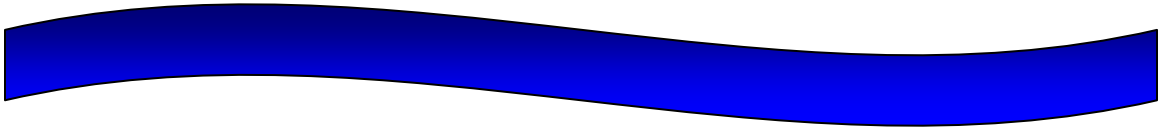


RUNNING HEAD: THE INVITATION

The Invitation

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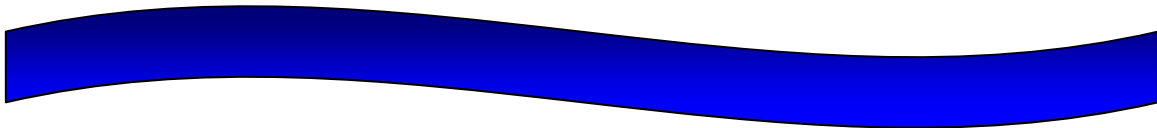
You are cordially invited to learn from your successes, rather than your mistakes.

You are cordially invited to give and receive credit for what has gone well, rather than blame one another for what has gone wrong.

You are cordially invited to celebrate your victories rather than bemoan your losses.

You are cordially invited to be an agent of inquiry; to discover and appreciate what gives life to your organization when it is at its best.

You are cordially invited to enter into the world of Appreciative Inquiry.



A Cherokee elder sitting with his grandchildren told them, “In every life there is a terrible fight – a fight between two wolves. One is evil: he is fear, anger, envy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, resentment and deceit. The other is good: joy, serenity, humility, confidence, generosity, truth, gentleness, and compassion.”

A child asked, “Grandfather, which wolf will win?”

The elder looked him in the eye and answered “the one you feed.”

Author unknown

This story exemplifies the essence of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). AI is a consciously chosen mindset that is practical in its application, and profound in its results. In an environment where layoffs, budget cuts and high employee turnover are very real, it may be difficult to see how a “mindset” has the power to affect change. And yet it does.

AI “is not about denying the negative and destructive. It is, rather, about focusing on the positive and creative as a force for building a more positive future” (Watkins and Cooperrider, 2000, n.p.). It affirms that when we choose to feed the organization’s strengths through appreciation, the organization becomes stronger.

The following offering seeks to answer some of the most often asked questions about AI. I invite you to read on...

So what is AI?

Appreciative Inquiry is a strengths-based approach to creating positive organizational change. It is a perspective of organizations as human systems, complete with all of the strengths

and resources necessary to create whatever future the organization desires. And it is a habit that seeks out the life-giving forces of the organization and in doing so, further energizes those very forces.

As the Cherokee elder says, the wolf you choose to feed is the one that will win. Your choice is to feed either the traditional problem-solving wolf that looks for what is wrong and then attempts to fix it, or the wolf that seeks examples of what is going well and then works to replicate that success. AI feeds the latter.

The basic assumption of the problem-solving wolf is that an organization is a problem to be solved...but it seems that this wolf's food supply may be drying up. According to AI co-creator, David Cooperrider, "We have reached the end of problem solving as a mode of inquiry capable of inspiring, mobilizing, and sustaining human system change" (1996, p. 5).

Contrast this basic assumption with that of the AI wolf; that "an organization is a mystery to be embraced" (Hammond, 1996, p. 24). Simply put, the job of AI wolf is to investigate the mystery; to look for clues as to what is working. Every organization has *something* that is working. By identifying that *something*, AI detectives can then explore ways to produce more of it. The AI wolf understands that what he focuses on multiplies, so he chooses to focus on those things he wants more of.

Which wolf would your organization rather feed?

If I say the AI wolf, can we viably feed it?

Absolutely! AI is practical in the sense that it offers a way to be in the world consciously. It is a mindful approach that uncovers below the surface, unspoken organizational assumptions and values that guide decisions and collective behavior...and it gives members of the organization conscious choice over their future.

AI is such a viable approach that company after company invites the AI wolf over for dinner. Cooperrider and Whitney believe this to be the result of “a growing sense of disenchantment with exhausted theories of change, especially those wedded to vocabularies of human deficit, and a corresponding urge to work with people, groups, and organizations in more constructive, positive, life-affirming, even spiritual ways” (p.2).

When posed with questions about AI being mindless, happy talk, a GTE senior manager responded by asking “when you get a survey that says 94% of your customers are happy, what do you automatically do? You probably interview the unhappy 6% instead of asking the 94% what we did to make them happy” (Hammond, 1996, p.8). The biggest challenge in seeing AI as viable is to suspend the cynic that is tempted to dismiss it as such. There is no way to discover it’s mystery until you are open to trying it.

What are the mysterious ingredients?

Combine two parts appreciation and one part of Cooperrider’s anticipatory reality – and the AI wolf will leave the table satiated. “Appreciation is the strongest emotion we have for attracting what we want” (Anonymous). And appreciation, when served with anticipation for what lies ahead “...brings the future powerfully into the present” (Cooperrider, 2000, n.p.). Here is a closer look at these two ingredients.

Traditional organizational philosophy upholds humans as individual and interchangeable parts of the organizational machine. How many times have you heard, or perhaps even said, that “everyone can be replaced.” This attitude assumes that humans function as robots; that the work individuals produce can be produced by anyone. It discounts the unique strengths brought by any one person ...not a very appreciative mindset.

AI, on the other hand, views organizations “as organic, which means that all parts are defined by the whole; thus, you cannot take an organization apart to study pieces” (Hammond, 1996, p.7). Yet that is what the traditional problem-solving wolf does; devours the problem into manageable chunks, thus dividing what Andrew Carnegie states as “the only irreplaceable capital an organization possesses...the knowledge and ability of its people.” An appreciation for the greatest resource organizations have, the creative minds of it’s people, is the largest ingredient in the AI mystery.

The other ingredient, anticipatory reality, is equally as powerful. A component of it, what Cooperrider refers to as the Heliotropic Hypotheses, is really the substance that gives AI it’s kick. This hypothesis states that “human systems have an observable tendency to macrodeterministically evolve in the direction of those ‘positive’ images that are the brightest and boldest, most illuminating and promising” (Cooperrider, 2000, n.p.). Imagine going through your day in anticipation of the most illuminating and promising future you can envision...and then imagine everyone else in the company doing the same. When done in critical mass, this has the power to transform entire organizations because “Whatever you vividly imagine, ardently desire, sincerely believe and enthusiastically act upon...must inevitably come to pass” (Paul Meyer).

Although in spiritual circles this truth has been known for centuries, Senge discovered some time ago that this mysterious ingredient, the power of the mind to envision and then create, can be applied to organizational life. He recognized that challenges in organizations were less structural than intellectual. “Problems originate in basic ways of thinking and interacting, more than in peculiarities of organization structure and policy” (Senge, 1990, p. 27). Doesn’t it stand to reason then that the answer also lies in changing our ways of thinking and interacting? When

will we stop seeing people as “helpless reactors to seeing them as active participants in shaping their reality, from reacting to the present to creating the future” (Senge, p.69)? Cooperrider presents another way to talk about this same truth.

“As made and imagined, organizations are products of human imagination. As made and imagined, organizations are products of human interaction and mind rather than some blind expression of an underlying natural order...reality is conditioned, reconstructed, and often profoundly created through our anticipatory images, values, plans, intentions, beliefs, and the like” (Cooperrider, 2000, p.29-30).

This is the mystery of AI.

Here’s how it works...

The first step is to internalize the assumptions behind AI as outlined by Hammond:

1. In every society, organization, or group, something works.
2. What we focus on becomes our reality; we move towards our image of our future.
3. Reality is created in the moment, and there are multiple realities. Regardless of what an organizations history is, all reality is open to being reconfigured.
4. The act of asking questions of a group influences the group in some way.
5. People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known).
6. If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be the best parts of the past.
7. The language we use creates our reality; this combined with consistently envisioning a positive future is what creates it.

Once these assumptions are internalized, a topic for inquiry can be chosen. Questions about the topic are developed, and interviews conducted to elicit stories that exemplify the best experiences with the topic being inquired.

This step, the elicitation of stories, is critical to successful implementation of AI because reality is socially constructed. “We create our reality through our dialogue, our choice of language to describe what is happening around us...as we change how we talk we are changing that world” (Bushe, 1998, p.2). Through story telling, themes will begin to emerge, themes that then become the foundation on which the future is built. The final step is allowing the mystery of AI to take hold. Appreciation and the anticipation of what is to come will spark spontaneous creativity that will transform the organization.

But how does it bring about meaningful change?

According to Bushe there are several ways:

- Our reality is socially constructed – change happens as a result of how we talk about the organization. “I will believe it when I see it” becomes “I will see it when I believe it.”
- Social systems evolve toward the most positive images they hold of themselves – in other words, the heliotropic hypothesis.
- Organizations have an inner dialogue made up of things people say in confidential, off-limits environments. This inner dialogue is present in the stories that people tell. Change the stories, and you change the inner dialogue, and you thus change the organization.
- AI offers images that resolve paradoxical dilemmas for groups; i.e. cut staffing but meet existing deadlines. These unresolved dilemmas keep groups dealing with the same issues time and again. By discussing best experiences a new image often arises that the group can focus on and then manifest.

Putting it to work...Ok, so how long is this going to take?

While there is a clear beginning to the process, a conscious choice to feed the AI wolf, there is no clear cut end. AI is a generative process – it has the power to produce, reproduce, and generate. The organization must commit to continuous learning, growth and change that begets more change. And the organization must embrace, with childlike curiosity, the rate at which change will start to happen.

What value will we see?

“Consultants working within this paradigm are reporting amazing transformations of organizations including renewed commitment, released energy of the workforce, far less complaining and the attendant hopeless affect, and innovative, creative images of the future that become the driving force for the organization” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000, n.p.).

The problem-solving wolf wants to see quantifiable results for change programs. This assumes that human systems are quantifiable. And while Hammond states that most change strategies will create quantifiable results in and of themselves, some of the results you will see are unquantifiable.

AI instills a sense of joy and wonder about the change process, rather than striking fear into the hearts of people. Everyone becomes a part of creating the change rather than being a victim to it. Employees feel empowered, valued, honored and important. Goethe says to “Treat people as if they were what they ought to be and you help them become what they are capable of being.” Does this not have value that will translate into the creation of a quantifiably more productive system?

One final thought...

“You see, positive things do not come by nature. For positive things we have to make an effort. We must make the effort. Nobody, no one else, can do that. So everyone, hope for a better future, a happier future, if that is our wish. The present generation must make every effort. It is our responsibility.”

(His Holiness, the Dalai Lama).

Instructor comment: My only wish is that you would have touched on the Principle of Simultaneity and the power of inquiry. I often use the following metaphor when explaining this principle to others. Imagine you wish to know the temperature of a glass of water by sticking a thermometer in the water. What happens to the temperature of the water when you do this? It changes. Such is the case with inquiry. How you choose to inquiry into a particular topic changes the response you get.

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<http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/practice/quotes.cfm>.