative Inquiry: The Power of the Unconditional Positive Question

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Appreciative Inquiry and the Power of the Positive Question

Appreciative inquiry distinguishes itself from critical modes of action research by its deliberately affirmative assumptions about people, organizations, and relationships. It focuses on asking the *unconditional positive question* to ignite transformative dialogue and action within human systems. More than a technique, appreciative inquiry is a way of organizational life -- an intentional posture of continuous discovery, search, and inquiry into conceptions of life, joy, beauty, excellence, innovation, and freedom.

Our experience suggests that human systems grow and construct their future realities in the direction of what they most persistently, actively, and collectively ask questions about. If, for example, our interest is in developing an organization that instills and nurtures enthusiasm, would it be better to do a low morale survey documenting the root causes of low morale and then try to intervene to fix the problem, or might it be more effective to mobilize a system-wide inquiry into moments of exceptional enthusiasm and then invite organization members to co-create a future for their system that nurtures and supports even more enthusiasm? Appreciative inquiry is premised on the belief that it is much faster and more straight forward to go through the front door of enthusiasm. Going through the back door to study into low morale on the way to a future of enthusiasm is an unnecessary detour that simply makes no sense.

As a method of organizational intervention, the underlying assumption of appreciative inquiry is that organizing is a possibility to be embraced. The phases include: (1) topic choice, (2) discovery, (3) dream, (4) design, and (5) destiny (see Figure I for a diagram of the appreciative inquiry 4-D model). Selecting a positive topic to explore is an essential starting point.

Appreciative inquiry is based on the premise that organizations move in the direction of what they study. For example, when groups study human problems and conflicts, they often find that both the number and severity of these problems grow. In the same manner, when groups study high human ideals and achievements, such as peak experiences, best practices, and noble

accomplishments, these phenomena, too, tend to flourish. In this sense, topic choice is a fateful act. Based on the topics they choose to study, organizations enact and construct worlds of their own making that in turn act back on them.

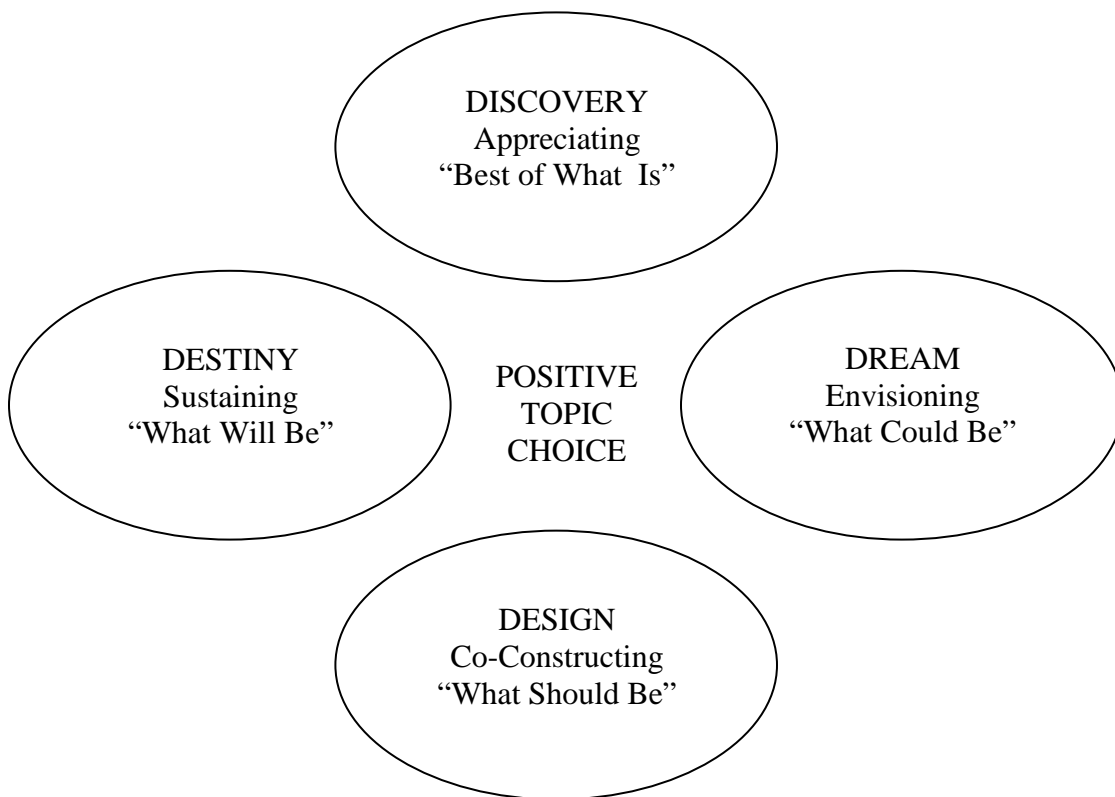
The purpose of the discovery phase is to search for, highlight, and illuminate those factors that give life to the organization, the "best of what is" in any given situation. Regardless of how few the moments of excellence, the task is to zero in on them and to discuss the factors and forces that made them possible. Valuing the "best of what is" opens the way to building a better future by dislodging the certainty of existing deficit constructions. By asking organizational members to focus, even if only for a moment, on the life-giving aspects of organizational life, appreciative inquiry creates enough uncertainty about the dominance of deficit vocabularies to allow organizational members to consider new possibilities.

The second phase is to dream about what could be. As alternative voices enter the conversation, new ways of seeing and understanding the world begin to emerge. Because these perspectives have been cued by the asking of unconditional positive questions, the vocabularies used to describe and envision social and organizational reality are creative and constructive in the sense that they invite new, positive alternatives for organizing. By generating words, phrases, and stories that illustrate the organization at its best and paint a compelling picture of what the organization could and should become, the dream phase liberates organizational members from the constraining power of existing reified constructions and offers positive guiding images of the future.

The third phase is to design the future through dialogue. It is a process of finding common ground by sharing discoveries and possibilities, dialoguing and debating, and finally getting to the point where everyone can say, "Yes this is an ideal or vision that we value and should aspire to. Let's make it happen." It is through dialogue that personal conversations evolve into organizational discourse and individual ideals becomes cooperative or shared visions for the future. The key to this phase is to create a deliberately inclusive and supportive context for conversation and interaction.

The final phase, destiny, is an invitation to construct the future through innovation and action. Appreciative inquiry accomplishes this by including ever-broadening circles of participants to join in the conversation. Each inquirer brings additional linguistic resources and helps to build a language that creates broader and deeper possibilities for action. Together, organizational members live into the systems they have designed in ways that translate their ideals into reality and their beliefs into practice.

Figure I: Phases of Appreciative Inquiry – The 4-D Model



In the next section of this chapter, a case illustration is shared in which appreciative inquiry is used to transform the discourse between more than 120 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) worldwide. The case shows how the positive questions of appreciative inquiry can be used to release a virtual explosion of new vocabularies through which social and organizational innovations can be constructed. In the final section of the chapter, eight positive relational consequences of the appreciative approach are developed and a call is extended to the field of

action research to create a positive revolution of learning and change by experimenting with appreciative modes of inquiry yet to be discovered.

Transforming Paternalism into Partnership – The Case of the Global Inquiry

The Global Relief and Development Organization (GRDO) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in the United States and Canada that works with about 120 partner organizations around the world. When we first began to work with GRDO, they came to us with the following story. “We have,” they said, “a system of building and measuring organizational capacity that is the envy of virtually every Northern NGO that has seen it. The system allows us to evaluate the organizational capacity of our partner organizations every six months according to five key criteria: their governance, managerial, technical, financial, and networking capabilities. We then use this information to design interventions – like training, consulting, systems improvements, finding new sources of funding, etc. – to strengthen their capacity. We also use the data to rate them and make informed decisions about how much we want to invest in them, both in terms of human and financial capital. In many ways, it’s a perfect system....And yet, many of our partner organizations and even our own staff do not like it. They consider it to be an imposition, and they find it tedious, irrelevant, and in some cases, demeaning. We want to do a worldwide appreciative inquiry to find out what’s wrong with the system and fix it!”

It is important to point out that GRDO and its partners were entrapped in many embedded layers of deficit vocabularies (two of which we will mention here) that restricted their ability to accomplish their dreams. At the level of organizational architecture, GRDO’s system for measuring organizational capacity was designed from a deficit perspective. It established a uniform global standard for a “healthy” organization and then evaluated partner organizations to discover the areas in which they were weak. Thus, the system itself created a context in which deficit vocabularies and negative blaming attributions dominated.

GRDO and its partners were also entwined in a more complex and pervasive discourse of deficit that had to do with paternalism and dependency between the Northern and Southern worlds. GRDO harbored the implicit belief that its organizational knowledge was superior to that of its Southern partners because it was from the more advanced North. GRDO was also a source of

funding for its partner organizations and therefore felt it had to be in a policing or monitoring role when it came to money. Thus, it was virtually impossible for GRDO to see itself in the role of an equal partner and learner in the capacity building process. It simply did not have the vocabulary to describe itself in that way.

Topic Choice

Resolute in our conviction that the seeds of change are implicit in the very first question we ask, we tried to discover the deeper yearning contained in GRDO's "problem statement." We asked something like, "What do you *really* want from this process? When you explore your boldest hopes and highest aspirations, what is it that you ultimately want?" Quickly their vision began to unfold. They said that they wanted to see a wildfire of organizational capacity building spread around the world in such a way that thousands of NGOs would be enabled to cooperate effectively with millions of marginalized communities to dramatically increase and sustain a dignified standard of living. They dreamed of an end to poverty and world hunger; social, political, and economic vibrancy; and the kinds of relationships between the Northern and Southern hemispheres that approached nothing short of global community.

Based on this image of the future, we, along with GRDO and its partners, launched a three-year global appreciative inquiry into the topic of "Best Practices of Organizational Capacity Building from Around the World" (see Johnson & Ludema, 1997). The purpose of the inquiry was twofold: first, to learn from each other about how to build strong, healthy, vibrant NGOs; and second, to discover new ways to work together in a partnership of equals. The inquiry was designed to follow a customized 4-D appreciative inquiry process, allowing the positive voice and experience of all the participating organizations to shape the learning and the outcomes of the study.

Discovery

In the first year of the inquiry, the discovery phase was carried out. It began with the formation of a global design team that included representatives from all of the different regions engaged in the study – East Africa, West Africa, Asia, Latin America, and North America. Once the design team was in place, large-group retreats that lasted four days were held in each of the regions to

familiarize GRDO and its partner organizations with appreciative inquiry, create an interview protocol, and launch the study. Appreciative inquiry asks two basic unconditional positive questions:

1. What in this particular setting or context makes organizing possible? What gives life to our organization and allows it to function at its best?
2. What are the possibilities, latent or expressed, that provide opportunities for even better (more effective and value-congruent) forms of organizing?

Building on these two core questions, the inquiry participants developed variations on the following protocol as a guide for their inquiry:

Appreciative Interview Protocol

1. Think of a time in your entire experience with your organization when you have felt most excited, most engaged, and most alive. What were the forces and factors that made it a great experience? What was it about you, others, and your organization that made it a peak experience for you?
2. What do you value most about yourself, your work, and your organization?
3. What are your organization's best practices (ways you manage, approaches, traditions)?
4. What are the unique aspects of your culture that most positively affect the spirit, vitality, and effectiveness of your organization and its work?
5. What is the core factor that "gives life" to your organization?
6. What are the three most important hopes you have to heighten the health and vitality of your organization for the future?

During the remainder of the year, each of the 120 partner organizations went back to its respective country and engaged in “listening tours” with members of the communities in which it worked. The inquiry was made as broadly participatory as possible. For example, in East Africa, 22 GRDO staff and members of 31 partner organizations were trained in appreciative inquiry at the first regional conference. They in turn used the same process with the 888 communities in which they work. An average of two people from each group attended each conference or workshop. Thus, in East Africa alone, over the course of the inquiry, as many as 1,800 voices were included in the conversation. The total number of participants worldwide is estimated to have reached as high as 5,000 persons.

Dream

In year two, the dream and design phases began. At the beginning of the year, a second round of large-group retreats was held between GRDO and its partners. The retreats provided a forum in which the organizations could share with each other the stories and best practices they discovered in their interviews with community members, articulate their dreams for the future, and begin to re-design their approach to building and measuring organizational capacity.

For example, a woman from Senegal told of how she and friend started an initiative to combat the rampant spread of AIDS in their country. From the beginning it was an uphill battle. Government ministries denied there was a problem, Muslim and Christian clerics denounced their efforts publicly, organized prostitute rings threatened their lives, and they had no money. Five years after they began, however, they had made remarkable progress. They formed a board of supportive government, religious, medical, and community leaders; they equipped a staff of over forty women to provide AIDS and health education throughout the country; in collaboration with the government, they started a center for AIDS treatment and research; and they attracted an increasing amount of financial support from both domestic and international sources. When asked what were the forces and factors that made this exceptional growth possible, they highlighted six core ingredients: their own deep sense of call, the compelling sense of hope held by the victims of AIDS and their families, the unwavering support of key individuals and organizations, the unique gifts and contacts of their board, the dedication and skill of their staff, and the grace of God.

During the second regional conference in West Africa, this story was told and woven together with literally hundreds of other “peak experience” stories from Senegal, Mali, Niger, Guinea, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. While all this was unfolding in West Africa, similar processes were under way in East Africa, Asia, Latin America, and North America. A virtual explosion of positive stories were being shared, and the way GRDO and its partners talked about themselves, each other, and their joint work was beginning to shift from a conversation of deficit to a conversation of possibility. Previously, GRDO and its partners rarely heard these compelling stories and rarely explored the core life-giving forces of their organizations, simply because they rarely asked the positive questions to elicit them.

As they entered the dream phase, many organizations described their image of the future in metaphorical terms. A group from Honduras imagined its ideal organization as a winding river carrying with it nutrients of all kinds, thus bringing life and vitality to an entire region. In West Africa, the participants described their organizations as fruit trees deeply rooted in the soil of African culture and tradition. They identified eight essential capacities that serve as “water, fertilizer, and sunlight” to support the healthy development of their organizations in the unique cultural contexts of West Africa – servant leadership, participatory management, organizational development, resource development, community empowerment, technical expertise, networking and partnership, and spiritual resilience. Then they began to wonder what would happen if these capacities were thriving to the fullest in their organizations.

Design

The design stage began as members started to explore systematically what kinds of social architecture would most powerfully translate their dreams and visions into day-to-day reality. Over the course of the second year of the inquiry, hundreds of gatherings took place worldwide in which participants developed a series of locally relevant “provocative propositions” that, based on their best experiences from the past and their highest hopes for the future, described their “ideal” organizational architecture. A provocative proposition is a statement that bridges the best of “what is” with what “might be.” These propositions, then, became the basis for a new, radically-dispersed and broadly-participatory system of organizational capacity building.

In collaboration with its neighbors and with GRDO staff, each community and each NGO participating in the study developed its own criteria and process for developing capacity in its unique local context. For example, in West Africa, provocative propositions of the ideal, similar to the example below, were developed for each of the eight essential capacities mentioned above.

Provocative Proposition – Networking and Partnership

We are highly networked organizations, broadly and deeply. We have strong, supportive, mutual relationships with each other, other NGOs, our donors, government officials, and the communities where we work. We celebrate our similarities and differences, understand each other's values, respect each other's cultures, and learn as much as we can from one another. We admit our needs and contract to help each other grow. We deliberately solicit and rely on each other's input, and we support each other in serving other parts of the world. In every way possible we strive to compliment one another.

It was also during this second year that GRDO's language began to shift around partnership as a result of listening to the voices of its partners. Midway through the year GRDO convened a Global Summit meeting at which representatives from each of the regional conferences convened to integrate learning at a global level. In his opening remarks, GRDO's CEO led with the following words that reflect the organization's change in perspective:

Through the appreciative inquiry process we have begun to realize that of all the crucial characteristics of organizational capacity building, none is more important than the need for mutual partnership between organizations. Organizational capacity is essentially an interorganizational activity, a condition that occurs when organizations enter into mutually edifying relationships with one another to carry out their respective missions in the world more effectively. This kind of transformative growth and development flourishes most fully in relationships between equals. We hope you will help us discover the possibilities as we move forward.

This is language that previously GRDO simply could not hear let alone articulate because they and their partners were locked into a form of deficit-based linguistic binary whose terms included "our system of capacity building/not our system of capacity building." Within the conditions of the binary, "good" partners were those who used the system and "bad" partners were those who refused. It was not until GRDO and its partners began to inquire into the good, the beautiful, the better, and the best that this language of possibility, previously invisible, could spring into view and offer itself as a resource for the social construction of the future.

Destiny

In year three, the delivery phase was launched. Because the restrictive grip of deficit vocabularies had been loosened and vocabularies of possibility had been unleashed, energy for action was immediately boosted within the system. People began to feel a sense of hope, excitement, cooperation and ownership about the future, and they began to unleash a veritable revolution of positive change and innovation. At the third round of large-group retreats these new initiatives were shared and a range of new joint activities were launched. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to list all of the accomplishments, the following examples provide a flavor.

An NGO in Bangladesh, having gained a new appreciation for the importance of networking, invited community members and its funding agencies into its strategic planning process. As a result, it doubled its budget and more than quadrupled the number of families it served in less than two years.

In East Africa, the NGO's that participated in the appreciative inquiry banded together to form an East Africa NGO network that would provide training, consultation, advocacy, and new sources of funding. A similar network was started in West Africa.

On a global level, GRDO launched a new initiative to link business entrepreneurs with NGOs to bring their products into the global economy. In its first two years, this initiative raised more than three million dollars and established over thirty relationships between groups of entrepreneurs and local NGOs.

GRDO and its partner organizations have also begun to hold regular Organizational Summit meetings every three years to provide a forum for strengthening relationships, finding common ground around visions for the future, and jointly enacting agendas for change.

GRDO radically redesigned its organization to support their new understanding of partnership. It moved to a team-based structure, reduced layers of hierarchy from nine to three, and formed regional teams to manage its operations. The new design has shifted the locus of power (and therefore control, learning, and innovation) from a central point in North America to multiple interdependent points through out the world.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, GRDO and its partners invented a new broadly participatory approach to organizational capacity building that far exceeded their expectations, and indeed their individual imaginations. As a result of this new system, more than 100 NGOs and thousands of communities have dramatically improved their capacity to increase and sustain a dignified standard of living.

Hundreds of social innovations similar to these emerged around the world as a result of the appreciative inquiry. But undoubtedly the most important result, and the one that enabled all the others, was the shift from vocabularies of deficit to conversations of possibility that was unlocked by the unconditional positive questions that guided the inquiry.

The Relational Consequences of Appreciation

This case illustration demonstrates how appreciative inquiry can be used as a positive mode of action research to dislodge reified vocabularies of human deficit and liberate the socially constructive potential of organizations and human communities. By unlocking existing deficit constructions, creating spaces for new voices and languages to emerge, and expanding circles of dialogue to build a supportive relational context, appreciative inquiry allows for the positive construction of social reality. There are at least five ways in which it makes this possible (see Table III for a summary of the relational consequences of appreciation).

Releases Positive Conversation within the Organization

Relational patterns in industrial-era hierarchies and bureaucracies are often held in place by problem-focused theories, assumptions, beliefs, and ideas that have been created and transmitted through language. The first and perhaps most important consequence of appreciative inquiry is that it releases an outpouring of new constructive conversations that refocus an organization's attention away from problems and toward hopeful, energizing possibilities.

These positive conversations are crucial to the healthy evolution of healthy of organizations. One of the basic theorems of appreciative inquiry is that it is the image of the future that in fact guides what might be called the current behavior of any organization (Polak, 1973).

Organizations exist, in the final analysis, because people who govern and maintain them share some sort of common discourse or projection about what the organization is, how it will function, and what it is likely to become (Cooperrider, 1990). By asking unconditionally positive questions, appreciative inquiry draws out and highlights hopeful and empowering stories, metaphors, dreams, wishes that embrace a spirit of vitality and potency – musings that typically remain unexpressed or underexpressed in organizational conversation. These positive

questions allow organizational members to inquire into the “realm of the possible,” beyond the boundaries of problems as they present themselves in conventional terms, and prefigure the very future they later help to create.

Builds an Ever-Expanding Web of Inclusion and Positive Relationships

Appreciative inquiry is a collaborative effort to discover that which is healthy, successful, and positive in organizational life. By definition, such a project is a radically participatory approach, designed to include an ever-increasing number of voices in conversations that highlight strengths, assets, hopes, and dreams. Whereas the critical impulse attempts to undermine the knowledge claims of others, the act of appreciation leads to a heightened sensitivity to multiple ways of knowing and an acceptance of a wide array of diverse experiences (Kolb, 1984). It supports open, respectful, productive dialogue between seemingly “incommensurable paradigms” and encourages a posture of empathy rather than attack when confronting differing points of view.

At the same time, momentum for change in any human system requires large amounts of positive affect and social bonding – including experiences of hope, inspiration, and the sheer joy of creating with one another. Our experience in a variety of change efforts leads us to one unmistakable and dramatic conclusion: the more positive the questions that guide an inquiry and shape a conversation, the stronger will be the relationships and the more long-lasting and effective will be the change. By inviting participants to inquire deeply into the best and most valued aspects of one another's life and work, appreciative inquiry immediately enriches understanding, deepens respect, and establishes strong relational bonds.

Creates Self-Reinforcing Learning Communities

As positive vocabularies multiply, people strengthen their capacity to put those possibilities into practice on an everyday basis. Organizational members develop increasingly textured and sophisticated vocabularies for doing things in new ways. Consider for a moment a young boy who aspires to be a basketball star. At an early age, he will have many ways to describe a poor shot – a brick, a squib, a rainbow, or an air ball – but few words other than “good” to describe a skillful shot. As he grows older and learns by watching the pros, listening to his coaches, talking

with his teammates, and monitoring his own successes, he develops an ever more textured and sophisticated vocabulary for describing a “good shot.” He discovers that balance, timing, elevation, extension, wrist action, focus, and follow through are all essential ingredients in shooting a good shot, and all this language opens up whole new worlds of possibility for him and for those around him. He now has “new knowledge” that will allow him to improve his own game, and he has an expanded capacity to see and encourage the positive strengths of others.

In this sense, there is a self-reinforcing learning cycle that develops as positive vocabularies multiply and people are drawn into relationships where they are invited to discover, see, and affirm the good and the possible in each other. In a very direct way, our capacity to learn and to that learning to use in healthy ways is developed in and through language. As the richness of our positive vocabularies increase, we become ever more able to see and learn from the strengths and potential of others, and the capacity of the whole system is multiplied.

Bolsters Democracy and Self-Organizing Throughout the System

A third important consequence of appreciative inquiry is that it dynamically promotes egalitarian relationships. In our experience, as organization members inquire into the best of one another and dream about their hopes for the future, it inevitably leads to the creation of images of less hierarchy and more equalized power and decision making. People talk about values of respect, partnership, and coming to “the table” as equals. They talk about breaking down silos between functions, transcending traditional boundaries, and going directly to the source to build futures that matter. Never, in all of our years of learning with appreciative inquiry, have we ever seen a group dream of increased hierarchy, greater power distance between individuals, or more command and control in the system.

Organizations that engage in appreciative inquiry increase their capacity for self-organizing by developing what can be called a system-wide collaborative competence (Barrett, 1995). By expanding dialogue about positive, innovative possibilities, equalizing relationships, promoting generative learning, and providing broad access to decision making and organization design, appreciative inquiry creates the conditions necessary for self-organizing to flourish. It is as though there is a direct and simultaneous link between the way we know and the kinds of

organizational forms we create. Each organizational form – the rational bureaucracy and the self-organizing human system – has also an underlying way of knowing that operates at a foundational level to provide a logic for its existence. Self-organizing systems characterized by equal distribution of power and self-management are marked by an epistemic stance of liberation, freedom, solidarity, and social construction, in which organizational members are released to co-create the worlds and realities in which they live. Similarly, they are distinguished by a deep appreciation for the miracle and mystery of organizational life, which allows members to create the future based on the strengths, assets, hopes and dreams that they cherish the most. It may well be, as we move into a new era of more egalitarian organizing, that appreciative modes of inquiry will be to self-organizing systems what deficit-based approaches to action research have long been to command and control bureaucracies.

Provides a Reservoir of Strength and Unleashes a Positive Revolution of Change

Just as the vocabularies of deficit of the critical social and organizational sciences contribute to broad cultural enfeeblement, so to the vocabularies of possibility and hope sparked by the unconditional positive questions of appreciative inquiry lead to organizational strengthening and widespread social imagination and invention. As organizations inquire ever more deeply into the forces and factors that give them life, they tap into a hidden reservoir of strengths that can be called the organization's "positive core" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999). This positive core is comprised of all the competencies, capacities, achievements, assets, best practices, values, traditions, wisdoms, inspired emotions that lie deep at the heart the organization.

On the one hand, the positive core provides the organization with a reassuring sense of history, identity, and continuity that gives calming stability and guidance for decision-making in the midst of turbulence. On the other hand, it generates energy for action. In the same way that the nucleus of an atom generates enough electrical power to support an entire region of a country, an organization's positive core nourishes the human learning and inspiration needed for system-wide social innovation. The positive core is an organization's most potent renewable source of energy for change, free and accessible to all organizational members. Once an idea or initiative is connected to the positive core, it takes a quantum leap forward toward its eventual realization. Thus, the more an organization experiments with crafting and asking the unconditional positive

question, the more its conversations tap into its positive core, and the more a positive revolution of change (De Bono, 1992) is unleashed and liberated throughout the system.

Table III: Summary of the Relational Consequences of Appreciation

Releases Positive Conversation Within the Organization – Unconditional positive questions ignite a virtual explosion of constructive conversations that refocus an organization’s attention away from problems and toward hopeful, energizing possibilities
Builds an Ever-Expanding Web of Inclusion and Positive Relationships – An ever-increasing number of voices are included in conversations that highlight strengths, assets, hopes, and dreams. Respect, understanding, and strong relational bonds are formed.
Creates Self-Reinforcing Learning Communities – As positive vocabularies multiply, people strengthen their capacity to put possibilities into practice. Organizational members learn increasingly sophisticated vocabularies for doing things in new ways.
Bolsters Democracy and Self-Organizing – Appreciative self-organizing systems are marked by an epistemic stance of liberation, freedom, solidarity, social construction, and a deep appreciation for the miracle and mystery of organizational life.
Provides a Reservoir of Strength and Unleashes a Positive Revolution of Change – The aim of appreciative inquiry is to discover the organization’s “positive core,” which provides continuity, strength, and stability in the face of turbulence and is also the source of energy for positive innovation and change.

Conclusion

Ever since Descartes, the Western intellectual tradition has suffered from a form of epistemological schizophrenia (Popkin, 1979). Its intent of building knowledge to enhance the human condition is a noble one, yet its methodological starting point of doubt and negation undermines its constructive intent. Appreciative inquiry recognizes that inquiry and change are not truly separate moments, but are simultaneous. Inquiry *is* intervention, and the seeds of change – that is, the things people think and talk about, the things people discover and learn, and the things that inform dialogue and inspire action – are implicit in the very first questions we ask. In this light, it may well be, that as action researchers and as organizational leaders, the greatest gift that we can give to science, society, and humanity, is continuously to craft and to pose the unconditional positive question that allows whole systems to discover, amplify, and multiply the alignment of strengths in such a way that weaknesses and deficiencies become increasingly irrelevant.

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