Appreciative Inquiry Is Not (Just) About The Positive

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One thing that concerns me 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 understand the importance of *generativity*, as an input and an outcome, of AI. Many people 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 I don't think that is the core of appreciative inquiry. Instead, the core of AI is *generativity* (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). One of the central sources that influenced the creation of AI was Kenneth Gergen's (1978) paper "Toward Generative Theory" where he argued that the most important thing social science can do is give us new ways to think about social structures and institutions that lead to new options for action. AI can be 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. My research suggests that when AI is transformational it has both these qualities: it leads to new ideas, and it leads people to choose new actions (Bushe, in press; Bushe & Kassam, 2005). Maybe we should start calling it Generative Inquiry.

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 "the positive" is really about and what is required for an appreciative inquiry to be generative and therefore, transformational - something quite different from the image that has been perpetuated of AI as 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 can do for AI: 1) it can support generative thinking, 2) it can support the change process, and 3) it can make "planned" culture change possible. Next I'll describe some things I've learned help make AI generative: 1) generative questions, 2) generative conversations and 3) 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.

Effective and ineffective AI

AI's distinctive competence is as 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 of AI, 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 were reassigned 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. 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 engaging people in collective problem-solving tends to leave the current organization culture intact. When AI is used this way, as action research with a positive question (identify what you want more of, collect stories about peak experiences, substitute Dream for analysis and the Design results in recommendations for change) no matter how "positive" the focus of inquiry, it is unlikely to create transformational change (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!

Why is it useful to focus on the positive?

David Cooperrider (1990) first wrote about "the positive" in describing how positive images can generate and direct action. Cooperrider & Whitney (2001) later described the "positive principle" mainly as the utility of positive feelings for building and sustaining momentum for change. But the image of the positive arises in AI in many more ways than that. There are many useful ways in which "the positive" can help create OD interventions that are more generative, and support the process of change in general. In this section I'll review how positive emotions, the ratio of positive to negative talk, positive stories, hope, the power from having a "positive attitude", and focusing on what you want more of (not what you want less of) can be used in the service of transformational change.

1. A Focus On The Positive Can Support Generativity

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 different way of talking about the positive in AI is linked not to feeling but to intent. From this perspective, the positive in AI is about focusing on what you want more of (Bushe, 1995). It comes from cultivating an "appreciative mindset" (Bushe & Pitman, 1991; Bushe, 2001a, 2001b). Those who operate out of an appreciative mind-set are oriented to see what they want more of as already being there, if only in small amounts, and use that to get more of it. Thatchenkary & Metzker (2006) have recently offered a theory of "appreciative intelligence"; the capacity to 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.

Another way in which "the positive" shows up in AI is in the notion of "hope" and the relationship between hope and generative images, and the necessity of having hope for generative action (Ludema, 2001). Many people have pointed out that it is impossible to get people to collectively act to change the future if they don't have hope and that to some extent hope is born out of discovering that we share common images of a better team, organization or world. The Discovery and Dream phases of AI can lead people to replace cynicism with hope and when that happens amazing generativity comes on line.

2) 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. For example, the Citizens' Coalition prejudice reduction process works by having a member of every social identity group in the room tell their worst story of being "done

to" because of their social identity group membership. Their theory is "break a heart, change a prejudice" and I can attest from personal experience how powerful that can be; after all, misery loves company.

AI's popularity shows that consultants and managers, in general, prefer talking about the positive but that isn't always the right thing to do. When the motivation underlying "keeping the focus on the positive" is to avoid the anxiety of dealing with real concerns, or to suppress the expression of dissent, AI can, as it critics suggest, become a form of repression dressed up as something else (Fineman, 2006). When used appropriately, however, the experience of many consultants is that positive stories have a "spread effect" that negative ones don't. Instead of finding fellowship in mutual pain or sense of injustice, during an AI process they find it in their mutual aspirations. Listening to and telling each other uplifting stories about the best of their meaningful experiences leads people to uncover their similarities, soothes those tensions and an amazing energy can appear. It also takes a lot less skill and facilitator competence to execute this part of AI, and build bridges between conflicting groups, than surfacing and working the conflicts and tensions in the system to a generative resolution. That is a major benefit of AI.

Finally, it's been found that an appreciative mindset not only increases generativity, it increases people's influence and therefore, their ability to create change. A very interesting study by Baker, Cross and Wooten (2003) found that having a "positive attitude" gave people more informal influence in organizations than the things traditionally associated with influence, like control of resources or information.
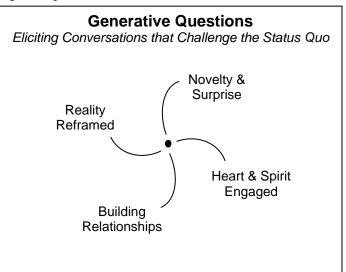
3. *You Can't Control Culture Change But A Focus On The Positive Can Usually Be Trusted To Make Things Better*

It is unlikely that leaders can "implement" cultural change. Attempts to install a preferred culture generally have unintended consequences and often make things worse (Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Ogbonna, 1993). Note the current situation in Iraq. 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. Collectively focusing on what you want more of, inquiring into the best of what people know and care about, appears to be 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 effectively I think you have to build generativity into every activity. I'll briefly review three here: generative questions, generative conversations, and generative action.

Generative Questions
Eliciting Conversations that Challenge the Status Quo

Novelty & Surprise

Reality Reframed

Heart & Spirit Engaged

Building Relationships

Generative Questions

Questions are fateful and 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.
2. They touch people's heart and spirit.

3. Talking about and listening to these stories and answers will build relationships.
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.

In addition, when, where and how people interview each affects the generativity of the interview process. For example, having a handful of people do all the interviews reduces the generativity of the Discovery Phase. The more people involved in interviewing, as well as being interviewed, the better. 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. 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. But instead of asking them to elaborate on and explore what they don't like we can 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 line of questioning is much more likely to be generative. 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 (in press) 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 is very simple. Stories from Discovery are written up and small groups meet where everyone in the group reads the same story together. Then they discuss what images and ideas the story provoked in them, related to the purpose of the inquiry. It's a kind of stimulated brain storming. 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. 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 described incremental changes (Bushe & Kassam, 2005). 11 of the 13 incremental 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. 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.

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. 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. They don't need permission to act.   They shouldn't wait around for some committee or plan. 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. 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

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

constructing events to launch the Destiny phase.

4. Rather than planning and controlling, leadership needs to look for any and all acts that move the organization in the desired direction and find 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).

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 traditional 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. It seems the competence, legitimacy and passion of the people charged at each school with leading the AI effort makes the difference. 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.

It's another cliché that AI is different because it focuses on the positive instead of on problems but my research (Bushe, in press) shows that's not correct. Actually, AI is different because it focuses on generativity instead of problem-solving. Without common problems and issues people don't create transformational change. 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" get "solved".

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