

Part One

Emerging Theory and Methodology for Creating and Sustaining Strength-Based Organizations

Appreciative Inquiry: A Process for Designing Life-Affirming Organizations

Diana Whitney

diana@positivechange.org

Diana Whitney's paper addresses three questions essential to anyone contemplating work at the scale of a strength-based organization: What is organization design? What is life-affirming organization design? How do Appreciative Inquiry processes enhance the life-affirming qualities of designing organizations? Contrasting traditional (i.e. modern) design assumptions with those of the post-modern paradigm, she reiterates 'social architecture' as the necessary focus of designing a strength-based organization.

We live and work in worlds created by human design. The office, the factory, the mall, the internet and the power plant are all human designs, as are the meeting room, the desk, the computer and the coffee cup we use daily. Design is an essential and inevitable aspect of life.

Designs create boundaries inviting and enabling some human actions and activities, and limiting others. Design and human performance are interwoven. The impact and implications of architectural design on human behavior, relationships and well-being is masterfully illustrated by Professor Emeritus Christopher Alexander in his book *A Pattern Language*.¹ Putting forth the same idea, Winston Churchill commented, 'first we shape our structures and then our structures shape us.' This is true of the designs (or in Churchill's terms, the *structures*) of products, the designs of spaces, the designs of services and the designs of the ways we work together – our organization designs.

Like many related fields such as organization development, leadership, management and strategic planning, organization design is undergoing a transformation. Table 1 shows that transformation between modern and post-modern assumptions of organizing:

	Modern Organizations	Post-modern Organizing
Decision Making	Top Down	Participatory
Design Assumptions	Structural Functionalist	Social Constructionist
Approach to Change	Deficit-Based Discourse	Strength-Based Discourse

Table 1: The Meta-Transformation in Organization Life

This meta-transformation in organizational life is part of the move from modernity to post-modernity and indicates a need to reconsider what we mean by organization design, as

well as to rethink the nature of the processes we use for organization design(ing).

The purpose of this paper is to address three questions:

1. What is organization design?
2. What is life-affirming organization design?
3. How do Appreciative Inquiry processes enhance the life-affirming qualities of organization design(ing)?

From Organization Design to Organization Designing

Traditionally, the notion of organization design appeared in the literature as a noun, if at all. The term was used to describe the relationships among all that constituted the modern industrial organization. According to Thompson, 'The major components of a complex organization are determined by the design of that organization.'ⁱⁱ The shift toward post-modern organizing, as described in Table 1, invites us to consider organization design as a verb, as a conscious human process.

Organization design(ing) can be defined as the process by which people make conscious choices about the social architecture that guides and gives form to their collective interactions and experiences.

It is the way people, through inquiry and communication, create realities, relationships and structures enabling them to work and live as organizations and communities.

From a social constructionist perspective this definition of organization design(ing) leads us to further ask, who designs? Historically, organization design has been the domain of 'the few' leaders who at best were benevolent authoritarians. They intended, through their choices, to do well for society. Their choices were inevitably formed by their values. Times have changed and the process of organization design(ing), like other work processes, is becoming more and more participatory. We now realize that to truly ensure that the interests of all people are accommodated, all people must be engaged in the processes of design (ing).

What is Social Architecture?

Spend time with any designer – an architect, landscape designer, interior designer or graphic designer – and the phrase 'design element' will readily enter your vocabulary. It refers to all aspects or components of design available to be mixed and matched to create a final design.

The social architecture of an organization or community refers to its design elements. Just as there are many elements in the architecture of a building (i.e. plumbing, heating, doors, windows, foundation, roof, etc.) there are many elements in the social architecture of an organization or community. They include: roles, responsibilities, projects, programs, policies, rewards, technology, communication, information, processes, language, laws, schedules and so on.

The secret to successful design – in any arena – is the selection of design elements that reflect deeply held values, that render the expression of values inevitable. Architects work to ensure that the design of a building is congruent with its intended use and the values of its users by the selection of relevant and preferred design elements. For example, the current value on environmental sustainability is leading many people to prefer solar heating, bamboo floors and organic fabrics over electricity and synthetic carpeting. In the process of designing (or redesigning) their home, they design their values into a 'green' home.

Just as the values have changed for what constitutes a 'well-designed' home so too have the values changed for what constitutes a 'well-designed' organization. No longer are top

down, command-and-control bureaucracies the organization design of choice.

Designing Life-affirming Organizations

Many terms are currently in play to describe the new forms of organizing that are emerging and being designed as alternatives to traditional hierarchies. From Appreciative Organizationsⁱⁱⁱ to Post-modern Organizations^{iv} to Holacracy^v (and with this issue, ‘strength-based organizations’) the message is clear – it is time to engage people in full voice, democratic processes on a daily basis. It is time for all the people whose future it is to gather together, face to face and/or online, to create the future they most desire. It is time for people to use processes that reflect their deepest values as a daily practice to create the future they want – now. It is time to design organizations and communities that cultivate the human spirit and draw upon relational resources to ensure the well-being of the whole.

Retired professor of architecture Christopher Alexander makes a clear and compelling case that everything has life. In *The Nature of Order, Book One: The Phenomenon of Life*^{vi}, he illustrates that everything from a rock, to a park, to a pub, to a party can be seen to possess a ‘degree of life.’ He goes on to say that the primary obligation of architects (and I would suggest leaders and organization designers) is to design life into all that they design. Imagine, as leaders of change, managers, executives and organization development consultants, our job is to design life into all that we do.

In the field of organization development we talk about the vitality of an organization’s culture and consider variables such as participation, empowerment, open communication and creativity as sources of vitality. I believe it is time to go one step further in the direction of life-affirming organizations. It is time to design organizations in each and every sector and industry, from business to education to health care to religion to military to entertainment, as if life matters. It is time to design organizations so that human well-being is inevitable.

Strength-based organizations create and nurture the life-giving quotient of an organization by creating ‘engaged participation’ through the identification, application and alignment of personal, team and whole-system strengths. People engage and excel, personally and collectively, when they ‘work’ or ‘play’ to their strengths. To not know one’s strengths nor the strengths of one’s colleagues makes it impossible to do or be your best. High performance, excellence at work, quality service, what ever we want to call it, requires attention to strengths. We must know who we are at our best in order to *be* our best.

Appreciative leadership knows how to illuminate strengths, to bring out the best in people, teams and organizations. Indeed, it is its unique configuration of strengths that give a strength-based organization its advantage in the marketplace. Core competencies have long been leveraged as competitive advantage. Strength-based organizations gain collaborative advantage through capacity to create a unique alignment of strengths – social, technical and financial, establishing an evolutionary purpose and what we might call an evolutionary advantage – the capacity to serve a societal need better than any other organization – through the application of a unique configuration of strengths to a unique social or global need.

Life-affirming organizations are just that – organizations that give life, energy, enthusiasm, satisfaction and well-being to all of their stakeholders. They balance the triple bottom line of people, profit and planet. They contribute to a world that works for all.

Appreciative Inquiry: One Way to Life-affirming Organization Design(ing)

When it comes to enhancing the life-affirming quotient or vitality of an organization, the way it is done must be a model of the desired end result. It is not possible to enhance vitality using processes that oppress and/or disempower people. It is not possible to design life-affirming organizations using processes that are top down, authoritarian or exclusionary. The process we use to design life-affirming organizations and to create a liberation of human spirit must be a life-affirming and liberating process from its inception. Certainly some processes are better suited to this important task than others.

Based on a social constructionist platform, Appreciative Inquiry is uniquely suited as a process for designing life-affirming organizations. First, by engaging all the people whose future it is in the creation of that future, Appreciative Inquiry fosters a sense of engaged wholeness. The value of inclusion embedded in Appreciative Inquiry at its best is itself life-affirming. People are enlivened by opportunities to share their stories and to be heard.

Second, Appreciative Inquiry fosters emergent meaning-making which enables everyone who is involved to be an author of the future. People commit to what they help create. Appreciative Inquiry enables hundreds and thousands of people to engage collectively and collaboratively in conversation, meaning-making and the design of the future that nurtures them. Through Appreciative Inquiry people discover what gives life to their organizations when they are at their best, and are able to design what they learn into their future. What gives life emerges, is validated and can be sustained in the process of Appreciative Inquiry.

Third, by mapping the positive core of strengths in an organization, a positive ‘innovation anticipation’ is created. When people hear stories of best practices and successes, the heliotropic principle sets in. They immediately want to put what they’ve heard and learned into practice. This creates an urgency to innovate in the direction of what works. People are inspired by what works. When a success story is shared the extraordinary becomes ordinary, the inconceivable becomes familiar, and the unachievable becomes doable. By inviting people to share stories from their own experiences of success, Appreciative Inquiry creates positive energy, enthusiasm and inspiration – all life-affirming forces.

And fourth, by having a design phase, Appreciative Inquiry invites organizational members to be conscious about their social architecture – the relational structures that guide performance. Most people join an organization intending to succeed; to contribute to the mission and goals of the organization in a way that gives them a return on their time, energy and contributions. They expect a return that appropriately recognizes their contribution and enables them to care for their needs and their families’ needs beyond work. Only a small percent of people (some executives and a few consultants) join an organization thinking it is their task to design it, to create forms to enact shared values and to achieve agreed upon goals. Through Appreciative Inquiry all stakeholders, and leaders at all levels of the organization – formal and informal – realize that design is an essential determinant of performance. The process of Appreciative Inquiry gives stakeholders the opportunity, the information (or stories) and the confidence to design their organization in line with their values and goals. Its grounded action research approach uniquely serves in the design of organizations that are appropriate to the needs of people today and enables everyone to participate in designing organizations that work for them.

From Principle to Performance: The Destiny Phase of AI – from Ideal to Action

The move from principle to performance occurs in what is often called the destiny phase of Appreciative Inquiry. The primary question at this time is, ‘what will we do to realize our design principles?’ Consider the following to see how principles inform performance. As you read them allow yourself to imagine the actions that will flow from each:

Company 1: We fire employees who do not perform to standard and we retire employees whose work is no longer needed.

Company 2: We ‘nurture out’ anyone who finds themselves no longer in alignment with our values and goals, and/or has out grown what we have to offer.^{vii}

These two principles both refer, in essence, to the way people will separate or be separated from a company. And yet they suggest radically different sets of acceptable actions. Another example from health care is equally vivid:

Hospital 1: We maintain a steady stream of trainees to ensure staff in the face of continuous turnover.

Hospital 2: We create a magnetic work environment for all staff through work, life skills and leisure time training, job rotations, child and elder care and mini sabbaticals.

Again we can see how the principles create a context for action. They prescribe the culture of the organization. All of the principles presented are well intended. The first in both illustrations are based on fear and/or old paradigm values. The second are more human-oriented and life-giving. The message here is that both design and the process for organization designing matter. They create the context for conversation, interaction, learning and performance.

Conclusion

As diversity increases in organizations and communities so does the need for processes that enable people to get to know each other, to build bridges across differences and to co-create ways of working together that bring out the best of everyone. As financial challenges mount so does the need for processes that enable people to balance human needs with economic returns. As environmental sustainability stays in the forefront as a leading global issue so does the need for processes that enable people to learn about best practices and to create products and services that support sustainable living. All of this calls for new forms of organizing and new processes for organization design. To paraphrase the quotation from Winston Churchill cited at the beginning of this article, ‘When we design our organizations with Appreciative Inquiry they in turn design us as people affirming each other’s strengths and differences and working together for a world that works for all.’

Endnotes

ⁱ Alexander, C., Ishikawa, S. and Silverstein, M. (1997) *A Pattern Language*. NY: Oxford University Press.

ⁱⁱ Thompson, J. (1967) *Organizations in Action*. San Francisco, Ca: McGraw Hill Book Company.

ⁱⁱⁱ Anderson, H., Cooperrider, D., Gergen, K.J., Gergen, M. M., McNamee, S., and Whitney, D. (2007) *The Appreciative Organization*. Taos Institute Publishing.

^{iv} Bergquist, W. (1993) *The PostModern Organization*, San Francisco, Ca.: Jossey-Bass.

^v Robertson, B. (2007) *Organization at the Leading Edge: Introducing Holacracy*. HolacracyOne.

^{vi} Alexander, C. (2002) *The Nature of Order, Book One: The Phenomenon of Life*. Berkeley, Ca.: The Center for Environmental Structure.

^{vii} This principle was shared by a CEO of a multibillion dollar construction company in the Midwest US.