

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Anne Radford talked to two business leaders about Appreciative Inquiry and found out why it worked so well for them.



Leading sustainable change in complex systems: Using Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a philosophy and methodology for promoting positive organisational change. It is influencing the way Safeguarding Children, Adoption Panels, and Adult Social Care issues are being addressed and improved in this country. The process or approach is being used throughout the world by a wide range of organisations including global corporations such as BP, the United Nations and local community groups in Liverpool to bring hundreds of people together to work on issues and develop joint action.

AI as a way of thinking

Studies of organisational excellence have shown that the art and science of asking powerful positive questions is much more important than looking for the gaps, weaknesses and limitations in a system.

A new Organisation Development (OD) is replacing traditional approaches looking at change as being cyclical and continuous, emphasising participation, shared leadership and a culture of commitment and innovation.

Research by Martin Seligman, Barbara Fredrickson and others have shown the power of the positive and the beneficial impact of positive emotions on behaviour and well-being.

AI therefore deliberately looks for what is working in a system.

AI methodology

Whether nurses want to be more involved in decision-making, a Fire Service wants to develop a fresh vision for their Service or stakeholders want to develop a new model for reviewing cases of children in need of safeguarding, they will use part or all of the following AI process or methodology:

- Choose an affirmative topic for an Inquiry. In safeguarding children it was looking for exceptional practice that keeps children and young people safe.

- Discover what is working in a system through interviews with people in the immediate or wider system. Questions are designed to bring out stories about successful practices and achievements.
- Envision a compelling image of the future by building on key positive attributes and skills coming from the stories. Involvement in decision-making, for example, would be described in some detail. The Fire Service describe what they want to achieve by 2013.
- Design the relationships, systems and processes with others to deliver the future. In the Safeguarding initiative, bringing together people with national and local safeguarding roles meant they were able to see the whole picture, work together and develop plans to trial a new model for reviewing cases.
- Look at how the organisation will continue to learn, improvise and sustain its success. Professor Jan Reed at Northumbria University has successfully used AI to evaluate several healthcare areas such as patients going home from hospital and the Cancer Services Collaborative 'Improvement Partnership' (CSC'IP') in England. In both instances the research focused on what went well and the strategies and skills that people felt made a difference. This data identified how to improve services and the patients' experience of care.

Leadership for sustainability – insights from two leaders in complex systems

Recently, Anne Radford interviewed two business leaders: one in BP and one at BT Global Services who have extensive experience as well as spectacular business success using Appreciative Inquiry. She wanted to know why AI had worked so well for them.

Both leaders are clear they are not, and do not want to be, traditional leaders working out what needs to be done with their peers or bosses and then telling their global teams

“Studies of organisational excellence have shown that the art and science of asking powerful positive questions is much more important than looking for the gaps, weaknesses and limitations in a system.”

what they need to do. For them, business life is too complicated, too fast moving and has too many variables for any one person to mastermind and control business growth.

Value of AI for these leaders

AI, which values multiple voices and perspectives, is well suited to these leaders' current climate where people need to work from their best, often with colleagues they see only rarely yet need to trust, as well as taking decisions at the most local level, aligning business goals with customer needs.

Moving on from traditional thinking

The traditional wisdom to sustain success emphasises reducing costs and increasing revenue. Both these leaders have a different view. For them, numbers only have a certainty within a context together with a narrative rather than having an objective validity. A key aspect of their leadership is about successfully bringing together the stories of people's successes, their hopes and wishes together with the numerical information.

Ways to sustain growth

Using AI they have sustained growth by:

- finding the positive core in the organisation and focusing on that
- finding out what a division or team aspires to be and co-constructing ways of translating belief into practice
- combining positive core and collective vision with external market information and customer needs – providing a powerful combination of skill, knowledge and compelling image of the future
- sustaining relationships, which is key. As one leader said, 'I am very aware that relationships and connectedness need to be effective beyond functions and there needs to be the right connections between people: in the team, between the team and other teams; and with external stakeholders.'

Insights into the success of using AI

They include:

- Exploring possibilities is a key part of how people work with each other.
- “I believe people in the teams have a bigger picture than next year's budget or the next order.”
- Appreciative leadership focuses on the many steps and drivers linked to the financial ratios rather than the ratios per se.
- Even with potentially very disruptive and demoralising activities such as organisational restructuring, people moving into new positions and others moving out of the business, it is possible for the outcomes to be much better than in the traditional way of handling these situations.

For these leaders, using AI has enabled them to move to a place where they can deliver far more success than they thought possible which in turn is bringing benefits for all.

In conclusion

Change begins with the first question. Sustainability comes when people own what they create. AI has shown its value in crises as well as in situations where organisations are performing well.

In these particularly troubling times, leaders have a sound approach in AI to draw on whether they want to deliver even greater success in some places or lead a turnaround in other situations. They join leaders around the world who are already seeing the benefits of taking the positive change approach. ■

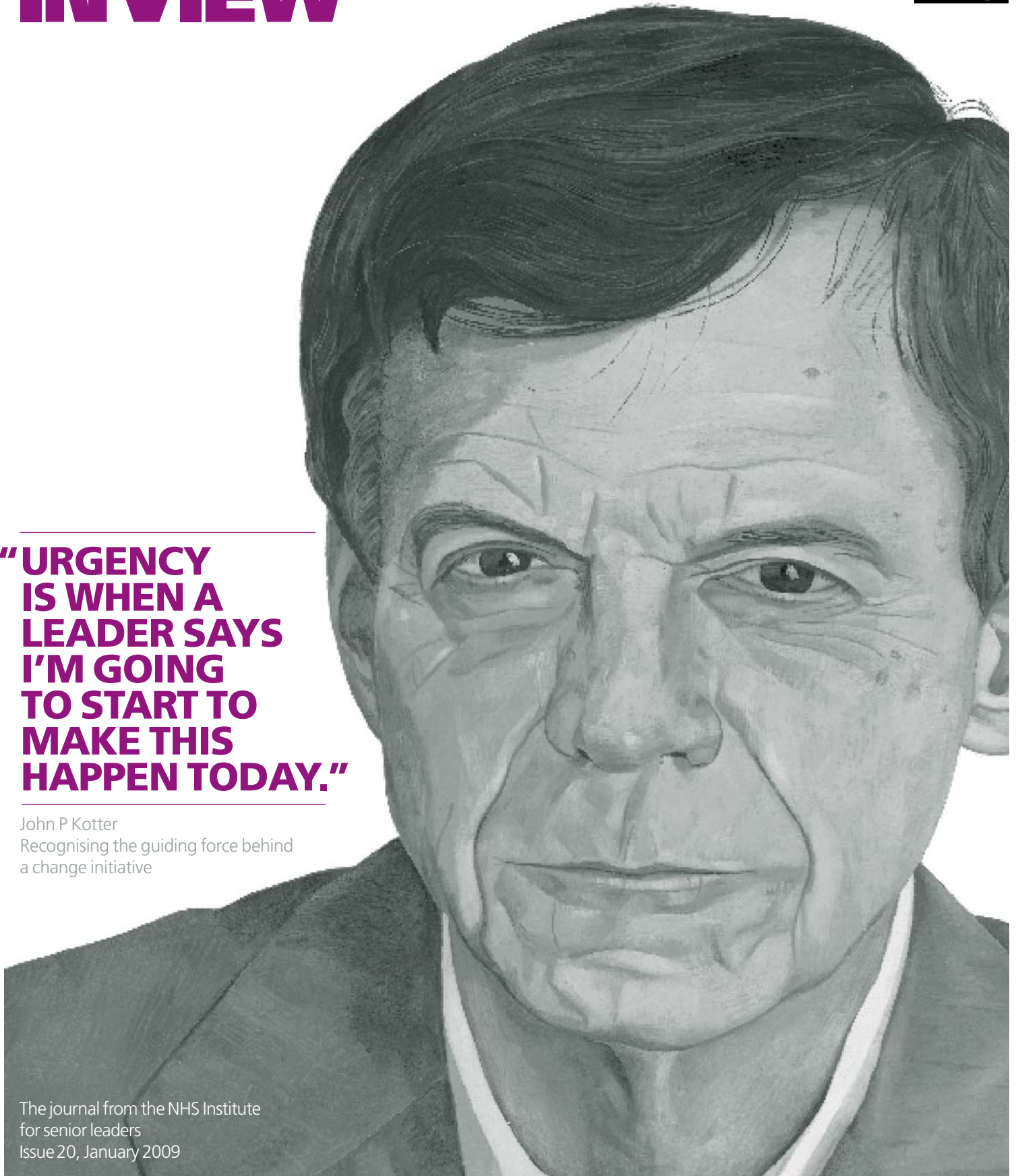
IN ADDITION

For examples of where AI is being used very successfully in UK public services, see the forthcoming *AI Practitioner* February 2008 Vol 11 No 1 www.aipractitioner.com

For more information on Anne Radford's work visit www.aradford.co.uk or contact her at anne@aradford.co.uk

**"URGENCY
IS WHEN A
LEADER SAYS
I'M GOING
TO START TO
MAKE THIS
HAPPEN TODAY."**

John P Kotter
Recognising the guiding force behind
a change initiative



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Institute for Innovation
and Improvement

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Welcome to the first edition of *In View* for 2009 – a year that promises to be momentous for the NHS, and for the world at large. In the next 12 months the health service must get to grips in earnest with the new change agenda set out by the Next Stage review: it is, as health minister Lord Darzi acknowledged, one in which effective leadership will be crucial. Meanwhile, the world must get to grips with the effects of the global economic downturn: here too, it goes without saying, dynamic and visionary leadership will be paramount.

As so often, our gaze is drawn across the Atlantic for counsel. The new US president, Barack Obama, sets an inspiring example. His overwhelming victory is a tribute to his vision of America and to the effectiveness with which he invoked it during his campaign. Despite the power that so strong a mandate has conferred on him, he is taking pains to reach out to former political opponents and build coalitions with which to govern. Perhaps most striking is the sense of urgency imbuing his actions: in his first 100 hours he moved to overturn some of the most symbolic and high-profile policies of the previous administration.

Whether by coincidence or not, President Obama thus appears to embody exactly the qualities defined by Harvard's Professor John Kotter in our 'Common voice' feature as prerequisites for leading successful large-scale change. With his 'Yes we can' philosophy, President Obama looks determined, as Professor Kotter puts it, 'to get out there, find the opportunities, take advantage of them, duck the hazards and to win'.

There is, of course, nothing more perilous, difficult or uncertain of success as 'taking the lead in the introduction of a new order of things', as Machiavelli observed. He is quoted in our article about Nokia, a company unafraid to embrace a new order if ever there was one. No doubt many NHS leaders feel they are experiencing the truth of Machiavelli's dictum on a daily basis. Well, help is at hand. The NHS Institute's new Academy for Large Scale Change – a world first – is now up and running.

Whether the chunk of change you are charged with leading arises from Lord Darzi's or President Obama's agenda, you need to be appraised of all the techniques available to assist you. Appreciative Inquiry, on which we focus in this issue, is one such. It advises examining in detail what works in a system. Sound advice, surely. Yet IBM's corporate saviour, Lou Gerstner, believed you perpetuated success by 'continuing to run scared, not by looking back at what made you great'.

Some sinuous thinking needed, clearly. Machiavelli, you should be living at this hour.

Paul Allen editor