Appreciative Inquiry Is Not About The Positive

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The thing that concerns me most about the current excitement and interest in appreciative inquiry (AI) is that many of the consultants and managers I talk to who claim to be doing AI don't seem to really understand it. Even some of my clients, after years of doing it, still don't understand what I think is most fundamental about AI. They all seem to get blinded by the "positive stuff".   After years of focusing on problems and deficits and dysfunction they get entranced with "focusing on the positive" and equate this with AI. But that's not the core of appreciative inquiry. AI is about the *generative*, not the positive (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).   Maybe we should start calling it Generative Inquiry. Generativity occurs when people collectively discover or create new things that they can use to positively alter their collective future. AI is generative in a number of ways. It is the quest for new ideas, images, theories and models that liberate our collective aspirations, alter the social construction of reality and, in the process, make available decisions and actions that weren't available or didn't occur to us before. When successful, AI generates spontaneous, unsupervised, individual, group and organizational action toward a better future.

AI uses a focus on the positive to aid generativity. But discussion of the "negative" can, sometimes, handled certain ways, be generative too. Otherwise OD would not have a 50 year history and today be more relevant and influential than ever.   There are many considerations, beside a focus on the positive, that go into crafting an effective appreciative inquiry. In this article I want to explore what is required for an appreciative inquiry to be generative and therefore, transformational - something quite different from action research with a positive question.   First, I'll give an example of what I mean by transformational change and contrast that with another AI intervention that was a dismal failure, making the point that simply getting people to tell their "best of" stories may not accomplish much. Then I'll look at what a focus on the positive does for AI by supporting generative thinking, supporting the change process, and making "planned" culture change possible.   Next I'll describe some qualities that can make AI generative, looking at generative questions, generative conversations and generative actions. I'll conclude by pointing out that many of the same consulting issues and contingencies that effect traditional OD effect Appreciative Inquiry too.   AI does not magically overcome poor sponsorship, poor communications, insensitive facilitation or un-addressed organizational politics.

AI is an intervention into the social construction of reality.   If successful, the organization's culture changes and stays changed. For example, principals from one high school and four of its elementary feeder schools wanted to change the decade's old separation of elementary and high school teachers to better manage the learning experience of students. Few of either group had ever talked to each other.   They even belonged to their own, separate unions.   The five principals, in conjunction with a district wide AI initiative, launched an inquiry into "creating confident math learners" focusing on the transition experience from elementary to high school. They collected stories of peak learning experiences from all stakeholders, engaged teachers, students and a few parents as interviewers and interviewees, and used my synergenesis method (described below) to create

a "Discovery Document" – combinations of stories and answers to their key questions, widely distributed. Close to one hundred members of those schools attended a two day AI Summit (Ludema, Whitney, Mohr & Griffen, 2003) that concentrated on the Dream and Design phases and they left the summit with a set of eight design statements (sometimes called provocative propositions) and individual, personal commitments to take action on 3X5 cards which they attached to a "roadmap to the future". A year later at least 2 transformational changes could be identified.

1. Conversations amongst teachers in the high school showed a heightened awareness of the importance of relationships for learning (which had been identified in most people's stories) and a new focus on fostering student confidence, not just in math but in all classes. This was transformational for a group known to say "I teach subjects, not students" and resulted in a number of innovations. For example, the high school began holding student forums every 6 or so weeks – a large gathering where they would ask the students an appreciative question and listen to and learn from the stories that emerged.

2. The boundary between elementary and high school teachers and administrators was fully breached. As I write this a year after the summit, principals continue to meet regularly to plan activities and coordinate change. Emails go back and forth between elementary and high school teachers. They attend joint professional development days. Now this is the key part: in the past year almost every elementary staff member involved in the AI moved out of their school to other jobs and were replaced with people who were not involved in the AI. Yet the transformation of this boundary continues, obviously not just on the strength of new relationships forged at the summit but from a deeper change in the culture of these schools.

So often traditional, action research type OD has no impact at this level. In action research we identify an issue, engage people in the organization in collecting information, analyzing it, making recommendations for change and implementing those. Even though it might aim for transformation (variously labelled cultural, or developmental or break though change) and might have been transformational in organizations a few decades ago, today the process of action research tends to leave the current organization culture intact. When AI is used this way – identify what you want more of, collect stories about it, substitute Dream for analysis and the Design results in recommendations for change, no matter how "positive" the focus of inquiry, it is unlikely to yield results beyond the normal impact of action research (Bushe & Kassam, 2005). Sometimes it can even be quite "flat".

For example, about ten years ago I spent a day with a group of construction managers telling stories of their best experiences of leadership. It was one of worst days I've ever run. In response to their first ever employee opinion survey some senior managers decided they needed to better train managers in leadership. I spent one day with the head of HR and a C-suite member devising this attempt to identify a common leadership model. We planned to do Discovery, Dream and Design in one day, beginning by having them pair up to tell stories of the best leader they had ever seen. During the day I discovered that this session was part of an influence struggle among senior management factions. The CEO displayed a somewhat interested demeanour through the first two thirds of the day and less interest thereafter – symbiotically influenced by and influencing the slowly declining energy as the day wore on. These men (and they were virtually all men) had never thought much about leadership and didn't have much in the way of personal stories of inspiring leadership. The "best of" stories that were selected in small groups to be told to the large (45 person) group were pathetic. Nothing generative emerged to power the rest of the process and it painfully ground on – I don't even remember how it ended. Simply focusing on the positive and telling stories of it does not guarantee a successful intervention! I'll describe the qualities of generative questions later. Let's first look at how Appreciative Inquiry can use a focus on the positive to support transformational change.

Why Does Appreciative Inquiry Focus On The Positive?

A Focus On The Positive Can Support Generative Thinking

Isen's (2000) research shows that people experiencing positive feelings are more flexible, creative, integrative, open to information and efficient in their thinking. They have an increased preference for variety and accept a broader array of behavioral options. In addition, there are numerous, recent studies showing that the ratio of positive to negative talk is related to the quality of relationships, cohesion, decision-making, creativity and overall success of various social systems (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). One explanation for this is Barbara Fredrickson's broaden and build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001, 2006). Her studies show that not only do positive emotions make people more resilient and able to cope with occasional adversity, they increase people's openness to ideas, creativity and capacity for creative action. The focus on the positive in AI can increase positive feelings, the positive talk ratio, and make generative thinking and acting more likely.

A focus on the positive also helps to increase the appreciative mind-set of people (Bushe & Pitman, 1991; Bushe, 2001a, 2001b). Those who operate out of an appreciative mind-set are oriented to look for what they want more of, not what's missing. They pay attention to the "positive core" of the system. They see the potential that is trying to emerge in people and processes. This more expansive orientation to what is and what is possible goes hand in hand with generativity.

A Focus On The Positive Can Support Change In General

What entrances so many people about AI, I think, is the ability of a well crafted appreciative question to build rapport and energy (Ludema, Cooperrider & Barrett, 2000). In an era of harried schedules and technologically mediated communication, events that quickly build energized relationships are prized. Change, like most things, gets managed through relationships and strong relationships can overcome bad designs and plans while good designs and plans usually can't overcome bad relationships.

Listening to an adversary's stories humanizes them and builds bridges. Sometimes adversaries discover they value very similar things, and can relate to each other – this itself is one transformational potential of appreciative inquiry. That state, however, can be attained through both uplifting stories and through sad or tragic stories. But positive stories have a "spread effect" that negative ones don't. When there are tensions in the system represented among those engaged in the inquiry, real co-inquiry is not going to happen between groups while the everyday tension is present. Listening to and telling each other uplifting stories about the best of their meaningful experiences soothes those tensions and an amazing energy appears. (It also takes a lot less skill and facilitator competence to execute this part of AI than working the conflicts and tensions in the system to a generative resolution.) In that space a new, affirming image can arise and it is such images, whether we call them visions, or mission statements, or dreams, that seems to be a pre-requisite for successful, planned, collective change.

You Can't Control Culture Change But A Focus On The Positive Can Be Trusted To Make Things Better

You can't implement cultural change. Attempts to install a preferred culture always have unintended consequences and often make things worse (Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Ogbonna, 1993). All I think you can really do is unleash culture change and hope for the best. There are a number of things you can do to make it more likely you'll be pleased with the result. Focusing on the positive, inquiring into the best of what people know and care about, is one of them.

What can make appreciative inquiry generative?

A focus on the positive is useful for appreciative inquiry but it's not the purpose. The purpose is to generate a new and better
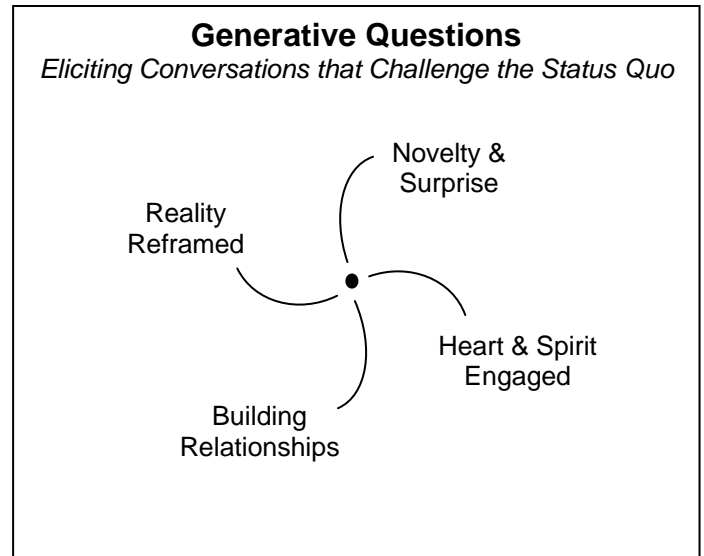
future. To design and facilitate appreciative inquiry you have to think about how to build generativity into every activity. I'll review three here: generative questions, generative conversations, and generative action.

Generative Questions

Anyone who has run a few appreciative inquiries knows that the initial questions can profoundly affect the success or failure of the entire intervention. Most people doing AI begin by having people focus on some personal peak experience. That's good, but it is not enough. I have found that generative questions have at least the following four qualities:

1. They are surprising. They are questions that people haven't discussed or thought about before. They are questions that cause people to reflect and think.
2. They touch people's heart and spirit. The questions take people back to memories that are personally meaningful and have deep emotion attached to them. They take people to memories that touch their spirit – what most matters to them.
3. Talking about and listening to these stories and answers will build relationships. As a result of these questions people will feel closer to each other. They will think they have revealed something important about themselves and learned something important about the other person. A greater sense of vulnerability and trust will be engendered by asking and answering these questions.
4. The questions force us to look at reality a little differently, either because of how they ask us to think or because of who we are listening to. Sometimes reality can be reframed by the way a question is asked. Sometimes reality gets reframed because the person we are listening to is telling us something very different from our stereotypes or assumptions.

In addition, when, where and how people interview each other can increase or decrease the generativity of the interview process. For example, having a handful of people do all the interviews reduces the generativity of the Discovery Phase. It generates a lot more

Generative Questions
Eliciting Conversations that Challenge the Status Quo

Reality Reframed

Novelty & Surprise

Heart & Spirit Engaged

Building Relationships

interest, engagement, excitement, relationship building and on-going conversation the more people are involved in interviewing as well as being interviewed. Getting the stories of marginalized members of the system can sometimes be the most generative thing you can do. This allows the really new ideas, which always exist at the margins of social systems, voice. Sometimes it's during the collection and discussion of stories that new ideas and images enter the organization's narrative, and as I have described before, this is another transformational potential of AI (Bushe, 2001a).

Generative Conversations

I think there are many ways to increase or support the generativity of the Discovery, Dream and Design phases left to be discovered. I don't think it requires an unflinching focus on the positive. Ron Fry (2007) describes this very well in a recent working paper. If someone wants to talk about what they don't like in their organization telling them "no, we can't talk about that, this is an appreciative inquiry" is likely to turn people off. What a traditional inquiry is likely to do is to ask them to elaborate on what they don't like and fully explore what they don't like and why they don't like it – what we might normally think of as responsible, value free, curiosity driven inquiry. But it wouldn't be very generative. We'd know lots about the

person and their discontent but not be much farther in generating a better future.

Or we could ask them what is missing, what they want more of, what their image of what the organization ought to be is that is creating this gap between what they want and what they see. This kind of inquiry is much more likely to be generative. Out of it can come new ideas and images that point us toward a better collective future. I think it unwise to try and banish discussion of what people don't like during appreciative inquiry; especially if they have a lot of emotional charge around it. Instead, let's try to be thoughtful in how we make a space for inquiry into hurt, anger, injustice, despair - doing that in a way that contributes to the group's ability to understand, and bring into being, its collective aspirations. Often, when we don't acknowledge and create a productive space for "negative" feelings, they show up in ways that aren't helpful. Pamela Johnson (2007) has written a beautiful paper on just this topic, looking at how an appreciation of the "shadow" in our clients and ourselves increases the generative power and potential of AI.

We need to think about how to design the interview process, about what happens with the stories, and how a collective inquiry into the affirmative topic takes place generatively. Synergenesis (first described as synergalysis – Bushe, 1995) has proven to be a generative way to stimulate Discovery during an appreciative process. Synergenesis requires a small group, a small set of rich stories written up in the first person from appreciative interviews, and a central question the group is trying to answer. The purpose of the group is to generate new ideas to answer that question. The stories are there to create a collective experience that catalyzes that conversation. It is very simple. Everyone in the group reads the same story together. Then they discuss what images and ideas the story provoked in them, related to the focal question. They are not trying to analyze the story or look for themes in the stories. They are simply trying to capture and list as many ideas for how to answer the question as possible. Some of those ideas won't be in the stories at all, they will emerge from the discussion – and that's great. When the conversation runs out of

steam, the group moves on to read another story. The group continues to do this until reading more stories does not create any more new ideas. Not only does synergenesis help to generate new ideas, it can generate a shift in the ongoing organizational narrative as people leave the synergenesis session influenced by the stories they've read and the conversation they've had. This is a third transformative potential of AI. The ongoing narrative is altered by new images and ideas and sometimes important new relationships are built among the people who participate.

We need to think about how to maximize the generativity of the dream phase and use that to power highly generative design statements. The purpose of the Dream phase is to surface the common values and aspirations that enliven the system. A generative dream phase will help people uncover values and aspirations they might not have been aware of. The Design phase is about the social architecture that will actualize those values and aspirations. Cooperrider called the output of Design "provocative propositions" because he was trying to maximize generativity. Things that are provocative are, by definition, generative – they provoke/generate thinking and action. A generative design phase will produce a blueprint for a house so beautiful and so functional people will be excited to build it and move in. How do we ensure discussion and buy in to design statements without long, laborious meetings that sap the energy and generativity from the group? We need better ideas about how to avoid the paralysis of consensus seeking while still creating a high level of agreement and alignment with the ultimate design.
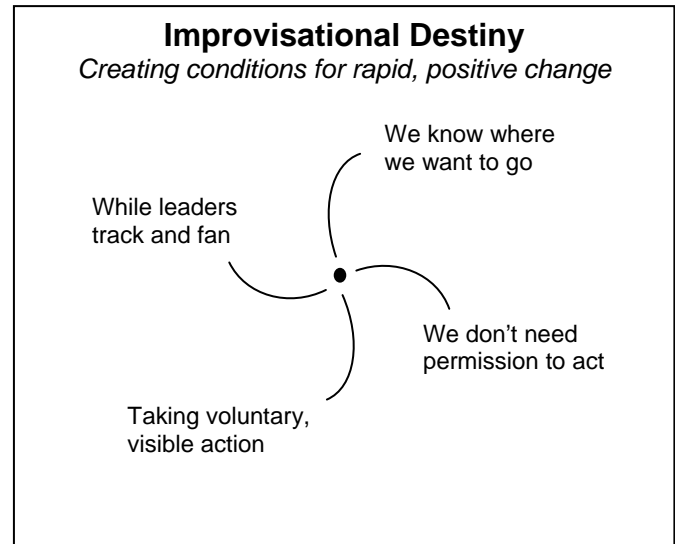
Generative Action

A few years ago I studied 20 cases of successful AI where only seven cases were transformational while the other 13 were more like everyday, successful OD (Bushe & Kassam, 2005). 11 of the 13 everyday cases used the everyday sort of action phase: Get either consensually or centrally agreed upon goals – or in these cases, design statements. Set up action teams. Try to implement something. But in 6 of 7 transformational cases they didn't use action

teams or try to manage implementation from the top. Instead they adopted an "improvisational approach" to the action phase. The specifics varied from case to case but in every case new ideas emerged that were widely accepted and authorities' sanctioned people to do whatever made sense to them to move the organization toward its dreams and designs. Rather than trying to implement something, leaders looked for where people were innovating and helped them along when they could. This approach seemed far more generative – much more change occurred much more quickly. If the first 3 D's are generative and people are allowed to take personal action, people will step forward to champion parts of the design. As in every participative change process, they are often the younger employees who have more energy and hope and are willing to put in some effort. Because they are younger and less experienced they usually have less informal influence and so another transformative potential of AI is to empower a new wave of informal leadership throughout the system.

Here is my current recipe for a generative Destiny phase

1. Create collective agreement on what you are trying to accomplish (the result of the 1st three D's). This is why the AI Summit (Ludema et al, 2003) has emerged as the most popular form of engagement for AI. In my consulting practice I tell clients the ideal scenario is take everyone to a stadium for 4 days to do the entire 4 D cycle at once – but nothing is ever ideal so let's work back from there to what is possible. By having as many people as possible involved in the process, in a contained space over a few days, widespread understanding and ownership of the Dream and Design are much higher.

2. Ensure that people believe they are authorized to take actions that will move the organization in the direction of the Design. Ensure they understand they don't need permission to act. They shouldn't wait around for some committee or plan – none is being created by the leaders. They, however, are free to create any groups or

Improvisational Destiny
Creating conditions for rapid, positive change

We know where we want to go

While leaders track and fan

We don't need permission to act

Taking voluntary, visible action

plans they think are in alignment with what you are trying to accomplish. Leaders should clarify what is out of bounds and then get out of the way

3. Create commitments by everyone to take some kind of initial action. This can be done through some kind of ritualized event, after the Design statements have been finalized, where improvisational destiny is explained and individuals each make some kind of public declaration of something they will each do in service of the new design. Salancik (1978) argues that commitment gets created when people take actions that are voluntary, visible, and relatively irreversible and those are good things to think about when constructing events to launch the Destiny phase.

4. Rather than planning and controlling, leadership leverages itself in much more generative ways when it looks for any and all acts that move the organization in the desired direction and finds ways to support and amplify those efforts. I call this tracking (looking for where what you want more of already exists) and fanning (adding oxygen to a small fire to create a blaze) and have described this leadership style in more detail elsewhere (Bushe & Pitman, 1991; Bushe, 2001b). Those facilitating the AI effort can support the generativity of Destiny by creating events where

innovations and initiatives are shared, discussed and fanned.

The generativity of Destiny can also be enhanced by using AI in an iterative way – making the lessons and outcomes of one AI the focus of inquiry for the next AI. Say an initial inquiry into customer satisfaction reveals that a key element is the relationships customers develop with sales personnel. During Destiny another AI could be launched to look at the nature of highly satisfying customer relationships, and so on, creating an ongoing stream of new ideas, new conversations and new possibilities.

AI is still affected by all the traditional change variables

Appreciative inquiry has often been described by contrasting it with traditional OD. I've done it here – contrasting the generative potential of AI with action research. This seems to have led at least some people to think that AI is so positive that it will almost run itself. Recently I was asked if I knew of research contrasting the success rate of AI with traditional OD. I think that's the wrong question to ask.

Positive questions and generative designs do not create change without a whole lot of the wisdom of "traditional OD" applied competently. In a study I am currently doing of the AI process in 30+ schools some early findings are obvious. One is that the quality of school leadership is the best predictor of the success of the AI project. We've seen good summits not produce much change and less generative summits produce more change due to the competence, legitimacy and passion of the people charged at each school with leading the AI effort. Communicating and engaging those not personally involved in the initial AI activities is just as important, and difficult, as any other change project. Inter-group conflicts, politics and competing agendas still need to be managed. AI events like summits need competent facilitation skills no different from any other large group facilitation. Most good AI practitioners make liberal use of other OD technologies, where appropriate. Techniques like Open Space and World Café are particularly popular because they fit with the self-organizing, generative form of AI. But I have found it useful even to bring staid change management models, like the sponsor-change agent-target model (Conner, 1992) into an AI where the internal consulting staff needs to do a better job of managing it's role with the rest of the organization, particularly leaders, because without that in place, no matter how well designed the intervention, much less of its potential will be realized.

It's another cliché that AI is different because it focuses on the positive instead of on problems but that's not correct. Actually AI is different because it focuses on generativity instead of problem-solving. Those who use AI are just as concerned with "problems" as any other leader; they just come at them differently. Instead of trying to solve the problem, AI generates a collective agreement about what people want to do together and enough structure and energy to mobilize action in the service of those agreements. When that happens, many "problems" go away.

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