

“The executive vocation in a post-bureaucratic society is to nourish the appreciative soil from which affirmative projections grow, branch off, evolve, and become collective projections. Creating the conditions for organization-wide appreciation is the single most important message that can be taken to ensure the conscious evolution of a valued and positive future.”

—DAVID L. COOPERRIDER, *Positive Image, Positive Action: The Affirmative Basis of Organizing*

Part I

Context Setting

PART I PROVIDES a context for this book. The last ten years have been boom years for the strengths movement and positive psychology. Appreciative Inquiry has been delivering *positive revolutions in change* to all sorts of contexts for thirty years. These new positive, strength-based methods for human and organization development have arrived, and we are ready.

Providing a Personal Context

“Curiosity killed the cat” was one of the many proverbs my grandmother delighted in repeating to me, as a very young child, every time I poked my head into something new or asked “Why?” It silenced me, as I was upset by the idea of “killing cats.” My mother, too, after endless “Why?” questions, in frustration would sigh, “Because I said so” or “‘Y’ is a crooked letter that can’t be made straight.” I had to pause to think hard about trying to straighten the letter “Y” and wouldn’t dare ask, “Why does it need to be straightened?” Even my father would tell me, “Mind your p’s and q’s.” I couldn’t fathom that one. In spite of these early reprimands, it seems my curiosity, love of learning, and desire to seek out new ideas have been my constant guides. These days, whenever I am in a new territory, I am called to go further to explore what’s around the corner, over the hill, or beyond the horizon. I am truly satisfied when I discover for myself what I can learn and what new ideas come up that stimulate possibility-thinking and what-if scenarios. After years of following these instincts, I know now that curiosity, love of learning, collecting ideas, and seeing the big picture are my best attributes, or my signature strengths. I am most satisfied when I am playing or working to these strengths.

Little surprise, then, that when I first heard the term Appreciative Inquiry, my neurons lit up and sparks were firing, especially as a trusted colleague had tantalized me with, “You will love this—it’s all about finding what works best in people and organizations; it’s been called a positive revolution in change.” As a facilitator of change, my strength is designing and facilitating workshops from a smorgasbord of tools and methodologies I have learned over the years, and I am constantly on the lookout for new, relevant tools to add to my toolkit. Finding Appreciative Inquiry, or Appreciative Inquiry finding me, was a gift. It has deepened, broadened, and enhanced my way of living and working. Here is a practical framework that looks at the world with a valuing lens. It addresses problems from the perspective of what’s working, instead of what’s broken, looking for the best in people and situations, not the worst. The worldview of Appreciative Inquiry, seeing people and their organizations as sources of strength and vitality, is a paradigm shift because it begins with the positive and therefore approaches change from that perspective. Instantly, Appreciative Inquiry resonated powerfully. It connected with my instinctive approach to see the glass half-full instead of half empty. People and organizations are living systems not only amassed with problems waiting to be solved but also filled with unlimited capacity for human relatedness, innovation, creativity, and excellence waiting to be appreciated.

As a life-centric change process, Appreciative Inquiry pays attention to the best in us, not the worst; to our strengths, not our weaknesses; to possibility thinking, not problem thinking. Appreciative Inquiry is an affirming way to embrace organizational change. It is a change method with the perspective that every system, human and otherwise, has something that works right—things that contribute to its aliveness, effectiveness, and success, connecting it in healthy ways to its stakeholders and the wider community. When we are open with each other to truly connect, we find our intersect points, and from that shared place of common humanity we begin to share dreams and aspirations, addressing problems in different ways. One of the ways we do this is story telling. It is through telling our stories that we transcend our differences as we discover our universal connection with others. “Remember, you don’t fear people whose stories you know. Real listening always brings people closer together” (Wheatley, 2002, p. 145). With that mind, I begin with some of my stories.

At the tender age of sixteen, my stated career goal was to “maximize people’s potential.” I didn’t know what it truly meant at the time, other

than I wanted to help people live their best lives. I followed that intuition, and many years later, I would even say it is my calling. My “maximizing people’s potential” has taken on multiple guises. I have contributed in many ways, in a wide variety of roles, switching careers across industries, countries, and cultures, always keen to embrace the newest technologies and evolving methodologies. Over time, continuing to learn and grow, I live with increased conscious awareness. This means two things: first, that I pay attention to as many of the thoughts, feelings, images, connections, judgments, impulses, and desires that flash in and out of my wakeful state and reflect on their appropriateness for the context; and second, that I pay increasing attention to the mystery and magnificence of life itself, cultivating a wonderment, gratitude, and desire to contribute positively to evolving our human spirit such that it benefits all beings and our entire universe.

It was in 2003 that I signed up to experience and learn about Appreciative Inquiry from its co-creator, David Cooperrider, at Case Western Reserve University. Approaching change from the mindset of existing strengths and discovering the healthiest, most alive experiences sounded most compelling. Here was a way to embrace wholeness: to view organizations as centers of human relatedness, where members are invited to discover their strengths through learning about and with one another, sharing their high-point stories of performing at their best. Here was a way to build on these stories of excellence by using our imaginative capacities to dream what we aspire to and, furthermore, to co-design flourishing environments for work and/or play that are a fusion of our own grounded realities and our highest aspirations. It was also thrilling to learn how positive psychology builds our resiliency and contributes to health and happiness over time. I was re-energized to find a method that initiated change from a healthy, positive foundation instead of the traditional “It’s not working”/“We’ve got a problem” mindset. Reflecting on my personal and professional life, I became aware that, had I been more conscious of my innate talents and strengths *earlier* in my life, how much more joyful, productive, efficient, and healthy that might have been ... and, that’s speaking just for me. Imagine the flow-on effects to all those I have lived and worked with. Their lives would have been so much easier as well! While I intuited my career goal to maximize people’s potential very early in my life, it is taking a lifetime to increase my knowledge, find congruent tools, and develop my skills to the point at which they have become interwoven into who I am.

Waking Up

This book is written for facilitators, change agents, trainers, and leaders. It's a practical how-to book to help bring Appreciative Inquiry and its positive, strength-based approaches into organizations and communities easily, effectively, and efficiently. As you continue to read this book and learn more about these approaches, you will become aware very quickly, if you haven't already, that Appreciative Inquiry is more than a practical method to be able to do things in an energized, collaborative, and generative way; it is very much a way of being in the world, a philosophy. As the creator of the collaborative workshops, my intention in writing this book is to inspire you to experience the value and joy that comes from working and living with increased awareness of your strengths, building your positivity ratio (Fredrickson, 2009), and become more consciously aware of all your thoughts, feeling, actions, and interactions in all ways at all times. Appreciative Inquiry is a process that integrates all three of these goals. It is a pathway to building trusting, flourishing, conscious environments.

As trainers, we generally encourage our participants to work toward unconscious competence in acquiring new knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The intention is to be able to perform at a level of competence without conscious awareness: that is, we can do it without thinking. As our skill level increases, our performance becomes easier. Remember how it was to learn a new computer program? Before we launched into such a new endeavor, we had no level of competence: we didn't know what we didn't know. We describe this initial stage as *unconscious incompetence*. We muddled through, acknowledging soon enough that we were not fully competent. We realized we needed some training or coaching to attain a level of competence.

With training and coaching, we worked at it and we improved. We performed some functions from memory, but for others we had to refer to the manual, and still we would make a number of errors. We felt a little awkward and self-conscious; we were not yet fully confident. However, we had come to a good place. We had become aware of what we didn't know, so we moved to a level of *conscious incompetence*. With increased awareness of our incompetence, we took more lessons and focused on what we needed to learn. Our performance improved even further and our initial stress levels lessened as we became more conscious of our growing competence. Performing now with greater ease and comfort, we had attained a level of *conscious competence*. With even more practice and investment

of our time, we reached a level of performance wherein we could use the software program without referring to manuals or having to consciously access steps from memory. It became “second nature to us”—just like riding a bike. We could just do it. We were operating at a level of *unconscious competence*. We had moved from *unconscious incompetence* to *conscious incompetence* to *conscious competence* and then *unconscious competence*.

While performing at a level of unconscious competence works for us at both neurological and physical levels to protect us from stimulus overload and help us to do things efficiently, it is not enough. It seems we are awakening from the complacency that comes from operating on autopilot and performing in a perfunctory way. Staying at this level will not maximize our full potential. Since the beginning of this century, neuroscience has taught us so much about the magnificence of the human brain, which is extremely exciting, as we think about all there is still to learn. It is not only in science that exciting discoveries are being made, but technologically and sociologically we are also making speedy progress. As next-generation trainers and developers, our work is much more than training to develop skills, knowledge, and attitudes so that our clients perform at a standard of unconscious competence. Today, there is an imperative to move beyond unconscious competence. To participate fully in the complex and interdependent world of which we have always been a part, it behooves us to embrace our lives as fully conscious human beings: to be awake to our whole selves and step up to our highest potentials so we can live our lives to the fullest. To be the best we can be is to maximize our potential, to recognize and honor our strengths, to continue to develop them and facilitate others to invest in their own strengths.

To help us move in such a direction, we need to develop another competence: a *reflective competence*. The term, used originally in the fields of education and social work, refers to the ability to be fully aware of oneself, one's thoughts and feelings in a given situation—namely, seeing the dynamics as they are being played out in the full context of the situation. It could be equated with taking a “third position” where you are the fly on the wall observing all that is going on, including how you are simultaneously constructing your part in the situation and responding to it and those involved. At the same time, you are in the movie and watching the movie run before your very own eyes. In the organizational context, we have moved beyond simple data collectors, information users, and knowledge managers to co-creators of new knowledge. The hope and

possibility of our time is to apply our new knowledge, skills, and increased consciousness in our homes, schools, hospitals, communities, businesses, and corporations with wisdom.

Shifting the Paradigm

The historian of science may be tempted to exclaim that when paradigms change, the world itself changes with them.

—Thomas Kuhn

As a student at Sydney University, in Sydney, Australia, I was informed that it took about thirty years for new theories about our world to make it into the mainstream. Making it into the mainstream means that new theoretical concepts and knowledge become accepted, integrated, or even supersede the prevailing paradigms. Despite our electronic evolution in the last twenty years and the speed and volume at which information can be shared, still we have been slow to act on new knowledge and apply it wisely. Our human capacity to hang on to what is familiar and comfortable is hardwired. “Why fix it, if it ain’t broke?” has been a dominant worldview that supports a prevailing paradigm that the only time to improve a system—human or otherwise—is to wait until something fails, goes wrong, or is a weakness or a problem.

This old paradigm of focus first on weakness is played out every day in most of our homes, our schools, our institutions, and our places of work and worship. The behaviors, the processes, the decisions that are described as weaknesses or problems are the first to grab our attention. We focus on the things that “need fixing.” As a consequence, those behaviors, thoughts, feelings, decisions, and processes that are working well and bring us successes don’t attract the same attention or the investment of resources. We invest energy, money, time, intellect, and emotion into things that don’t work for us instead of putting energies into those things that will give us an easier and a much-amplified return for our efforts and investments. Simply, what we focus on gets done. Punters at the racetrack do not place their hard-earned money on the weakest horse in the race. They bet on the best and the strongest. Owners and trainers of racehorses invest in nurturing and developing the strengths of each individual horse. It’s not to say that they discount or ignore their weak areas. They work on the principle that the return on investment will come from developing what is already a natural strength in each horse.

When training for triathlons, cycling was my strength, running was in the middle, and swimming was my weakest stage. To perform at my best, it was the cycling I needed to excel at. I could get into the zone when I cycled. I was at one with the bike, torso parallel to the road, legs dancing on the pedals, feeling the exhilaration of my rhythmic cadence, the wind flowing over me as I challenged myself to go faster and faster. It was hard work and it was pure joy. I trained in running, but it took much more effort to feel pleasure above pain. No matter how much I trained, I would never bring my running up to a standard that would exceed my performance on the bike. When it came to swimming, I trained just to be able to compete—damage control, as it's known. Swimming was hard work for me. I lacked the same joy I experienced in cycling. Had I invested all my time in my weakest stage, I would have jeopardized my overall performance and would have certainly dampened the pleasure and rewards I got out of participating in triathlons.

Similarly, if you were the coach of a successful swimming team, you'd know the strengths and weaknesses of all your team members. In order to get the best out of the team, you'd invest greater effort on developing the strengths of each team member to optimize his or her performance. You would also work with team members to overcome their weaknesses for necessary damage control. The biggest investment of your time, effort, and money, however, would be in building the strengths of each team member. You would not do it the other way round—focus on individuals' weaknesses at the cost of their natural talents and strengths.

It seems we know this in the sports arena. Yet, when it comes to organizational contexts, don't we do it the other way round? A vast majority of leaders still think we need to eliminate weaknesses in order to obtain optimal performance. Peter Drucker, one of the most influential thinkers on leadership and management, stressed that the role of leadership is to build on organizational strengths so that weaknesses seem irrelevant. Weaknesses cannot be ignored. But to develop and improve performance, it is more resourceful to focus on what already works well. At one time, I was contracted to coach a number of highly talented women in a professional services firm. All six clients came to their first coaching session with their 360-degree performance review reports. The first gesture of each person was to go the end of the document and point to the feedback of her manager with the comment, "These are my weaknesses. These are the areas my manager wants me to work on." Each woman paraphrased her manager's desire for her to address her weaknesses. Each considered

the manager's perspective to be fair and agreed focusing on these areas would help her advance in her career with the firm.

I listened respectfully before I spoke: "It is important to have this information. It's only one part of the story, not the whole, and we'll get there. For now, what do you think you do best in your role, when you are working to your best, and you feel most productive; when the work may be challenging, and at the same time most satisfying; when you feel fully engaged and time just seems to fly?" 99.9 percent of the time when I set the scene in this way, the response is silence, a puzzled look, a defocused glaze to access memory and then a pronounced physiological shift happens. Sheepish smiles light up their faces, a softening of the shoulders precedes a more relaxed posture, and then they struggle to respond. It usually is a struggle at first, because our education system traditionally seeks to correct what's bad and not reward what's good. Most of us have difficulty talking about our strengths and talents up-front. In support of the strengths movement, there is new research in the field of neuroscience that shows brain cells learn from our successes rather than our failures. The corollary is that we are more likely to be successful when we deploy our strengths with confidence rather than struggle with overcoming our weaknesses with difficulty.

Organizational Contexts

Organizational cultures vary, just as human personalities vary. Many organizations are embracing new methods and tools that bring all voices to the table. Participatory, inclusive decision making and increased global collaboration with the help of social media platforms to level the playing field are becoming more common, facilitating our capacity to be more experimental, playful, and engaged. Still, in most organizations, the starting point is to focus on what is broken and then call for change or a training program only when leaders or managers perceive employees are not performing. "It's a training problem," they complain. How many of us have been brought in to fix many "training problems" after a major change implementation failed to include informing (let alone including) the employees of new strategies, organizational restructure, new technologies, systems, processes, policies, or procedures. The expectation was that employees would slot into whatever the new design was and keep the organization running smoothly without support or strategies for transitioning to the new. Psychologically, one of the ways of coping with the feelings of anxiety and frustration is to defend against them by regressing to learned

helplessness, and with that come dependent behaviors and downtrodden, discouraged thoughts and feelings.

Years ago, I led a team of twelve training consultants for a major global professional service firm in Melbourne, Australia. My boss called me in one day, a little frustrated that I wasn't managing my team as tightly as he wanted me to. He handed me the marker pen, pointed to the huge whiteboard that hung on the wall in his huge corner office, and asked me to draw my organizational chart and reporting structure. Somewhat surprised at his request, yet without hesitation, I drew a circle and placed myself between the center and the edge of the circle and consciously placed the various team members within the circle, as I perceived them to be in relation to each other and to me. I placed my boss at the circle's edge.

I had believed him to be a temperate man. (He was an ex-minister.) As I drew my organizational chart, I felt him bristling to my side. He went red in the face and spoke to me with a tense jaw in a very restrained tone, "No wonder you're having trouble managing!" He took the marker pen from my hand and aggressively drew a traditional organizational tree structure on the whiteboard. He was at the top of the tree (in a box) with a vertical line to me (in a box) beneath him and then beneath me, vertical lines to all the twelve consultants (they were not in boxes). I attempted to explain the thinking or philosophy behind my chart, but I wasn't heard. That experience helped me realize my natural talents and strengths, after five years of service, could be better utilized elsewhere. I came to the conclusion that I had the potential to flourish in a different environment.

The command-and-control organizational structure is not an optimal one to facilitate human flourishing. Much has been written about the dampening effect of the command-and-control structure on willingness to assume responsibility, exercise creativity, and show innovation. Over time, command-and-control structure creates cultures of dependency. When the boss makes all the decisions and takes all the credit, employees' will to assert any form of leadership is diminished. In such contexts, employees do the best they can with resources available, willing to assume full responsibility for their actions, being accountable to their bosses, but often it all stops there. Their sense of pride in work well done is passed over without receiving fuller and broader acknowledgment or having the opportunity to earn wider visibility. Over time, this type of unsupportive climate wears thin; motivation and morale begin to spiral downward. A discouraged, disempowered workforce, whose ideas are not listened to and whose full potential is not realized, does not perform optimally. The spirit of ownership, vitality, engagement, and possibility-thinking diminishes.

Fresh Influences

From the perspective of systems dynamics, other forces in the open system—economy, politics, environment, science, society, and culture—are finally being acknowledged for their influence at the local level—our places of work, our communities, and regions. We are more aware than ever before of the interdependency of all these dynamics. The interplay of these elements seems to have sped up, meaning the time to market has also sped up, requiring decisions to be made down the line by those performing the tasks. Waiting for executives to own and endorse all the decisions no longer produces the best results. Moreover, the shifting demographics of the workforce with the influx of Generation Y, the Millennials, or the Net Gen (all names for the same generation born between 1977 and 1999), who are beginning to enter our workforce and who will constitute the dominant employed demographic within ten to fifteen years, is bringing a whole new complexion to the workplace. This generation has new and refreshingly different sets of expectations. It has been labeled the “can-do” generation. Members of this generation had parents who were able to respond generously to many of their needs, which is perhaps why they are also described as the pampered generation. They are the most technologically connected, savvy, and socially networked generation. They are virtual problem solvers, seeking opportunities to contribute in friendly, flexible environments. This new workforce is goal-oriented, with a positive attitude, and is open to a sharing, collaborative team culture in which everyone is treated respectfully. They possess a strong confidence, they embrace challenge, they want development, and they thrive on recognition and feedback. They seek work that is meaningful and expect leaders to be participative and to demonstrate respect for their knowledge and skills, creativity and entrepreneurial spirit.

Could it be, looking through the lens of Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, that members of Net Gen, in the affluent parts of the world at least, having their physiological, safety, and belonging needs met early, enter the workplace ready to fulfill their esteem and achievement needs much sooner than the generations before them? In fact, their need for self-actualization seems to be their modus operandi—they want to change the world. When shelter, food, safety, and comfort are taken for granted, and feeling loved and cared for promotes self-confidence and openness, there is ample energy and attention available to focus on achievements

and higher sense of purpose. Indeed, Net Gen members are extremely self-aware, concerned with personal growth, fulfilling their potential, and being of service to humanity and the planet.

Calling of Our Times

The aspirations of the newest generation entering our workforce, who will be the leaders of tomorrow, give great hope. Positive psychology provides sound theory about how we can continue to develop such talent. With optimal functioning enabling individuals to live their best lives and to improve well-being and productivity, our families, schools, workplaces, and communities will all be better off. The fusion of this tech-savvy generation and the growth of positive psychology focusing on human strengths and optimal well-being can serve to expedite flourishing communities and workplaces.

What the world is calling for is much clearer than it has ever been. We have started to think more consciously of ensuring the future for generations to come. There is a collective groundswell to serve. In the first decade of the 21st century, the world really did change. The citizens of this planet reached a tipping point in just about every domain, resulting in more people speaking up for greater compassion and understanding across cultures; workers and shareholders alike calling for greater transparency and integrity in financial markets; consumers seeking products and services that conserve our natural resources and health. Alongside these positive seismic systemic shifts, our communication channels and flows became easier, faster, and more far-reaching, collaborative, and compassionate. Out of curiosity, and in many cases necessity to make sense of our world, more and more of us, and particularly the Net Generation, are connecting to people of other cultures in far lands. We find these connections to be sources of great innovation and inspiration, putting us in touch with our own creativity and imaginations. Social media, including networks, wikis, blogs, podcasts, and video, bring us together as one world. We increasingly self-select into online communities in which we are finding mutual interests, shared passions, connection points, and a sense of belonging. Our films and entertainments have become increasingly multi- and cross-cultural. We laugh together. We cry together. We celebrate our global humanity.

There is exciting energy around renewed optimism, hope, and possibility, spreading virally through the sharing of new ideas—some established

and many radical—and the creation of new knowledge through collaboration on the World Wide Web and through other social media tools. As if in harmonious alignment with these new and innovative ways of interacting in and with the world, positive psychology, strengths-based approaches and methodologies such as Appreciative Inquiry are perfectly timed to help us make sense of all that we are experiencing at this time in history. These approaches reconnect us with the best of who we are from the philosophical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions.

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