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Business as Agent of World Benefit: A Worldwide Action Research Project Using Appreciative Inquiry

*By Amanda Trosten-Bloom, David Cooperrider,
Nadya Zhexembayeva and Diana Whitney*

As we step into the 21st century it cannot be business as usual – for business now exists in the context of a variety of global crises, the likes of which were unimaginable in the past. The world business community is now called to rethink old mindsets and strategies . . . to bring its extraordinary capacity for imagination, innovation, and action to assist the entire world to foster economic and ecological development, peace, and the creation of prosperous and generous societies.

Judy Rodgers, Executive Director

Weatherhead Center for Business as an Agent of World Benefit

*Weatherhead School of Management
Case Western Reserve University*

THE CALL

While major headlines decry fraudulent CEO's and corporate scandals, a quiet revolution is emerging all over the world in the relationship between business and society. Business – considered by some to be the nemesis of human and ecological wealth and well-being – has become one of the most capacity-

filled institutions on the planet. While the times are unstable and difficult, businesses and leaders around the globe are awakening to the call to express their highest capacities, and systemically take up the universal responsibility to build a better world.

Business as Agent of World Benefit (BAWB) is a worldwide action-research project that uses Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to discover organizational innovations at the intersection of business and society. The project's goal is to identify new frontiers: innovations that, if further developed and applied, could vitally transform the planet.

BAWB does not impose a superficial sense of hope on a troubled time. Instead, it singles out and creates dialogue related

CONFERENCE CONNECTION



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FASA104 Appreciative Inquiry –
Strategic Planning
1 Day: Friday am - Saturday noon

to the one arena that we believe has potential like no other: the relationship between business and society. Catalyzed by Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management and a growing network of world-class partners (including the World Business Academy, the OD Network, and Appreciative Inquiry centers on every continent), *BAWB* offers up new ways for people to: share stories of exceptional business and social practices; connect and conference with one another; experience each other's talents; and articulate anew – across cultures – a 21st century vision of business as an agent of world benefit.

In this article we trace the project's vision, challenges, and areas of immediate learning and impact. We transmit stories that have already surfaced – of companies like Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, Reebok and Nutrimental Foods – that herald a future in which organization development and world development are seamlessly one.

From our beginnings, we in the field of organization development have known that organizations and the larger world are integrally connected. We have done our work within human systems in part to contribute to global social good – to a better life on the planet. Now, we put forth an even bolder hypothesis: the future of OD involves consideration of much wider societal horizons and new, exciting languages of change-sustainable enterprise, natural capitalism, eco-industrial clusters, social entrepreneurship, chaordic partnerships, and conscious evolution. Whether or not the future is bright or dark – whether the path is strewn with human misery or hope – depends on the vitality, vision, mindfulness, and courage of business.

WHY APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY?

Appreciative Inquiry (“AI”) is a strength-based, narrative inquiry process that searches for stories of everything that “gives life” to organizations, communities, and larger human systems when they are most alive, effective, and healthy in their interconnected ecology of relationships. Created at Case Western Reserve University in the 1980s by David Cooperrider, Suresh Srivastva and colleagues, AI has emerged as both a practical approach for leading change and a key research approach in the positive organizational scholarship movement (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987). It is founded on the assumptions that: inquiry into and conversation about strengths, successes, values, hopes and dreams triggers life-affirming change; and human systems move in the direction of what we most persistently, actively, and authentically ask questions about (Cooperrider and Whitney, 1999).

So, why is Appreciative Inquiry the “right” approach for a project of this nature and scope? AI is uniquely suited to the *BAWB* project for three reasons. First, it is based on a radically new model of change. Unlike so many deficit-based approaches, which leave us devoid of images to describe *what we want*, AI immediately reveals grounded stories of possibility that are anchored in the direct experience of inquiry participants. Thus,

AUTHORS

AMANDA TROSTEN-BLOOM, Principal with Corporation for Positive Change, was one of the first OD consultants to use Appreciative Inquiry for whole-system culture change in a business setting. Her work focuses primarily on promoting positive change in mid-sized organizations. In these settings, she facilitates AI-based culture transformation, strategic planning, leadership development, and business process improvement. Amanda can be reached at: amanda@positivechange.org.

DAVID L. COOPERRIDER, Ph.D. the originator of Appreciative Inquiry and co-founder of Corporation for Positive Change, is regularly called upon as a consultant and keynote speaker. A Mandel Scholar of Organizations and Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior at Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management, David is one of the thought leaders and instigators of the *Business as Agent of World Benefit* inquiry. You can reach David at: dlc6@cwru.edu.

NADYA ZHEXEMBAYEVA serves as a Director of Inquiry and Knowledge Management for the *Business as Agent of World Benefit* Inquiry. A native of Kazakhstan, she works on creation of the Organization Development Consortium of Central Asia, while continuing her graduate study Organizational Behavior at Case Western Reserve University. Nadya can be reached at: ntz@weatherhead.cwru.edu

DIANA WHITNEY, Ph.D. is the President of Corporation for Positive Change, a consulting firm offering Appreciative Inquiry to businesses and social profit organizations around the globe. Diana is an internationally recognized consultant, speaker and thought leader on the subjects of Appreciative Inquiry, Positive Change, and Spirituality at Work. Her consulting practice focuses on the use of Appreciative Inquiry for corporate culture change. You can reach Diana at: diana@positivechange.org.

Amanda Trosten-Bloom, David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney are prolific authors, and in the past few years have co-authored seminal works in Appreciative Inquiry. For specific citations, please see the *References* at the end of this article.

the moment that we embark on this conversation, stories arise, possibilities become apparent, and action is inspired. In other words, the conversation itself makes a difference.

Second, more than almost any other approach to change, AI can work at a scale of wholeness. Through a process known as *mass-mobilized inquiry* (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2003), it can engage hundred, thousands, or even millions of people in system-changing conversations – over a period of weeks, months, or even years. Similarly, through a process known as the Appreciative Inquiry Summit, it can involve hundreds or thousands of people in multiple-day meetings, during which participants *discover* the best of what is, *dream* what might be, then *design* and *deliver* the preferred future (Ludema, Whitney, Mohr and Griffin, 2003). Together, these two whole-system technologies address the question of overwhelming scale that is involved in the *BAWB* project. By combining mass-mobilized inquiry with in-person and virtual summits, we can potentially engage millions of people in the process of reinventing the role of business on the planet.

Finally, AI is uniquely suited to this project because it is a conversation-based form of change. In other words, it can transform the nature of public dialogue – which is vitally important, since we don't yet know how to speak about what is happening. It can provide us with a vocabulary of relationship that will lift up more positive possibilities for the future, allowing people to express – and then live into – a different and better relationship between business and society.

THE INITIATIVE

BAWB is a vehicle for people and organizations across societies and cultures to collaborate in a new kind of world dialogue. Organized as a series of one-on-one interviews, discussion groups, classroom conversations, virtual summits, publications, and conference workshops, it is dedicated to discovering, appreciating, and mobilizing the best in business with a task of creating prosperous, inspired, and sustainable societies that work for all.

BAWB grew out of a conversation between Dean Mohsen Anvari and the faculty at Case Western's Weatherhead School of Management, immediately following the collapse of the World Trade towers on September 11, 2001. Based on this group's original inspiration, an innovative experiment in appreciative action research was launched. The initiative invited the world to partici-

pate in creation of a new, cross-cultural vision of business as an agent of world benefit.

David Cooperrider is one of the initiative's originators. He says *BAWB*'s aspiration is: "to tap into the positive potential of Appreciative Inquiry as a way of mobilizing millions of face-to-face interviews with business leaders, visionaries, students, and scholars, and to link these to the original potential of the internet as a medium that inspires creativity, collaboration, and worldwide education" (Cooperrider, 2003).

To realize this aspiration, and to experiment with a worldwide call to inquiry, a five-month pilot took place in early 2002. Volunteers from around the globe downloaded interview guides, conducted interviews with "positive change leaders," and submitted interview summary reports to a central source. Recognizing that leadership is a multifaceted phenomenon, five categories of potential interviewees were identified:

- **Senior Executives:** Leaders at the top levels in business organizations (e.g., Presidents, CEOs, COOs, and Chairpersons) who wished to share their highest hopes for the future of the world and newest examples and practices of "business as an agent of world benefit."
- **Change Agents:** Leaders of every level in business organizations, who operate from a new vision and practice of how real change occurs in the

world, and are committed to harnessing the very best elements of business in service of the whole.

- **Idea Leaders:** Organizational scholars, futurists, and visionary critics of business (from the grassroots) whose transformational ideas have the potential to disrupt assumptions of the status quo, elevate our sense of what's possible, and raise new options for better living.
- **Social Entrepreneurs:** Dedicated innovators, networkers, and/or collaborating business partners from the not-for-profit or community sector, who believe the same inventiveness used historically to create great wealth can be applied to world issues and change agendas.
- **Wisdom Companions:** Children, wise elders, respected spiritual teachers and others who care about a positive future for our planet, and who can elevate the dialogue and bring practices for accessing our best human strengths, meaningful commitments, and purposes.

During the pilot period, more than 200 interviews were conducted and reported. While 80 percent of these interviews were from North America, five global regions were represented with

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powerful stories from Nepal, Russia, Argentina, Rwanda, and others. The sample includes 38 percent women, and 57 percent Senior Executives, followed by an approximate 10 percent each as Change Agents, Idea Leaders, Wisdom Companions, and Social Entrepreneurs (Neville & Cooperrider, 2002).

The pilot received great response and support at the Spirit in Business conference in New York, NY (April 2002), and was awarded a Provost Opportunity Grant from Case Western Reserve University to seed a full-scale project. Now a 10-year initiative, *BAWB* seeks to continuously empower inquiry and dialogue and to develop a strong infrastructure providing support for a global initiative. More than 1100 conversations have been organized to date, bringing together people of all continents and walks of life. Partnership networks have been initiated and grown. In collaboration with iCohere, Inc., development of comprehensive virtual community space (featuring e-learning modules, asynchronous conversations, synchronous chats, searchable “innovation bank,” and much more) has been launched. The Call to Inquiry continues to echo around the planet.

THE INITIAL FINDINGS

The *Business as Agent of World Benefit* dialogue is dynamic and emergent: a project in continuous motion. A powerful action research initiative, it integrates theory and practice, providing ongoing opportunities for social change that leads to discovery, learning and invention.

The first year of the project has yielded rich, inspiring insight and experience. As visionary thinkers like Peter Drucker – together with top executives of Abbott Laboratories, Wal-Mart, and Shorebank – have opened their doors to this conversation, we have learned that people are hungry to talk about and consider this crucial topic. When volunteers in Argentina, Sweden, Nepal, and Kazakhstan have taken interview questions and re-crafted protocols to make them relevant for their socio-political situations (with minimum training in Appreciative Inquiry), we have discovered that cross-cultural conversation is possible.

Powerful, urgent, and pertinent examples of “golden innovations” and future visions of business acting as an agent of world benefit have already emerged in the first wave of interviews. At the same time, the cross-cultural nature of the initiative has already begun to create a new vocabulary of what’s possible. (For example, during an interview with an executive from Sweden, we discovered that the Swedish word for business is “näringsliv” – translating into “the nourishment of life.”) These factors, combined, reinforce our belief in the crucial importance of this project.

The stories, insights, ideas, and themes that surfaced during the pilot phase are too numerous and complex to report here; instead, they are summarized in the Preliminary Report prepared for the April 2002 Spirit in Business Conference (Neville & Cooperrider, 2002). We believe, however, that three of the themes or clusters that were surfaced during that analysis are immediately

relevant to the field of Organizational Development.

DOING GOOD BUILDS GOOD BUSINESSES

One particularly provocative and puzzling theme continuously emerged throughout the interviews: *doing good for the world at large builds good businesses*. It suggests that organization development work is both fostered and accelerated when organizations’ stakeholders share a clear, compelling picture of their larger role in society. Rather than focusing people’s attention within, we must help organizations to turn their gaze to the world around them. In so doing, changes never before contemplated become real and possible. Green Mountain Coffee Roasters (GMCR) is a colorful example of this proposition.

GMCR is a fast growing company, internationally renowned for its sustainable business practices. Featured in many top media outlets – including Forbes Magazine, Business Ethics Magazine, and PBS – the company’s story powerfully testifies to the relationship between overall financial success and doing good in the world. Bob Stiller, CEO and Forbes 2000 Entrepreneur of the Year, speaks:

At Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, our improvement programs, seeking efficiencies in production and administration, had little energy and minimal success until we started looking beyond ourselves. When we turned our attention outward, seeking to use our capacities to work on global environmental projects and Fair Trade initiatives with the coffee growers in many poor regions of the world, our people made breakthrough changes internally.

Let me be absolutely and unapologetically clear on one point: profitability is our goal. But our profitability soared and our efficiencies improved when we turned our attention to being of benefit to society and building a sustainable ecology ‘out there.’ In its cover story featuring Green Mountain, Forbes Magazine talked about this apparent paradox. It seems like a paradox - but it is not, because ‘out there’ is really ‘in here.’ When people feel good about themselves via doing good, it reverberates.

I am an entrepreneur. And this kind of entrepreneurship – being of benefit to each other and building a better world while making extraordinary profits – is something that is not describable in traditional business school terms. If I had not experienced its power personally, I might never have believed it. It is inspiring, powerful, and fun. It feels like a revolution. It is a thrill.

EVERY GLOBAL AND SOCIAL ISSUE IS A BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY

Another consistent proposition that emerged from the initial *BAWB* conversations is that *every social and global challenge of*

our day can be turned into a business opportunity. This challenging theme appeared most prominently in the interview with Peter Drucker, a man often referred to as “the inventor of management.” He is convinced that any and every social, political, and environmental issue of our time can be turned into a successful business opportunity, with the right combination of social entrepreneurship, visioning, knowledge, and pragmatism. This conviction was echoed in the stories of both Sager Family Travel Foundation and Roadshow and Reebok Corporation.

Sager Family Travel Foundation and Roadshow is a brainchild of Bobby Sager, a successful American businessman. The Foundation’s work is built upon the “eyeball to eyeball” philosophy, which calls the Sagers to play active, hands-on parts in each initiative. Sager projects range from youth leadership, skill development, and education to micro-enterprise and peace and reconciliation programs. They are focused on creating long-term, deep impact and positive change in some of the world’s most troubled communities.

One of the most innovative initiatives of Sager Foundation, organized in the spirit of entrepreneurship, is a reconciliation effort in Rwanda: a country that suffers intense poverty, overshadowed by the residue of the recent violent conflicts between the Hutu and Tutsi. Here’s how Bobby Sager describes the project:

We decided to set up cooperative groups of women. In so doing, the wives of the people who were murdered in the genocide went into business partnerships with the wives of the 150,000 people that are in prison, accused of participating in the genocide.

The basic idea is this: If you want really powerful results, use business as a device for substantive reconciliation, not simply as a way to alleviate poverty. Although they’re not by any means mutually exclusive, you get both at the same time by bringing together groups that are 50 percent Hutu and 50 percent Tutsi. Let these women pursue their dreams together, and bring their extended families into the process. Now THAT’S the way to get to substantive reconciliation.

Another great case of a merger between social and business innovations comes from Reebok Corporation. Here’s a former Reebok executive’s story of a successful three-phase plan to eliminate the use of child labor in the manufacture of soccer

balls, as related by Neville and Cooperrider (2003):

The shapes stitched together to make soccer balls are so small, that children’s hands had been traditionally well suited for the task. However, the children were working 14-16 hours per day. ...

Reebok realized that many companies were buying from these suppliers, so one company’s refusal to buy because of working conditions would have hardly any effect. They also saw that if the children were taken off of

the sewing lines to go to school, there were no schools for them to attend; and children would simply move on to the next labor opportunity –making and carrying bricks. ...

So, [Reebok] designed a three-year, multi-layer program. ‘First we had to train the parents so they can do [the work]. Second, of all we had to have the parents agree that they will let the kids go to school – if there was a school. And third, we had to get a school, and train teachers. It took three years to get this whole project done. But now, we have soccer balls [for the United States] that are made by adults, making a regular livelihood, and kids that go to school.’

In short, BAWB tells us that as OD practitioners, we can and should be fully explicit about the global implications of the work we do. We should be more conscious about building a world that is sustainable. And finally, we should remember that we’re not just working to create better organizations... we’re working to create organizations that in turn create a better world.

“WEALTH” IS WELL-BEING

The third and final proposition extracted from our initial pool of appreciative action research is that “wealth” is more than just financial gain. True to the word’s Middle English roots, wealth is “well-being” for the whole. In keeping

with this proposition, wealth is best calculated using “triple bottom line” measures of profit, people, and planet. The story of Pavilion Technologies’ involvement with Austin People’s Community Clinic vividly illustrates such wealth.

People’s Clinic is a healthcare facility for the working poor and uninsured. Neville and Cooperrider (2002) tell the story that the clinic was projecting repeated shortfalls over a period of months. Rather than cutting Clinic services to address the shortfall, Pavilion sponsored an annual community event to raise money. In the face of a declining economy, the economic impact of 9-11, and many who challenged the idea, the People4People event exceeded increasing goals for two consecutive years, with similar projections for the third. The spirit of community camaraderie and philanthropy significantly influenced multiple large donors, and a single donor pledged \$1MM to directly support the

ongoing and expanding efforts of the project.

By redefining wealth as well-being, we raise questions about the relationship of meaning, purpose, and values to a business' overall success. We also bring more people – more voices – into conversations about how this wealth can and should be generated. By fostering more inclusive conversations, we deepen and enrich people's experience of their work, and enhance businesses' overall capacity for sustained success. This, in turn, creates more wealth that extends across business to society at large.

INVITATION AND POTENTIALS FOR THE FIELD OF OD

From its inception, the field of Organization Development has committed itself to lead organizations in directions that are well suited both to the people who populate them and to the world as a whole. As we have already suggested, practitioners in this field already share values around making the world a better place.

Our OD methodologies over the past several years have increasingly reflected that commitment – engaging larger and larger stakeholder groups in conversations of greater and greater collective significance. The *Business as Agent of World Benefit Inquiry* breaks new ground, however, by demonstrating that whole-system change can take place at a global scale. Even in its pilot period, *BAWB* has confirmed that thousands – even millions – of people can be engaged in revisioning and recreating business as we know it . . . that global development and organization development are integrally interconnected. In short, *BAWB* tells us that as OD practitioners, we can and should be fully explicit about the global implications of the work we do. We should be more conscious about building a world that is sustainable. And finally, we should remember that we're not just working to create better organizations... we're working to create organizations that in turn create a better world.

We in OD can and should apply the insights gained through the *BAWB* project both formally and informally, on a global and a local level. On a formal local level, we can follow the lead of companies like Nutrimental, SA. In 1998, Nutrimental addressed its need for a financial and operating turnaround by hosting a whole-system strategic planning summit. Turning one of the company's warehouses into a giant meeting room, they gathered all 700 employees together with dozens of customers and suppliers. Over a four-day period of time, and using the Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle as a guide, participants in the summit redefined the Company's purpose: "*To offer healthy and convenient foods, respecting and valuing life and human beings.*" In addition, they established short-term operating strategies, the short- and long-term results of which have proven to be staggering:

- 400 percent increase in profitability after only six months
- 66 percent increase in sales
- 42 percent improvement in productivity
- 95 percent employee satisfaction

- Company recently named one of the top 100 best companies to work for in Brazil

On an informal and global level, we can become involved in the *BAWB* project. We can visit the *BAWB* web site (cited in the References section of this article), download interview guides, and conduct interviews. We can participate in conferences, such as the first on-line summit (scheduled for September, 2003) or the first face-to-face international summit (scheduled for one month later, in Brazil). We can continue to visit the *BAWB* web site for updates. We can carry the stories of this remarkable initiative out into the world, thereby planting seeds for further movement in organizationally fertile ground around the globe.

In short, we can lend our unique talents, skills and gifts to implementing the *BAWB* vision within and beyond the organizations that we touch. For if building a better world is emerging as the next business frontier (Kanter, 2002), the *Business as Agent of World Benefit* project is where the action is going to be for anyone interested in being at the expansive and inspirational edge of OD (Cooperrider and Dutton, 1999). ■

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