

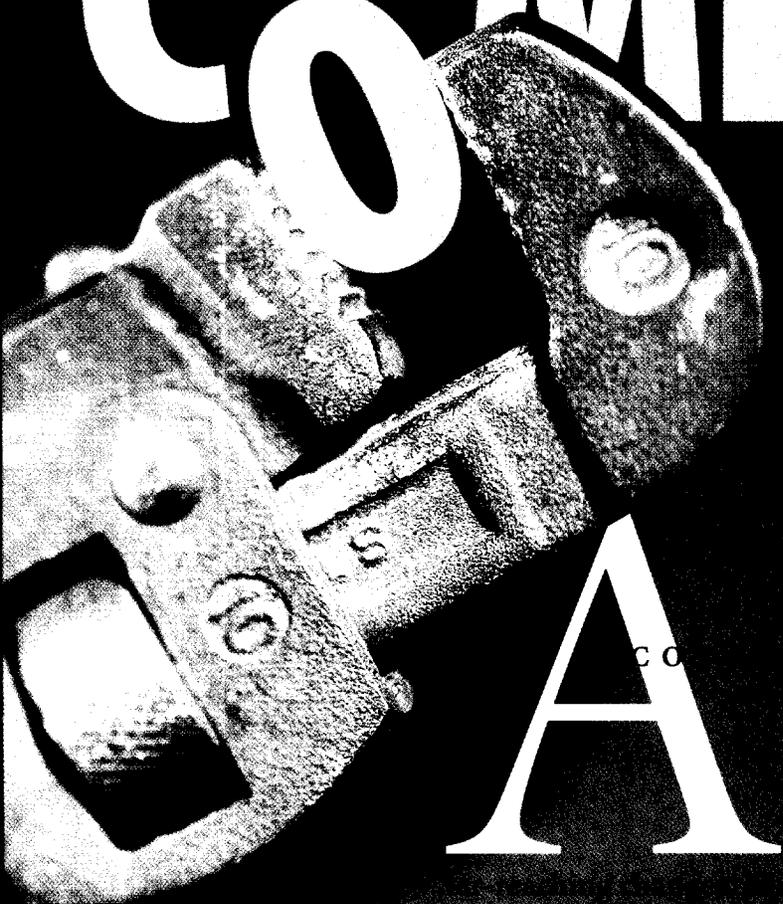
MAYBE PROBLEM-SOLVING IS THE PROBLEM

DON'T FIX THAT

'Appreciative inquiry' is a new approach to organizational development that focuses on what works rather than what doesn't.

It just might change the way you think about your job.

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Cooperrider, a professor of organizational behavior at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, introduced the assembly to an idea he had been experimenting with since the early 1980s—an idea that may be destined to turn the contemporary practice of organizational development on its head and to transform the way managers are taught to think about change in the world around them.

He put the executives in small groups and asked them to discuss the time in their careers that they'd been most alive, involved and effective. The exercise resonated immediately with C.F. "Butch" Brecher, who was president of GTE Retail Markets when he attended that 1995 meeting in Colorado. "I've always been a very positive person who enjoyed looking for the success stories to build on, and this provided a logical background for that instinct," says Brecher, who is now president of GTE Communications Corp.

Rather than sitting through one more sound-alike lecture on change, the GTE executives began to realize that, as a group, they already possessed the expertise to handle whatever challenges their reshuffling industry might throw at them.

Accentuate the Positive

What, exactly, is Cooperrider's big idea? It begins with the observation that during the last 50 years, managers, consultants and researchers have seen organizations as "problems to be solved." True to Abraham Maslow's observation that "to a hammer everything looks like a nail," those same managers and consultants have become quite good at finding, analyzing, and sometimes even solving problems in organizations. So much so that organizations have become problems personified. Cooperrider postulates a different view: What if we consider an organization a mystery to be embraced, not a problem to be solved?

The idea, in other words, is to look at an organization as a positive force, understand its strengths, and figure out how to refine and enhance what it—or a system within it—is already doing well. Cooperrider christened his approach "appreciative inquiry." He defines AI as the art and science of ferreting out the best in an organization through skillful questioning, and bringing key stakeholders together with that knowledge to plan the future or change the present. The approach is being lauded as excit-

ing and revolutionary by OD practitioners and managers who have seen AI's results.

Does that seem a rather pallid platform upon which to build a revolution? OK, try this. Think about the last seven projects you've worked on and the last dozen meetings you've attended. How many of the projects were designed to "fix" something? How many of the meetings were called to address "the problem of...?"

"The problem-solving paradigm may once have been the most effective approach for enhancing an organization's performance," says Cooperrider, "but it is out of sync with today's reality." He ticks off a list of things that are wrong with the problem-solving approach to management and organizational change: It is painfully slow; it always asks people to look backward at yesterday's failures and their causes; and it rarely results in a new vision. "Once we describe something as a problem," he says, "we assume that we know what the ideal is—what *should* be—and we go in search of ways to close any 'gaps'—not to expand our knowledge or to build better ideals."

In human terms, he continues, problem-solving approaches are notorious for placing blame and generating defensiveness. "They sap your energy and tax your mind, and don't advance the organization's evolution beyond a slow crawl," Cooperrider says.

Against this backdrop of assumed dysfunction and its deficit-focused language, he proposes a better way.

Reflections of the Heart

In 1980, when Cooperrider was a graduate student at Case Western in search of an organizational-diagnosis project, he got a call from a doctors' group at the Cleveland Clinic. "They wanted me to look at a number of issues—communications, cooperation, teamwork—the standard things," he recalls. He had done organizational problem-solving before, but was taken aback by this particular enterprise. It was not only well-run, but ahead of the curve in trying out innovations like team management. "It was definitely not an organization in need of fixing," he says.

Cooperrider spent the next five years studying what he came to think of as the things that reflected the "aliveness" and the "heart" of the Cleveland Clinic. Specifically, he asked employees to recount times they felt the organization worked best. As he puts it, "I kept asking versions of the same question: 'When is it that

this organization—the people, the system—is most alive and liberating of the human spirit? When is it most committed to its mission and contributing to the world and the practice of medicine?”

By conducting these appreciative interviews with patients, doctors, nurses, suppliers and administrators, Cooperrider was able to reflect back to the doctors and the board of directors a picture of Cleveland Clinic's unique qualities and special strengths. In other words, by inquiring into the successes rather than the problems of the organization, he discovered distinctive attributes that management could build upon to improve performance and create strategic plans.

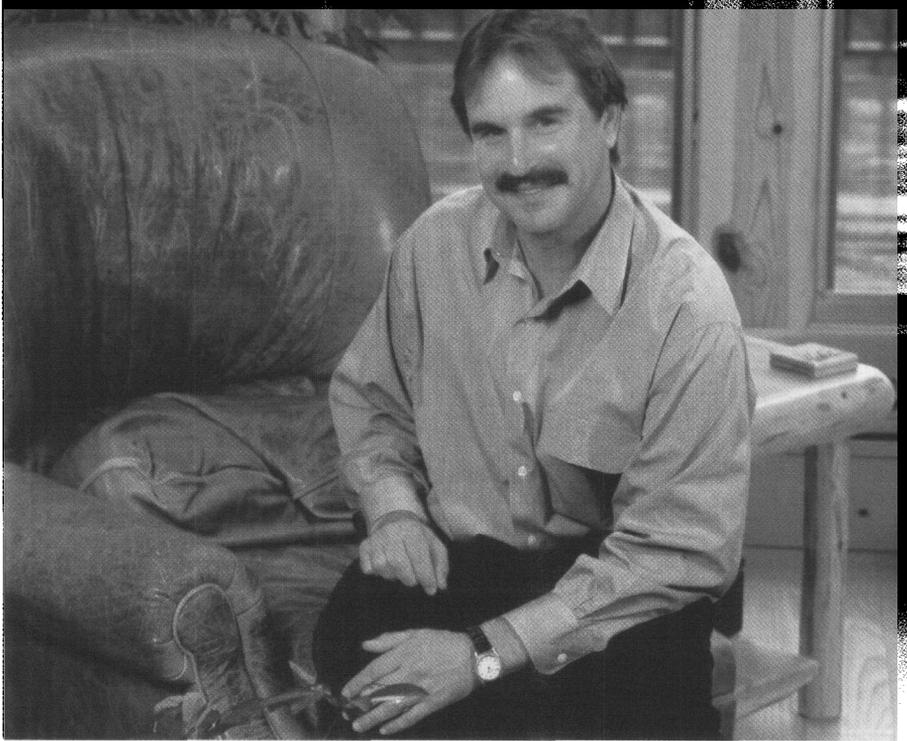
Cooperrider and his graduate adviser and frequent co-author Suresh Srivastva, also of Case Western, became convinced that he was onto a new approach to organizational development—one that could potentially equal the impact of action learning, strategic planning, and other innovations to OD.

In the intervening decade, Cooperrider's idea has gone from an oddity (his first presentation of the concept to an Academy of Management gathering was met with snickering and derision) to a major sensation among OD practitioners, particularly those involved in international community development. AI has received glowing reviews in the OD literature, where it's been called “a paradigm of conscious evolution,” the “heir to Maslow's vision of a positive social science,” and OD's new “philosopher's stone.”

The 4-D Process

If you can look past the breathlessness of some of its enthusiasts, appreciative inquiry becomes reasonably accessible when viewed as a process. In its simplest form, it consists of four steps, which often play out in a large-group meeting over the course of a two- or three-day event.

Prior to the event, however, a three-part preparation occurs. First is choosing (or “forming”) the topic. That sounds like a no-brainer, but the topic must be framed in an affirmative way—which can be tricky. Most traditional, problem-focused projects have embedded in them a number of confounding issues. For example, the question “How do we eliminate sex-



Problem-solving approaches 'sap your energy and tax your mind, and don't advance the organization's evolution beyond a slow crawl.'

—David Cooperrider, professor of organizational behavior
Case Western Reserve University

ual harassment in this organization?” carries such baggage as gender conflict and pay and power inequities. Getting to a simple *positive* statement of the objective of the inquiry (“Our goal is to develop a model of high-quality cross-gender relationships in the workplace”) can require a lot of mind-bending work.

So can the second step: creating questions that inspire and encourage people to give the interviewer positive examples to use as models. Simply saying “Tell me about male-female relationships here” more than likely will elicit descriptions of *problems*, as will a seemingly less loaded query such as “Tell me about communications around here.”

Figuring out the right questions may be the most critical part of an appreciative-inquiry cycle, says Cooperrider: “The questions you frame and ask, from the very first one to the very last one, are an intervention in themselves. And they frame the way people come to look at the topic.”

For example, to shape a positive inquiry about male-female relationships, the AI practitioner might frame the question as, “Your name came up as someone who has a good cross-gender relationship here. Can you describe for

me how your working relationship began?" And then, "What do you see as supporting that relationship?"

Once the right questions are struck, the interviewing begins—and this is where the process can take on more variations than a jazz quintet's performance of "Full Moon and Empty Arms." The most conservative approach is to send a small team of highly trained interviewers out to solicit positive stories and instances from people in the organization, compile and analyze the central themes of those stories, and report the findings to the study's sponsor or a small group of senior managers. The polar opposite is to give

the questions to everyone in the organization (or the department, or the supply chain) and turn them loose on each other—customers, partners, whomever—to gather information for the first phase of the "4-D" cycle of appreciative inquiry.

DISCOVERY (also referred to as the "appreciating" phase or the "What gives life?" inquiry). This phase explores the themes of the stories and includes consensus-building about the strengths of the organization. Discovery is often done in an open-meeting format with anywhere from 100 to 1,000 participants interviewing each other in small groups.

In Cooperrider's original conception, this was (and sometimes still is) a sort of data-dump session with the researchers/interviewers reporting what they had learned to the entire "system" at once. Everyone concerned—a whole department, for instance—gathers to listen to the same information. Those assembled then set to work to create a new vision relative to the topic of the inquiry.

DREAMING (also known as the "envisioning results" phase or the "What might be?" inquiry). The information from the discovery phase is used as a platform for speculating on possible futures for the organization or system. Sometimes this phase is kicked off with a dreaming exercise: "Let's assume that tonight we all fall asleep and wake up five years from now. When you wake up, Acme has become exactly the organization you would like it to be. What do you see that is different and how do you know that it is different?"

After discussing participants' dreams, the process

The Five Principles of Appreciative Inquiry

As appreciative inquiry evolves, its academic adherents are working to clarify the philosophy that underlies it. So far, they consider five basic principles central to the AI theory of organizational change:

- **The Principle of Constructionism.**

This theory says we create our own reality. Note the words "we" and "create." Reality and fact are created by common consensus, not by individual perception and opinion. In other words, the truth about an organization is what those involved agree the truth is. More importantly, perhaps, an organization's future is what the organization—as a collective of individuals—decides it to be.

- **The Principle of Simultaneity.**

Mucking about in an organization asking questions is not a neutral event. Inquiry is intervention. In the words of the father of appreciative inquiry, Case Western Reserve University's David Cooperrider: "The questions we ask set the stage for what we 'find,' and what we 'discover' becomes the linguistic material, the stories, out of which the future is conceived, conversed about and constructed."

- **The Poetic Principle.** Organizations must be studied as social systems, not machines. That means studying the human experiences within them by

eliciting narratives—the "story" of the living organization. AI attempts to capture not only the past and present facts of an organization, but the affective and qualitative sense of it as well. Eliciting stories, understanding their themes, and cataloging those stories and themes is key to grasping an organization's real capabilities.

- **The Anticipatory Principle.** This is positive mental imagery turned up a notch: The future we anticipate is the future we create. AI practitioners point to studies of the placebo and Pygmalion effects as evidence of the truth of this principle.

- **The Positive Principle.**

Problem-solving has been the sine qua non of organizational consulting and managing for most of this century. But AI practitioners take the opposite approach, ferreting out positive experiences and past successes, then attempting to build the future upon those findings. Focusing on the positive isn't mindless happy talk; it's a discipline that keeps AI practitioners from being trapped in the null-sum game of problem-solving. Problems, they contend, are better solved by focusing on what should be rather than by focusing on what is wrong.

—R.Z.

leads to some sort of coalescence around the most intriguing of these visions. This phase often culminates in the drafting of a dream articulation, a statement that summarizes the organization's vision, purpose and strategic intent.

DESIGN (also referred to as "co-constructing" and "What should be the ideal?"). Based on the dream articulation, participants speculate on how the organization will look and agree upon its driving "concepts" and "principles." A typical principle might be, "Women are included in all levels of decision-making in this organization."

DESTINY (also known as the "sustaining" phase or the "How to empower, learn and adjust?" part of the process). This is the vaguest phase, and the one that has evolved the most over the years. Originally the fourth "D" stood for "delivery" and was dedicated to writing action plans, building implementation strategies and monitoring progress. While that is still an option, Cooperrider and several of his colleagues now de-emphasize these concrete activities in favor of something more free-form. "What we discovered, quite honestly, was that the momentum for change and long-term sustainability increased the more we concentrated only on giving AI to everyone, then stepping back and letting them apply the process on their own throughout the organization," says Cooperrider.

At GTE, for example, one strategy for creating a more competitive and customer-focused culture was left wide open. "One of our most powerful interventions was to create a network of change agents throughout the organization, give them training in AI, and send them out without a very explicit agenda to look for ways in which to make a difference in the organization," says Jean Moore, assistant vice president for work force development.

These folks were charged with spreading the appreciative-inquiry process throughout GTE. Within their departments, in meetings, wherever they went within the company, they'd continue asking the kinds of positive questions that would keep the problem mind-set at bay.

In 1997, the GTE culture-change effort, of which AI was a critical part, received an ASTD award for exemplifying outstanding OD practices. To date there are several hundred AI-trained employee "change zealots" at work within GTE. (The name "zealots" was recently

changed to the less controversial "positive change agents.")

The "end product" of an AI event, or AI summit as they are sometimes called, depends on the topic that started the cycle. It can be the beginning of an organizational redesign or a new strategic plan. It can be the start of a quest to form a diversity-friendly culture or to create ideas for building closer customer-company collaborations.

Variations on a Theme

As appreciative inquiry has grown in popularity, Cooperrider's original formulation has evolved to accommodate a variety of circumstances—sometimes right in front of his eyes.

In 1997, for example, Nutrimental Foods, a food wholesaler in Ceritiba, Brazil, invited Cooperrider to apply AI to its strategic-planning effort. He showed up ready to do several days of careful inquiry to kick off the 4-D cycle, only to discover the company had an alternate plan already in motion. It had decided to close the next day and had invited all employees, plus a large group of customers and strategic partners, to meet in a vacated warehouse.

After an hour's instruction from Cooperrider, the 700 enthusiastic stakeholders formed teams, interviewed one another for half a day, and then presented several hundred conclusions and ideas to the whole gathering. At the end of the day their work was handed off to a group of 150 stakeholders, who were given four days to hammer the information (with Cooperrider's help) into a new and "bolder" corporate vision. Three new strategic business initiatives came of the process. Six months later, according to co-CEO Rodrigo Loures, company sales had zoomed by several million dollars and profits went up by 300 percent.

Another appreciative-inquiry initiative began in a public-housing project in Chicago and turned into a citywide project called Imagine Chicago, supported by a MacArthur Foundation grant and headed by an OD-trained, ex-bank executive named Bliss Browne. Struck by the AI tenet that imagining a positive future creates a positive future, Browne has trained 4,000 public school kids to conduct 1 million "peak experience interviews" with older city residents. The focus: "What is Chicago like when it's at its best?"

The lesson, says Cooperrider, is that positive interviewing is an intervention in and of itself. "Perhaps it's obvious," he says, "but the process

of doing the interviews is as important as the data collected.”

Although some practitioners define AI as appropriate only for large-scale change efforts or strategy-setting, it can be useful for more modest interventions. A case in point is the work of Marge Schiller, another of Cooperrider’s colleagues. Several years ago, Schiller, a consultant in Higham, MA, became convinced that the sexual-harassment training she was delivering at Avon Mexico in Mexico City was having, if anything, the opposite of its intended effect: Workplace relations between men and women were worse, not better, after training.

acrimony between the sexes, was one of two North American companies to receive a 1997 Catalyst Award for promoting women to top jobs. Much of the credit was given to Schiller’s program and the 30 principles for positive male and female relationships that came out of the AI research she facilitated.

The End of Problem-Solving?

Can AI replace problem-finding, gap analysis and solution generation, or is it simply an interesting new planning technique? Practitioners and theorists disagree.

David Jamieson, adjunct professor of management at Pepperdine University’s Graziadio School of Business and Management in Malibu, CA, frames the debate this way: “It is a very positive process, but critics feel it is too ‘Pollyanna-ish,’ that if you don’t deal with problems, you can’t make change happen. Change comes from dealing with problems.”

Even some of AI’s most ardent supporters waver on the issue. Sue Annis Hammond of Kodiak Consulting in Plano, TX, author of *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry*, assigns appreciative inquiry and traditional problem-solving to different contexts. “Problem-solving and gap analysis are still useful, in the appropriate context,” she says. “If you are in an airplane with a sputtering engine or you are having a heart attack, you have a problem in need of solving. You don’t want someone asking appreciative-inquiry-type questions just then. You want fault-finding and fault-analysis and fault-fixing.” Perhaps, however, after your heart

is on the mend, an appreciative analysis that helps you focus on physical wellness would be useful, she suggests.

Appreciative inquiry, Hammond says, is more concerned with moving an organization as a whole than with small, incremental changes. On the other hand, an intervention like training is about incremental change. “Someone has a skill deficit that has been identified, and they go to training to have that gap resolved,” she says. “Perfectly appropriate.”

Ken Murrell, professor of organizational development at the University of West Florida in Pensacola, agrees with Hammond’s view—to a point. “Things like gap analysis or benchmark-

A Study in Contrasts



PROBLEM-SOLVING

- Identify Problem
- Conduct Root Cause Analysis
- Brainstorm Solutions and Analysis
- Develop Action Plans

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

- Appreciate “What Is” (What gives life?)
- Imagine “What Might Be”
- Determine “What Should Be”
- Create “What Will Be”

Working from an AI viewpoint, Schiller reasoned that her goal should be to promote positive male-female relationships, not just rail against the usual laundry list of inappropriate behaviors. She advertised on the company’s e-mail system for a few male and female pairs who believed they exemplified high-quality communications in the workplace and from whom she could learn about the nature of positive male-female relationships.

Hundreds of volunteers replied. Eventually, she trained 15 pairs to interview other exemplary pairs and ended up with a 300-story catalog from which to build a new, positive model for her program. Avon Mexico, once rife with

ing or problem-solving are good tools if they are handled gingerly and you understand that you are taking a narrow view of a pretty complex puzzle—an organization—and trying to translate what you see into advice,” he says, adding that he would not relegate problem-solving tools and skills to the scrap heap any time soon.

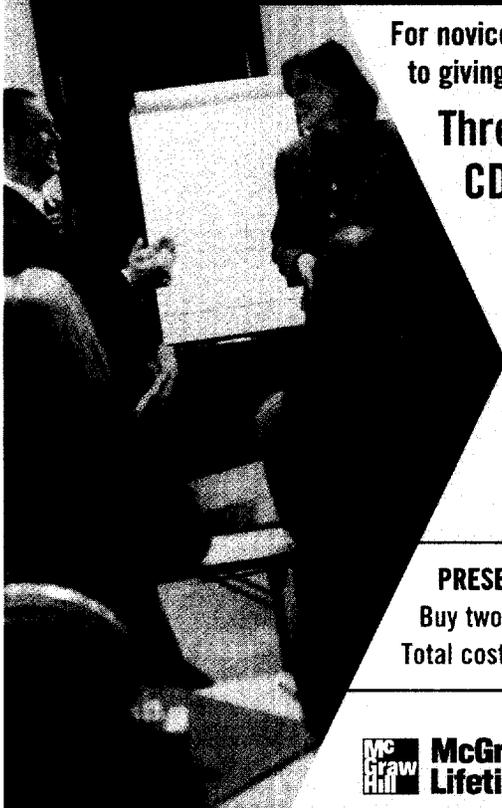
Cooperrider isn't so sure. “I don't know that we actually ever solve problems,” he says. “We go out, do an analysis, and work on the problem—until something else comes along. Then our attention moves on to that new problem.” The original problem may not be solved, he says, it just moves out of our field of vision.

“We are all so inculcated in the language of deficit and the problem-finding orientation that it's hard to see appreciative opportunities,” says Cooperrider. “When we keep seeing our clients as problems to be solved, we impoverish them and disempower them.” ■

FOR FURTHER READING

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