Effecting Positive Change
Through
Appreciative Inquiry

A presentation by

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"This is a time of tremendous call and promise for business, government and society for a different approach to produce results and act in ways that make the world a better place; a time of great opportunity to venture beyond what we know; an opportunity for positive organizational change."

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a meta-theory and practice for approaching change of all kinds – strategic planning, diversity, process innovation, alliance building, leadership/team development, organization redesign, cultural reshaping, family and community development, etc. Philosophically and scientifically it is rooted in the new sciences (i.e., Complexity Theory/Complex Responsive Processes, Quantum Physics etc), the Sociology of Knowledge (i.e., Social Constructionist thinking), and most significantly, breakthrough research in the power of words, images and positive emotions.

Rather than the 400 year old "what's wrong and how do we fix it?" framework, AI invites us to focus upon and learn from the "positive deviant" – moments of exceptional performance at the individual or system level. Appreciative Inquiry suggests that human systems, including organizations, are the reflection and product of the dominant stories that people tell about the organization – and that these stories are created each time any organizational member asks questions about the organization's performance.

AI suggests that "*we create the world by the language we use to describe it and we experience the world in line with the images we hold about it.*" By aligning systems and practices with the organization's positive, generative and creative core, AI builds on the values, aspirations, ideas for innovation, assets, strategic opportunities and best practices of the system.

AI is about inquiry and learning and using what we learn to create futures we all prefer. The core AI approach and processes are:

1. Define: Clarify the topics into which we want to inquire and figure out the practicalities of involving the whole system in the overall process
2. Discover: The positive core of the system – its opportunities, core values, assets and competencies, ideas/aspirations for innovation, hopes and best practices (which exist both within and outside)
3. Dream: Fully envision the impact or results (for employees, customers/clients, shareholders, and society) of taking the positive core and expanding it, building upon it
4. Design: Create vibrant, actionable descriptions of the high leverage items in the organization's social architecture, i.e., the roles, relationships, HR processes, strategic structures and practices – changes which when implemented will catapult the organization into the future described by the dream and changes which when implemented will serve to sustain the momentum of positive transformation
5. Deliver/Destiny: Invite inspired action (rather than the burden of imposed action plans) and ongoing inquiry into the positive as an implementation strategy

"The task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths making our weaknesses irrelevant."

Peter Drucker

AI is used by groups as diverse as the American Red Cross, McDonalds, John Deere, Glaxo SmithKline, the U.S. Navy, the Episcopal Church USA, British Airways, and British Petroleum where it has been applied to customer service improvement, strategic planning, merger integration, alliance building, union management, process innovation and reinvention, team and leadership development, organization design, and cultural transformation. Appreciative Inquiry is increasingly used as a primary approach to successful executive consulting and is emerging as the future of organizational development.

Bernard Mohr has taught at the Universities of Toronto, Ottawa, Dayton, and Cornell as well as at the Canadian Centre for Management Development, The Danish Center for Management, NTL Institute, and the Taos Institute. He is the author *of Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination* (on which this seminar was based); *The Essentials of Appreciative Inquiry: A Roadmap for Creating Positive Futures;* and *The Appreciative Inquiry Summit: A Practitioner's Guide for Leading Positive Large-Group Change.* Mohr is a graduate of University of Waterloo, University of Toronto and Columbia University.

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*F*ar from being a Pollyanna approach, Appreciative Inquiry works. Numerous studies show that when we recognize strengths, build on best practices, and anticipate a bright future we are considerably more effective than when we focus on overcoming weaknesses. A golfer is more apt to improve her game by envisioning herself performing very well than by focusing on the imperfections of her swing. Said another way, her success is positively influenced by paying focused attention to what is right and good and strong and hopeful. Her image of success tends to create itself.

Often confused with positive thinking, AI focuses on the power of questions to create both the energy and knowledge and images that allow significant transformation. Because it is question based, AI continually takes into account the evolving world we live in and continuously creates new visions of possibility. With Appreciative Inquiry, the focus is not on reasons for problems, but on how things would look if we built upon strengths and best practices. It is a powerful way of approaching organizational problems; a case for change; and clarity about the reasons for changing. AI is grounded in the power of images and the power of positive emotions; i.e., the expectations we hold and how they influence what we create as well as the ability of positive emotions to increase collective intelligence, creativity and the capacity of an organization to bounce back after the inevitable hard times (i.e. organizational resilience)

In very simple terms, AI is an approach to increasing success by acknowledging strengths, aspirations and opportunities, and then building on them to create a desired future. But there is much more to AI than that.

> *"Appreciative Inquiry is an emerging approach to learning and innovation which emphasizes the art and practice of engaging the whole system in discovering what gives life; dreaming about what could be; designing the cultures, structures and processes which will nourish the future we most want; and living our destiny - gaining sustainability through ongoing inquiry. AI is a collaborative and highly participative, system-wide approach to seeing, identifying and enhancing the "life-giving forces" that are present when a system is performing optimally in human, economic and organizational terms*

> *The term "appreciative" comes from the idea that when something increases in value it appreciates. By "inquiry" we mean the process of seeking to understand through asking questions.*

> *AI involves . . . the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate and heighten positive potential. Instead of negation, criticism and spiraling diagnosis, there is discovery, dream and design . . . achievements, unexplored potentials, strengths, opportunities, high point moments, strategic competencies, and visions of valued and possible futures."*

Appreciative Inquiry encourages:

- Focusing on images of health and wholeness, using the organization's energy to make the image real.
- Engaging the organization in positive dialogue to create multiple positive possibilities and move the organization and ourselves in the direction of the most desired future.
- Seeing all parts of the organization as being interconnected, organic and always in flux.
- Using language as the creator of a desired reality.
- Directing our movement toward the ideal -- embracing what works -- knowing that this is far more powerful than fixing what hasn't work.

AI recognizes that "o*rganizations move in the direction of what we most systematically focus on or ask questions about."* So at some level, AI is about creating your own future by establishing self-fulfilling prophesies. When the discussions are positive, positive actions are likely to follow. On the other hand, when the conversations are about fragmented teams, low morale, or long-lasting conflicts, actions are likely to reflect these negative images.

The DNA of Appreciative Inquiry

There are many ways of describing the AI cycle of change. We mention the 5 D model in the introduction (Define, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver/destiny). Another powerful way of describing AI is:

Choose the positive as the focus of inquiry. *"Leading change might be all about inquiry into strengths. What strength connected to what strength would create change? What happens if we connect strength to strength, joy to joy, hope to hope?"* The idea is that strengths help us *perform*, but they also help us *transform.*

Inquire into stories of life-giving forces. Appreciate that which gives life. This process positions the high points of the past -- the times of organizational excellence when it was most alive, effective, and satisfying -- as templates for creating the future. The discussions may include generative relationships and partnerships, structures, technologies, planning, learning and so forth.

Locate the themes that appear in the stories and select topics for further inquiry. Envision their impact. The conversations here are about possibilities, potentials, callings and unique contributions that contribute to global well-being. This is a time of great thoughts that are *practical* (grounded in history) and *generative* (seeking to expand potential).

Create shared images for a preferred future. Co-construct the future. Designate the social architecture, structural, strategy and infrastructure; and create a shared future that articulates the dream for each activity and participant. *"These make explicit the desired qualities and behaviors that will enable each part of the organization to function in a way that moves it toward the higher visions articulated . . . in the dream stage."*

Find innovative ways to deliver on the image of the preferred future and sustain the change. This is an ongoing process that includes overall vision as well as specific propositions. As such, it includes *"continuing dialogue, revisited propositions, additional interviewing sessions and a high level of innovation and continued learning."*

In addition to these processes, the DNA of Appreciative Inquiry includes five principles that sum up the research from the new sciences, the research on positive image and emotion and the work from the sociology of knowledge:

Constructionist: Knowledge of who we are and our destiny, are interwoven. "In each conversation we both describe and create the world. *What we believe to be true about an organization will affect the way we act and the way that we approach change in that system."*

Simultaneity: Inquiry and change are not separate, but are simultaneous. *"Questions set the stage for what we discover and discovery creates the stories that lead to conversations about how the organization will construct its future."*

Anticipatory: The horizon of expectation. *"Our most important resource is our collective imagination and our discourse about the future. The image of the future guides behavior and action in the present."*

Poetic: There are no limits to what we can inquire into. *"Human organizations are open books continually being co-authored by (everyone) who interacts with it . . . open to endless inquiry."*

Positive: The power of positive inquiry. *"The more positive the questions used to guide a process or change effort, the more long-lasting and effective the change effort (will be). Human beings and organizations move in the direction of what they inquire about."*

In combination, the Processes and Principles work well because they focus on:

- whole system dialogue and conversations as well as self-organizing, inspired actions
- carefully chosen transformational topics
- powerful, positive questions
- full voice by all affiliates
- story telling and meaning-making that connects experience with possibility
- building confidence for the journey to the future
- using image and metaphor to bring topics alive
- valuing the past along with innovation and transition

Think of AI processes and principles as a set of flexible, scalable ideas rather than a set of tools. Mohr suggests that maybe we don't need another technique or tool. Referencing commonly held traditional conceptions of organizational development, he says *"Maybe we need to challenge our assumptions and think differently."*

Implementation

A good place to begin organizational change is to ask questions. Traditionally, these questions have focused on what's wrong and how to fix it: on getting clear about the problems, gathering information, and then taking action. In contrast, AI focuses on what's right -- on strengths, shared values, successes, etc. -- and on how we can use these to transform us.

But what makes good topics? Consider curiosities, bold stretches, ideas that have potential to energize and mobilize; that everyone can relate to; that represent where you want to go. Move from deficit issues to affirmative topics. For example, instead of focusing on curbing sexual harassment (fixing the problem), focus on building *positive cross-gender working relationships* (Avon Mexico). Instead of finding ways to trace lost bags more quickly (fixing the problem), create *exceptional arrival experiences* (British Airways). The point is to let positive actions crowd out negative actions.

Deficit-based Change (Traditional) Core Assumption: Organizations as problems to be solved Discover what is wrong, and fix it	Strengths-based Change (AI) Core Assumption Organizations are solutions to be embraced Discover what is right, and build on it
Identify problems	Discover what gives life
Conduct root cause analyses	Dream of what might be
Brainstorm solutions and analyze them	Design what should be
Develop action plans	Deliver what will be

Werner von Heisengberg's Principle of Uncertainty tells us 1) that whenever we collect data about something, we influence the data; i.e., the very act of investigation causes it to change and 2) that there is no certainty

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that B will follow A. We can't be truly objective. For example, a room-temperature thermometer inserted into a hot liquid will change the temperature of the liquid it seeks to measure.

This *simultaneity of inquiry and change* suggests that change begins the moment we ask the question and makes the kind and context of the question very important. "*Organizations, by their very nature, are problems to be solved. Within these are the seeds to help us understand what happens. Organizations are mysteries to be embraced. Perhaps it is our consciousness that needs to be changed.*"

Appreciative Inquiry doesn't mean denying the issues. It means discovering what it is that gives life to your organization. If you know what you're good at, what would happen if you built on that? Consider the 5% of the time when everything works great; the processes, the people, the feeling, the outcomes. What would happen if you made this happen 30% of the time? Discover what makes your organization great when it is great and then expand on it. Design an infrastructure that focuses on strengths.

Figure out what you're going to inquire into. Begin with acknowledging that things aren't as they should be. Then figure out what you want to move toward. The idea is to focus on what you want, not on what you don't want. If you look at what hasn't worked, you move in one direction. If you look at what has worked, you move in another. Said another way, leverage your strengths. Discover > dream > design. Create a roadmap to lead you to where you want to be. Think about a time when things were working at their very best. What were the themes? What gave life?

AI begins with discovery. Reflect on what is heard and do analyses for the underlying factors that create outstanding relationships and productivity.

Be data competent. Data suggests specific actions. Consider gathering data about what are the best practices and history (suggestions below) and then discuss how to inculcate them into your present and future.

• achievements	• strategic opportunities	• product strengths
• technical assets	• innovations	• elevated thoughts
• best business practices	• positive emotions	• financial assets
• organization wisdom	• core competencies	• visions of possibility
• vital traditions, values	• positive macro trends	• social capital
• embedded knowledge	• social capital	• business resources and capabilities

Why were these practices successful? What gives hope? What causes great client services? Build on these. Use this information to determine where to go next. Concept + application = success.

Other AI Applications

Escaping depression or cynicism: Barbara Frederickson (*The Power of Positive Emotions*) writes that emotions are much more than indicators of health: they are contributors of health. When we are feeling positive emotions, we are much more creative, inventive, resilient and healthy, and regenerative: as people move into a space of feeling good, the body "undoes" negative memories and begins to heal itself. It doesn't have to go back and deal with the stuff located in a past that can't be changed.

This is a true physiological and chemical shift. Thus, one of the great uses of AI in coaching is to shift from saying, "This is where you want to be; you are here; what do you need to do to get there?" to saying "When are you the strongest and happiest and most positive? How could you make more of this positive stuff happen?" As in sports psychology, incorporating images of good performance and success predictably helps us maximize our performance. Detecting negative stuff and correcting it doesn't work nearly as well as detecting positive stuff and amplifying it.

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Be aware of your own thinking, you own internal dialog. Make a conscious choice to shift the dialog from what is or could be wrong, to what is or could be right. In a study of heart surgery patients, those that recovered in the shortest time were consistently those who expressed (pre-surgery) two hopeful thoughts for every one of concern.

Engaging people in the process who may not want to be engaged, or who don't buy in: As a supervisor or manager, we go through life asking questions. We have a conscious choice of what questions we ask. Consider replacing "What's wrong?" with "How's it going?" or even better, "What's working well?" Be aware of opportunities for people to come together in new relationships. Consider how children walk through the world with curiosity. We are not born with skepticism. Remember when things went well. Acknowledge concerns, but don't give promises. Invite participation: *"Would you be willing to give it a try?"* Make it their choice. What you are seeking is to change the patterns of thinking that need to be changed.

Consider the Art of the Question:

Traditional	Appreciative Inquiry
What's the biggest problem here?	What's the smallest change that could make the biggest impact?
Why is this such a troubled organization?	What possibilities exist that we have not yet considered?
Why do you blow it so often?	What solutions would have us both win?
Why do we still have those problems?	Tell me a story of when we were at our very best?

Acknowledge that things could be better, but don't focus on what's wrong. *("That's one of the problems with 360 degree feedback: unintentionally but typically focused on what we are doing wrong. AI focuses on what we are doing well.")* Articulate the thing you want to move toward. Nurture the hope of building on what is good. Create a rich palette built around a positive core: the wealth of knowledge, wisdom and wonder that is waiting to be discovered, the source of untapped positive potential or organizing and change. The richer the palette, the richer the future.

Start with new activity. Phrase questions around what has worked great before. *"What would happen if it were to be implemented here?"* Talk about images of the future. Talk about their ideas no matter how half-baked they are.

- Bring to mind a story of a high point, a time when the best was present
- Value work, organization, and self
- Pull from the inside: what gives life, what is the best about us now
- Pull from the outside: what are the positive macro-trends and opportunities
- Nurture wishes and positive images of the future
- Develop ideas about practical steps to move forward

The standard question is, *"How we can take the best of our past and bring it with us?"* A very useful questioning method is to pair up across boundaries -- young/old, male/female, new/experienced -- since this is likely to enhance the buy-in and understanding of the interviewee as well as that of the interviewer.

Implementing AI with its "sunny outlook" when there are negative elephants in the room.

Research by Frederickson and others indicates that we don't need to acknowledge elephants. When we focus on past successes, the elephant will fade away. Build on what you do have that's best. Acknowledge the situation, interview the people by inviting them to focus on strengths and honor the achievements.

Conclusion

Bear in mind that this synopsis of Mohr's presentation is intended as an introduction to Appreciative Inquiry rather than an outline of action. For that, Executive Forum suggests that you read and carefully consider *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination by Mohr and Jane Magruder Watkins.* (2001 Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, www.pfeiffer.com)

- Pages 48-51 define the skills and knowledge necessary to lead an AI process.
- Pages 53-180 flesh out the processes and give two case studies for each.
- Pages 193 - 209 are filled with FAQs about AI theory and technique.

"We repeat our mantra: Appreciative Inquiry is a way of seeing and being, based on the belief that we can create what we imagine when we open our minds and our social processes to the widest possible dialogue among the largest number of people who are invested in the enterprise. The two-cup tumbler filled with one cup of water is, indeed, both half empty and half full. How we describe it is our choice to make."

"In the physical world, all matter is held together by the pull between opposite electric charges. Successful companies are equally magnetic. People connect in ... innovative ways. Suppliers and customers are pulled together and become seamless edge-to-edge organizations. Communities of interest form and are pulled together by shared values and interests. Knowledge networks form as catalysts for innovation and creativity."