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## What Is Appreciative Inquiry?

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We are no longer surprised when clients ask, “Appreciative what? What do you mean by Appreciative Inquiry?” After all, the words are a somewhat unusual, if not paradoxical, addition to a business vocabulary that revolves around strategy, structure, problems, and profits. After learning more about the power and potential of Appreciative Inquiry, however, our clients declare, “We want to do Appreciative Inquiry, but we will definitely have to call it something different for it to catch on in our organization.”

Appreciative Inquiry is the study of what gives life to human systems when they function at their best. This approach to personal change and organization change is based on the assumption that questions and dialogue about strengths, successes, values, hopes, and dreams are themselves transformational. In short, Appreciative Inquiry suggests that human organizing and change at its best is a relational process of inquiry, grounded in affirmation and appreciation. The following beliefs about human nature and human organizing are the foundation of Appreciative Inquiry:

- People individually and collectively have unique gifts, skills, and contributions to bring to life.

- Organizations are human social systems, sources of unlimited relational capacity, created and lived in language.
- The images we hold of the future are socially created and, once articulated, serve to guide individual and collective actions.
- Through human communication—inquiry and dialogue—people can shift their attention and action away from problem analysis to lift up worthy ideals and productive possibilities for the future.

Words create worlds, and the words Appreciative Inquiry are no exception. Clients have named their Appreciative Inquiry initiatives The Zealots Program, The Power of Two, Value-Inspired People, and in the case of Hunter Douglas, Focus 2000. In each case the company brand has endured—along with the words Appreciative Inquiry. As people understand more about the principles of Appreciative Inquiry and begin to experiment with its practices, they realize how radically positive and subtly different it is from business as usual. To fully describe and understand Appreciative Inquiry, consider the meaning of each of the two words.

## Appreciation: Recognition and Value Added

Appreciation has to do with recognition, valuing, and gratitude. The word appreciate is a verb that carries a double meaning, referring to both the act of recognition and the act of enhancing value. Consider these definitions:

1. To recognize the best in people and the world around us.
2. To perceive those things which give life, health, vitality, and excellence to living human systems.
3. To affirm past and present strengths, successes, assets, and potentials.
4. To increase in value, as in “the investment has appreciated in value.”

Indeed, organizations, businesses, and communities can benefit from greater appreciation. Around the globe, people hunger for recognition. They want to work from their strengths on tasks they find valuable. Executives and managers long to lead from their values. They seek ways to integrate their greatest passions into their daily work. And organizations strive regularly to enhance their value to shareholders, employees, and the world. But Appreciative Inquiry is about more than appreciation, recognition, and value enhancement. It is also about inquiry.

### Inquiry: Exploration and Discovery

Inquiry refers to the acts of exploration and discovery. The spirit of inquiry is the spirit of learning. It implies a quest for new possibilities, being in a state of unknowing, wonder, and willingness to learn. It implies an openness to change. The verb inquire means:

1. To ask questions.
2. To study.
3. To search, explore, delve into, or investigate.

Inquiry is a learning process for organizations as well as for individuals. Seldom do we search, explore, or study what we already know with certainty. We ask questions about areas unfamiliar to us. The act of inquiry requires sincere curiosity and openness to new possibilities, new directions, and new understanding. We cannot “have all the answers,” “know what is right,” or “be certain” when we engage in inquiry.

To continue to succeed, organizations need more inquiry. They need less command and control by a few and more exploration of possibilities among many. They need less certainty in their usual plans and strategies and a greater capacity to sense and adapt quickly as their world changes. They need leaders who can acknowledge what they don’t know and who will enthusiastically ask provocative and inspiring questions.

For Appreciative Inquiry to be effective, however, not just any questions will do. Questions must be affirmative, focused on topics

valuable to the people involved, and directed at topics, concerns, and issues central to the success of the organization. When appreciation sets the direction for inquiry, the power of Appreciative Inquiry is released.

## The Catalytic Effect of Appreciative Inquiry

Like the elements hydrogen and oxygen—which combine to make water, the most nurturing substance on earth—appreciation and inquiry combine to produce a vital, powerful, and catalytic effect on leadership and organization change. By tapping into accounts of organizations that are functioning at their best, Appreciative Inquiry unleashes information and commitment that together create energy for positive change.

Hierarchies all too often exclude those people most significantly impacted. Appreciative Inquiry turns those hierarchies into knowledge-rich, relationally inclusive, self-organizing enterprises. This change is powerfully illustrated by British Airways. After September 11, 2002, most airlines needed to cut costs and reduce headcount as demand for air travel declined drastically. British Airways Customer Service in North America was no exception. However, their prior experience using Appreciative Inquiry led them to involve people in determining how best to reduce the workforce. People explored one another's career hopes and dreams, suggested options, and volunteered for sabbaticals, job sharing, and part-time positions. Appreciative Inquiry created a context for people to be included and heard throughout the difficult and challenging time.

Appreciative Inquiry turns command-and-control cultures into communities of discovery and cooperation. For example, a year into our work with one long-term client, we asked an employee to tell what had happened. This is what he said:

Before Appreciative Inquiry if the R&D group wanted to run a prototype on my machine, they would go to my supervisor, who would review the schedule and tell me when to do it. Now, they come to me directly and together we work out the best time to do it.

This organization moved beyond authoritarian styles of management, liberating people to create together what they knew was best for their customers, the business, and themselves.

When we began working with GTE, an organization that had earlier laid off thousands of employees, morale was at an all-time low. Conversations at all levels in the organization were about “ain’t it awful,” “what’s wrong around here,” and “why it won’t get any better.” We created a process that invited employees to use Appreciative Inquiry to make the organization a better place to work—and they did. Thousands of employees were trained in the Foundations of Appreciative Inquiry, Front-Line Leadership Using Appreciative Inquiry, and Appreciative Union-Management Relations. After their training, front-line employees at GTE self-organized a wide range of initiatives, including changes in customer satisfaction surveys, studies of call center best practices, and appreciative processes for employee recruitment, orientation, and retention. After the many organic changes that took place, GTE won the American Society for Training and Development Excellence in Practice Award (Managing Change) in 1997.

Finally, Appreciative Inquiry renews leaders as well as organizations and communities. Rick Pellett, president and general manager of Hunter Douglas Window Fashions Division, describes profound personal shifts in perception as a result of leading the Hunter Douglas initiative:

The work I did here began to change me, almost right away. It got me asking questions—not just about the company but about my life.

The questions we were asking and the dreams we were dreaming opened doors for me. They invited me to consider where I was heading, and whether it was the future I really wanted to live. They compelled me to take action to correct things that I’d simply chosen to live with for years and years and years.

I recognize that this experience wouldn’t create the same kind of “awakening” in everybody that it touched. But for me, it was revolutionary. And for many of the other hard-core, quick-deciding, bottom-line leaders that rise to the top in corporate America, it just might be life changing, for the better.

## The 4-D Cycle

How does Appreciative Inquiry work? The process used to generate the power of Appreciative Inquiry is the 4-D Cycle—Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny (Figure 1). It is based on the notion that human systems, individuals, teams, organizations, and communities grow and change in the direction of what they study. Appreciative Inquiry works by focusing the attention of an organization on its most positive potential—its positive core—and unleashing the energy of the positive core for transformation and sustainable success. This is the essential nature of the organization at its best—people’s collective wisdom about the organization’s tangible and intangible strengths, capabilities, resources, and assets.

The 4-D Cycle can be used to guide a conversation, a large group meeting, or a whole-system change effort. It can serve as a framework for personal development or coaching, partnership or

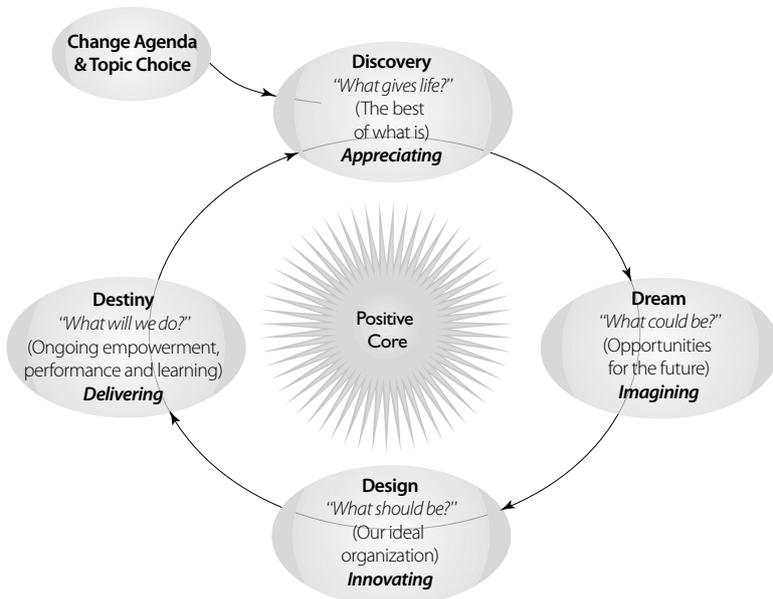


Figure 1. The Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle

alliance building, and large-scale community or organization development. Whatever the purpose, the Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle serves as the foundation on which change is built.

### *Affirmative Topic Choice*

The 4-D Cycle begins with the thoughtful identification of what is to be studied—Affirmative Topics. Because human systems move in the direction of what they study, the choice of what to study—what to focus organizational attention on—is fateful. The topics that are selected become the organization’s agenda for learning and innovation.

Affirmative Topics are subjects of strategic importance to the organization. They may be aspects of the organization’s positive core that if expanded would further the organization’s success. They may be problems that if stated in the affirmative and studied would improve organizational performance. Or they may be competitive success factors the organization needs to learn about in order to grow and change.

Once selected, these affirmative topics guide the 4-D Cycle of Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny. A thorough explanation of how to choose affirmative topics, criteria for good topics, and many sample topics can be found in Chapter 6, “Affirmative Topic Choice.”

### *Discovery*

Discovery is an extensive, cooperative search to understand the “best of what is and what has been.” It is typically conducted via one-on-one interviews, though it may also include focus groups and large-group meetings. In any form, Discovery involves purposefully affirmative conversations among many or all members of an organization, including external stakeholders, “best-in-class” benchmark organizations, and members of the organization’s local community. A detailed description and comprehensive guide for the Discovery

phase is provided in Chapter 7, “Discovery: Appreciative Interviews and More.”

The Discovery process results in:

- A rich description or mapping of the organization’s positive core.
- Organization-wide sharing of stories of best practices and exemplary actions.
- Enhanced organizational knowledge and collective wisdom.
- The emergence of unplanned changes well before implementation of the remaining phases of the 4-D Cycle.

### *Dream*

Dream is an energizing exploration of “what might be.” This phase is a time for people to collectively explore hopes and dreams for their work, their working relationships, their organization, and the world. It is a time to envision possibilities that are big, bold, and beyond the boundaries of what has been in the past. The Dream phase is both practical and generative. It amplifies the positive core and challenges the status quo by helping people envision more valuable and vital futures, better bottom-line results, and contributions to a better world. Typically conducted in large-group forums, Dream activities result in alignment around creative images of the organization’s most positive potentials and strategic opportunities, innovative strategic visions, and an elevated sense of purpose. A detailed description and comprehensive guide for the Dream phase is provided in Chapter 8, “Dream: Visions and Voices of the Future.”

### *Design*

Design is a set of Provocative Propositions, which are statements describing the ideal organization, or “what should be.” Design activities are conducted in large-group forums or within a small team. Participants draw on discoveries and dreams to select high-impact

design elements, then craft a set of provocative statements that list the organizational qualities they most desire. True to the principles of Appreciative Inquiry, Provocative Propositions are written in the affirmative. They expand the organization's image of itself by presenting clear, compelling pictures of how things will be when the organization's positive core is boldly alive in all of its strategies, processes, systems, decisions, and collaborations. A detailed description and comprehensive guide for the Design phase is provided in Chapter 9, "Design: Giving Form to Values and Ideals."

### *Destiny*

Destiny is a series of inspired actions that support ongoing learning and innovation, or "what will be." This is the final phase of the 4-D Cycle. The entire cycle provides an open forum for employees to contribute and step forward in the service of the organization, and change occurs in all phases of the Appreciative Inquiry process. The Destiny phase, however, focuses specifically on personal and organizational commitments and paths forward. In many cases, Appreciative Inquiry becomes the framework for leadership and ongoing organization development. Therefore, in the Destiny phase, many organizations begin the Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle anew.

Destiny activities are often launched in large-group forums and continue as small-group initiatives. The result of destiny is generally an extensive array of changes throughout the organization in areas as diverse as management practices, HR processes, measurement and evaluation systems, customer service systems, work processes, and structures. A detailed description and comprehensive guide for the Destiny phase is provided in Chapter 10, "Destiny: Inspired Action and Improvisation."

### What Is Distinctive About Appreciative Inquiry?

As an approach to organization change, Appreciative Inquiry borrows from the strengths of many other practices in the field of

organization development. From Harrison Owen, creator of Open Space Technology, we learned about the power of self-organizing processes. From the groundbreaking work of the “mother” of Whole-Scale® Change, Kathleen Dannemiller, and her colleagues at Dannemiller Tyson Associates, we borrowed many practices for designing and facilitating large-scale meetings.

From organizational learning guru Peter Senge—and his colleagues in the Society for Organizational Learning—we came to value the practice of dialogue for awakening the flow of collective meaning making and enhancing organizational learning. And from Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, creators of Future Search, we understand the importance of bringing all the stakeholders together to focus upon and create the future.

While honoring the contributions made by these and other leaders in the field of organization development, we believe that Appreciative Inquiry offers the field a radically new direction in principle and in practice. Grounded in the theory and practice of social construction, Appreciative Inquiry is an invitation to a positive revolution in change. It is distinctive in three significant ways: it is fully affirmative, it is inquiry based, and it is improvisational.

### *It Is Fully Affirmative*

As a process of positive change, Appreciative Inquiry is fully affirmative. Moving through the 4-D Cycle builds upon the organization’s track record of success and inspires positive possibilities for the future to be expressed and realized. Unlike other change methodologies, Appreciative Inquiry does not include deficit approaches to organizational analysis, such as root cause of failure, gaps, barriers, strategic threats, or resistance to change. All Appreciative Inquiry activities, practices, and processes focus on the organization at its best—past, present, and future.

Too often, organizations are prevented from fully knowing or drawing upon their positive potential because of their habit of focusing on problems rather than possibilities. The result, accord-

ing to David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, is decreased organizational capacity:

Problem analytic methodologies are based on deficit discourse. Over time, they fill the organization with stories, understandings, and rich vocabularies of why things fail. Compulsive concern with what's not working, why things go wrong, and who didn't do his or her job demoralizes members of the organization, reduces the speed of learning, and undermines relationships and forward movement.<sup>1</sup>

A classic example of AI's commitment to the affirmative is the case of British Petroleum's ProCare, a U.S. auto repair business. At the end of its first year of operation, ProCare's customer surveys showed that 95 percent of all customers were 100 percent satisfied—an astonishing statistic, as anyone in the auto repair industry will confirm. ProCare was not satisfied, however. They decided to conduct customer focus groups. Unfortunately, they asked only the 5 percent of dissatisfied customers about their dissatisfaction. Then, on the walls in every station, they posted vivid descriptions of the identified causes of dissatisfaction. Within a short time customer satisfaction ratings dropped, along with employee morale and retention.

After hearing about the success gone astray, a team of Appreciative Inquiry consultants made suggestions to help the failing business. They recommended that focus groups be conducted with the customers who were 100 percent satisfied. With great skepticism and a moderate amount of curiosity, the leaders of ProCare agreed. The results were stunning. Customer satisfaction ratings reversed once again, this time for the better, as people began to learn and replicate the root causes of their success. The fully affirmative stance of Appreciative Inquiry created a rich learning environment and paid off by restoring high levels of customer satisfaction.

### *It Is Inquiry Based*

At the heart of Appreciative Inquiry is the “art of the question”—the ability to craft unconditionally positive questions and to interview

tens, hundreds, even thousands of people with questions of organizational relevance and vitality.

Organizational life is a continuous stream of questions and analysis. What caused this downturn in productivity? How can we reduce overtime? Why did you do it that way? Who needs to be involved in this decision? How can we increase revenue while containing costs? Appreciative Inquiry confirms that all questions are important, but the nature of our questions is particularly important. Appreciative Inquiry posits that organizations move in the direction of what they consistently ask questions about, and that the more affirmative the questions are, the more hopeful and positive the organizational responses will be.

The starting point and essential component of any Appreciative Inquiry process is the appreciative interview. Appreciative Inquiry would not be Appreciative Inquiry without appreciative interviews. Without appreciative interviews there is no inquiry, no openness to learn, and little potential for transformation. There is only an appreciative perspective. There is an important distinction between an appreciative perspective and Appreciative Inquiry. An appreciative perspective focuses on recognition, values, and affirmation, whereas Appreciative Inquiry implies a search, a willingness to discover, and an openness to learn.

To understand the difference, let's look at the processes two organizations used to establish employee alignment on shared values. The first organization is actually a composite of many. We would describe it as having an appreciative perspective. A small group of people, consisting of the executive team and several employees with high potential, met and articulated the company's values. They printed a beautiful document defining the values and describing their importance to the business. They wanted all employees to be informed, to understand, and to be rewarded for performance in alignment with the values. To roll out the values, they launched a communication campaign and implemented a values-based recognition system. Employees were given "values cards" to carry in their wallets and posters of the "values statements" for their office walls.

Most employees hung the posters, but few learned or felt valued in the process.

The second organization, the American Red Cross, decided to use Appreciative Inquiry to seek out and identify their living values. They were sincerely interested in discovering and learning about the values enacted on a daily basis by their members. To learn what values guided the service provided by their members, they conducted over three thousand appreciative interviews about values in action. They collected thousands of heartwarming and inspiring stories about the challenging, committed, and compassionate work of the American Red Cross. The stories were clustered, and the ten most frequently lived values were identified. At a national conference, two thousand members heard stories of the Red Cross's living values and saw videos of themselves and their colleagues telling stories of their values in action. As members shared stories and watched the videos, the organization's collective knowledge increased.

In the spirit of inquiry, all members had the opportunity to be interviewed and share their stories in this living values process. Thousands participated and were inspired, recognized, and honored for their values-based work on behalf of the American Red Cross.

### *It Is Improvisational*

As an approach to change with endless variation, Appreciative Inquiry is improvisational. It is not a singular methodology because it is not based on one firmly established way of proceeding. Like great jazz improvisation—a metaphor proposed by consultant Frank Barrett—each Appreciative Inquiry is a new creation, an experiment that brings out the best of human organizing. It begins with a clear purpose. But from there, who knows precisely what will happen? In many cases, the most remarkable outcomes are unplanned and unexpected—they emerge as the organization's unique version of Appreciative Inquiry unfolds.

And like musical improvisation, Appreciative Inquiry is loosely structured, based on a set of principles and generally following the

framework of the 4-D Cycle. This book is filled with stories that illustrate a variety of ways that individuals and organizations have used the 4-D Cycle to meet their unique goals, with surprising and positive results. But even the 4-D Cycle itself can be adapted to different cultures and situations. For example, social activist Mac Odell—whose work with thousands of women throughout rural Nepal demands great improvisation—added three more Ds: Do It Now, Drumming, and Dancing. Similarly, the international consulting firm Cap Gemini Ernst & Young’s Appreciative Inquiry process, branded ePositive Change, has five Ds: Define, Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver.

As an improvisational approach to change, Appreciative Inquiry is guided by a series of questions:

- What is your overall Change Agenda?
- What Form of Engagement will best suit your needs?
- What is your overall Inquiry Strategy?
- What steps will you take at each phase of the 4-D Cycle?

In Chapter 2, “A Menu of Approaches to Appreciative Inquiry,” we expand upon these questions and highlight some of the many ways Appreciative Inquiry has been used.

Green Mountain Coffee Roasters’ (GMCR) answers to these questions led them through a highly successful experiment with Appreciative Inquiry. What was their Change Agenda? To increase the effectiveness of existing business process teams—and in turn reduce overall operating costs. What Form of Engagement did they choose? They created a new approach to inquiry. They trained five intact business process teams in Appreciative Inquiry and set them loose to initiate their own process-related inquiries. Several times during their three-month period of Discovery, one or more of the inquiries seemed to veer off their original course. Each time this happened, a mixed group of executives and operations staff adapted and revised the process, ensuring its continued relevance and success. In the end, using Appreciative Inquiry, GMCR achieved a 25

percent reduction in operating costs as well as organization-wide input on ongoing strategic initiatives.

The improvisational character of Appreciative Inquiry makes invention and continual learning imperative. Professor and Appreciative Inquiry thought leader David Cooperrider believes that only 5 percent of the possible practices, applications, models, methodologies, and approaches to Appreciative Inquiry have been created. We hope this book helps you learn the basics so you will be able to design your own Appreciative Inquiry initiatives and add to the growing body of knowledge on positive change.

### From Deficit-Based Change to Positive Change

Appreciative Inquiry is a bold shift in the way we think about and approach organization change. The ultimate paradox of Appreciative Inquiry is that it does not aim to change anything. It aims to uncover and bring forth existing strengths, hopes, and dreams—to identify and amplify the positive core of the organization. In this process, people and organizations are transformed. With Appreciative Inquiry, the focus of attention is on positive potential—the best of what has been, what is, and what might be. It is a process of positive change.

In contrast, most other approaches to change are deficit based—focused on problems and how to overcome them. Success depends on a clear identification and diagnosis of the problem, the selection of an appropriate solution, and the implementation of that solution. In our experience, deficit-based change can work—it has for years—just not as effectively as positive change.

Appreciative Inquiry is an invitation to shift from a deficit-based approach to change to a positive approach to change. Our experiences, spanning twenty-five years of organizational consulting, reflect this shift. Early in our careers, we confidentially gathered information about our client systems, diagnosed organizational problems, and designed processes whereby our clients would correct what was wrong. Periodically, while employing these

well-established approaches to change, we would see glimpses of alternatives. And so we experimented.

We experimented with engaging organizational members in their own action research. While consulting on the merger of SmithKline Corporation and Beckman Instruments, we established research teams made up of line managers, front-line employees, and HR staff to study the best practices of each organization. Sixty people conducted interviews and focus groups with thousands of participants. We facilitated their sharing of stories and data and the identification of five core competencies. We took the experiment further by having them design and lead a week-long workshop on the five core competencies. Three thousand employees worldwide participated in these workshops as part of the merger integration.

At the same time, we began to focus people and organizations on possibilities—on what they wanted to do and to be, and on the collaborative creation of their work processes and services. At the Visiting Nurse Service of New York we brought teams of administrators, nurses, medical assistants, social workers, and patient advocates together to learn from each other and collectively envision and define their processes for service delivery. We facilitated their success by keeping their eyes and their conversations focused on what worked and what they hoped and wished could be.

The positive results of these experiments guided us toward new assumptions and new ways of working that we now describe as positive change. This transition from deficit-based change to positive change is illustrated in Table 1.

As you can see, the move from deficit-based change to positive change alters what is studied—from problems to the positive core. The shift alters who is involved and who has access to information—from some of the people to all of the people. Finally, it alters the results—from a best solution to the problem to the boldest dream of positive possibility. And it shifts the capacity gained in the process—from the capacity to implement and measure a specific plan to the capacity for ongoing positive change.

For us—as for many of our colleagues—there is no going

**Table 1. The Shift from Deficit-Based Change to Positive Change**

	<i>Deficit-Based Change</i>	<i>Positive Change</i>
<b><i>Intervention Focus</i></b>	Identified problem.	Affirmative topics.
<b><i>Participation</i></b>	Selective inclusion of people.	Whole system.
<b><i>Action Research</i></b>	Diagnosis of the problem. Causes and consequences. Quantitative analysis. Profile of need. Conducted by outsiders.	Discovery of positive core. Organization at its best. Narrative analysis. Map of positive core. Conducted by members.
<b><i>Dissemination</i></b>	Feedback to decision makers.	Widespread and creative sharing of best practices.
<b><i>Creative Potential</i></b>	Brainstormed list of alternatives.	Dreams of a better world and the organization's contribution.
<b><i>Result</i></b>	Best solution to resolve the problem.	Design to realize dreams and human aspirations.
<b><i>Capacity Gained</i></b>	Capacity to implement and measure the plan.	Capacity for ongoing positive change.

back. Having made the transition from deficit-based change to positive change, we are committed to working from our strengths, to helping people around the globe discover and work from their strengths, and to building vibrantly successful organizations in which the human spirit soars.

### But What About Problems?

Isn't it unrealistic to deny them? Aren't you asking us to ignore problems or to act as if they don't exist? These are some of the most frequently asked questions about Appreciative Inquiry. Let us be clear. We are not saying to deny or ignore problems. What we are saying is that if you want to transform a situation, relationship, organization, or community, focusing on strengths is much more effective than focusing on problems. In Chapter 4, "Appreciative Inquiry in Action: From Origins to Current Practice," we offer numerous stories about organizations and communities that benefited signifi-

cantly by using Appreciative Inquiry to shift their attention from problems to possibilities.

We often work in situations fraught with anxiety, tension, and stress: union-management relations, merger integration, and cross-functional conflict. Frequently, when we turn people's attention from "what is wrong around here" to "who are we when we are at our best," conflict turns to cooperation.

We do not dismiss accounts of conflict, problems, or stress. We simply do not use them as the basis of analysis or action. We listen when they arise, validate them as lived experience, and seek to reframe them. For example, the problem of high employee turnover becomes an inquiry into magnetic work environments or a question of retention. The problem of low management credibility becomes an inquiry into moments of management credibility or inspired leadership. The problem of sexual harassment at work becomes a question of positive cross-gender working relationships.

The capacity to reframe problems into affirmative topics is central to Appreciative Inquiry. Chapter 6, "Affirmative Topic Choice," offers a description of how to do this, along with several compelling examples.

## Why Does Appreciative Inquiry Work?

The Buddha once said, "Life is suffering." Problems are like suffering—they're always present. But suffering and problems are not the only qualities present in life or organizations. In addition to suffering, there is joy. In addition to problems, there are successes, hopes, and dreams. Appreciative Inquiry redirects the focus of analysis. This simple shift in attention allows people and organizations to rise above and move beyond the conditions in which the problems originally existed.

Appreciative Inquiry works because it treats people like people, not like machines. As humans, we are social. We create our identities and our knowledge in relation to one another. We are curious. We like to tell stories and listen to stories. We pass on our values,

beliefs, and wisdom in stories. We like to learn and use what we learn to achieve our best. And we delight in doing well in the eyes of those we care about and respect. Appreciative Inquiry enables leaders to create natural human organizations—knowledge-rich, strength-based, adaptable learning organizations.

We know this in part through experience and in part through our research. We wondered why Appreciative Inquiry had worked so well—so we did an inquiry. We interviewed people and conducted focus groups. We asked them to tell us stories of Appreciative Inquiry at its best—how it influenced them and why it worked. What we discovered surprised and delighted us. Appreciative Inquiry works because it liberates power. It unleashes both individual and organizational power. It brings out the best of people, encourages them to see and support the best of others, and generates unprecedented cooperation and innovation.

The people we interviewed told us that Appreciative Inquiry works for six reasons, briefly outlined here and described in detail in Chapter 12, “Why Appreciative Inquiry Works”:

- *It builds relationships, enabling people to be known in relationship rather than in roles.* As one participant put it, “Appreciative interviews are energizing every time you do them. They build relationships and give you a chance to connect. This tells people that they are important and that they belong.” Many people told us of the satisfying and productive friendships they made in the process of Appreciative Inquiry—among co-workers, among managers and line employees, and among customers and members of the organization.
- *It creates an opportunity for people to be heard.* Recognition, mutual respect, and morale all go up when people feel heard. One manager described his experience by saying, “My people were finally recognized as contributors. We’d been considered the black hole in the organization for years. Through our work with Appreciative Inquiry, we were really seen and heard for the first time.”

- *It generates opportunities for people to dream, and to share their dreams.* Repeatedly people were glad to be asked to describe their dreams. And they got even more excited when they discovered that their dreams were shared by others. In the words of one Appreciative Inquiry enthusiast, “Sharing our stories and our dreams is the best vehicle for positive change that I have ever experienced. I will retire now knowing that I helped create a better company and a better world.”
- *It creates an environment in which people are able to choose how they contribute.* When people are free to volunteer based on their interests and passions, their capacity to learn and contribute is significantly increased. Understanding the value of free choice, one director sent the following memo to his staff: “As you know, Appreciative Inquiry is not mandatory. On the other hand, if it does not fit your style, do not obstruct what others are choosing to do. We need to be talking about the process and sharing our approaches so we can all keep learning and gain confidence.”
- *It gives people both discretion and support to act.* One participant commented, “We had always had support to take action on behalf of the organization, but now—suddenly—people were making resources available and paying attention to what we were doing. They backed us up and made it possible for us to follow through on—and finally do—the things that we knew needed to be done.”
- *It encourages and enables people to be positive.* As one employee commented, “It isn’t always popular to be positive! People make fun of you and tell you that you’re Pollyannaish. Appreciative Inquiry turned my positive attitude into an asset rather than a liability. It gave me things to look forward to here at work.”

Throughout this book, we illustrate our explanations of Appreciative Inquiry with the story of one company—Hunter Douglas Window

Fashions Division (Hunter Douglas)—and its use of Appreciative Inquiry. The company is introduced in Chapter 4, “Appreciative Inquiry in Action: From Origins to Current Practice.” The story continues in Chapters 5 through 10. At the end of each of these chapters you will find vignettes about Hunter Douglas, describing how they carried out each phase of the Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle. Together with other case studies and examples, the Hunter Douglas story provides clear and substantial evidence that Appreciative Inquiry works. More importantly, perhaps, it shows you how it works.

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