



The Appreciative Inquiry Summit

Explorations into the Magic of Macro-Management and Crowdsourcing

Guest Editors: David Cooperrider, Lindsey Godwin, Brodie Boland and Michel Avital

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Ahead of the Curve

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Macro Management of Meaning and Identity

Explorations into the Magic of Macro-Management and Crowdsourcing

ABSTRACT

The company had a history of profitable success and employees were proud to work there. The retirement of the long-standing CEO set a tidal wave of change in motion: positive, customer-focused, innovative, yet very different from the past. Uncertainty blanketed the organization. If changes don't make sense to people, they will not produce positive results.

The company in question had a history of profitable success, its products and services were in demand, and employees were proud to work there. The retirement of the long-standing CEO set a tidal wave of change in motion, positive, customer-focused, innovative, yet very different from the past. Uncertainty blanketed the organization. Strategic changes, strategically-sound, were openly communicated, yet people were unable to make sense of the new narrative or their place in it. Relationships, performance and results suffered.

As this brief case illustrates, no matter how apparently positive and strategically chosen organizational changes are, if they don't make sense to the people involved they will not produce positive results or benefits for the organization, its members or its customers. Organizational life, work and human identity are intimately woven in a web of meaning that varies widely from person to person. For some people, work is described as an answer to their life calling, a way to express their deepest gifts in service to society. For others work is the means to care for themselves and their families, to provide the basics of food and shelter, often with hope that their children will have a better life. And for still others it is an opportunity for personal achievement, learning and development.

No matter why we work, or where on Maslow's hierarchy of motivation our work resides, the meaning of work is situated as central to both human and organizational identity. As we seek to understand human organizing, we must also be curious about human identity, especially the stories people tell about their work and their relationships with their organizations; and as we seek to change patterns of human organizing, we must be aware that we are simultaneously influencing the espoused and lived identities of organizational members.

The purpose of this essay is to suggest how a move from the classical command-and-control management of people to a postmodern management of meaning and identity using Appreciative Inquiry (AI) can be a viable approach for human



The function of management is to give meaning to work life. It might better be called 'meaningment' than management.

organizing and change at a macro level. Classical management and leadership approaches to organization and change focus upon people as the pivotal point for effectiveness, high performance and change. Classical management practices center upon the management of people, and point to people as a source of potential as well as the problem when things are not going well.

This reductionist, micro-management focus on individual behavior and performance parallels industrial age, mechanistic models of organizing, in which people are regarded as parts in the workings of an organization and as parts can be and must be, retooled or replaced to optimize organizational effectiveness.

Management of meaning

Post modern approaches center upon relational processes, organizational narratives and meaning-making among people. Human organizations are repeated, habitual, familiar patterns of relationship, interaction and meaning-making. In essence they are grand recitals, acts of communication. Consider relationships among employees, with customers or across departments and functions. Consider processes for decision making, strategic planning and marketing. Consider hiring, performance reviews and purchasing. All, acts of communication and the co-creation of meaning. When we talk of management it is more efficacious to consider the management of meaning and identity, rather than the management of people.

The fiction of management is that it is possible to control human behavior; and that it is in anyway ethical to do so. The function of management is to give meaning to work life. It might better be called 'meaningment' than management.

Active communicators

People are co-creators and re-creators of organizations, active 'communicators' in participatory discourse families of meaning and identity. We are each born into, live, learn and laugh within what is commonly called a cultural context that provides the raw material and gives meaning and identity to our life experiences, including work. From this milieu, which easily includes nurture, nature and neurology, arises our unique vocabularies, sets of stories, relational potentials, moralities and ethics.

The concepts that define human identity such as work, job, family, strengths, society, economics and time, for example, become meaningful as they are situated in the context of organizations – families, schools and communities – and then serve, in turn, as patterns of meaning that proffers both potential and limits for people and organizations. Whether given or taken, opportunities (face-to-face or digital) for voice, dialogue and collaboration prompt story telling, sense-making and human organizing – for better or worse. In other words, human organizing and human identity are intimately melded. To work in the arena of one requires curiosity and consideration for the other.

Questions arise for those of us who believe in freedom of expression and at the same time seek to support the creation, transformation and development of life-affirming and socially sustainable collectives. How can leaders and change agents effectively support human processes of 'communicating'? What is it that enables large numbers of diverse people with different ideals, opinions and strengths to come together in meaningful dialogue and find common ground, even touch upon what they often call universal? What enables people to co-

By questing for uniqueness, differences are honored, respected and located as integral to the whole.

create organizations and communities that are meaningful and generative over time? What fosters personal achievement within the context of relational responsibility and collaborative results? What practices bring out the best of people, foster a safe communication environment and stimulate upward spirals of meaning, emotions and identity?

Having designed and facilitated dozens of large group meetings (200 – 250 people) using AI in business, government, health care and religious organizations I want to suggest that clues to answering these questions, and many more, rest with communication strategies that transcend the management of people and focus upon the macro-management of meaning. Three such strategies are presented here: quest for uniqueness, interpretative generosity and punctuating the achievable.

Quest for uniqueness

Appreciative Inquiry is by definition, and in practice, a quest: a discovery and exploration of what gives life to human systems when they are at their best. The questions we ask when conducting an appreciative inquiry are invitations to story telling. They invite organizational stakeholders to share stories of their own high point experiences and best practices as well as hopes and dreams. Each person is asked to share her own unique narrative of success. Paradoxically, it is in this quest for uniqueness that commonality and a shared sense of organizational meaning arises.

The paradox of uniqueness and universality goes something like this: when we ask people to share, with others, their own personal and unique story of organizational life, we create a tendency toward synthesis. When people share, hear, witness and feel valid as unique and significant members of the organization, they feel emotionally safe to wonder and sense what they have in common with others. They describe appreciative interviews as a window to the universal. The sharing and witnessing of their personal identity narrative as integral to the organizational narrative creates a sense of belonging and 'witness' that is then articulated as what we have in common – our positive core of strengths, values and practices.

On the other hand, when as facilitators and leaders we ask people to discuss and identify what they have in common we create a tendency toward analysis, breaking apart and separation. It is amusingly paradoxical that in order to identify what we have in common we must first identify, generally make a list and differentiate who we are separate from one another. Asking people to discover what they have in common requires knowledge of differences and creates shared focus on stories of individuation and separation: 'I am, he is, they are.'

The implications of this paradox are resounding. The quest for uniqueness through AI might just be the most effective way to build bridges among people and groups whose narratives describe their differences as significant barriers to social interaction and peaceful collaboration. By questing for uniqueness, differences are honored, respected and located as integral to the whole. As students of uniqueness, we see patterns of collective wisdom that give meaning and articulation to the whole.

Interpretative generosity creates upward spirals of emotions, dialogue and relationships.

Interpretative generosity

Meaning emerges from and resides in the relational mist of organizations, in the form of both productive and unproductive, life-affirming and life-constricting narratives. In all too many organizations we hear stories of distrust, lack of cooperation and respect, intolerance, abuse, risk-averse decision-making and economic greed. This fear-based grand narrative is punctuated with practices that are not healthy for people, organizations or the planet. It is within this environment that we are often asked to work. It is this narrative that we are often asked to help transform. And it is precisely within the bleakness of these stories that the people with whom we work seek to find hope.

Appreciative Inquiry offers a viable antidote to fear-based organizational narratives. In its philosophically affirmative stance, AI is, from the start, an interpretative process that assumes strengths, good will and trust. From affirmative topic selection through the 4-D process, successful Appreciative Inquiry initiatives are characterized by interpretative generosity – seeking and attributing life-affirming value, benevolence and munificence. As a relational process that enables large numbers of diverse stakeholders to collaboratively engage in storytelling, interpretation and sense-making, it furthers interpretative generosity as an organizational norm.

Generosity is generative

Interpretative generosity can be seen in questions that scope an AI process from initiative to innovation:

- What is the most important and life-giving direction for our inquiry?
- How shall we state our affirmative topics so they reflect what we really want?
- What interview questions will be most engaging and enlivening for our colleagues and customers?
- What is the most compelling way for us to state our design principles or provocative propositions?
- What new projects, products or services will enhance social and economic wellbeing and sustainability?

Generosity is generative. It nourishes the noble and privileges positive, life-giving forces. Generous acts of collaboration transform narratives and relationships. Interpretative generosity creates upward spirals of emotions, dialogue and relationships. The practice of seeking and speaking the best of people crowds out intolerance and creates space for new possibilities and courageous risk-taking.

When generous practices, such as dialogue and sense-making focused upon what works well, best practices, strengths, assets, resources and ideal images of the future, become daily practices the whole of the organization resonates with sustainable goodwill.

Punctuating the achievable

Questions are often asked about the viability of AI to positively impact organizational results: 'How will AI help us achieve our goals? How do you go from interviews, discussions and visioning to tangible actions? How is it that AI

The more we collectively envision positive results, the more we will collectively achieve positive results.

gets results? How can we be certain that what people decide to do is the right thing? How do such large groups of people make decisions about what to do?

The link between inquiry and action is not a missing link, as these questions would suggest. Inquiry and action are intimately linked throughout an AI process. I call this link punctuating the achievable. During the Discovery phase of an appreciative inquiry, for example, people collaboratively uncover and share strengths, best practices and what works well. They map the organization's positive core. In doing so they populate the organization's vocabulary and public discourse with success stories embedded with results-oriented messages such as: if we've done it before, we can do it again. If they can do it, we can do it. If you took that risk, we can take other risks. This is an example of punctuating the achievable. There are numerous stories of people who having learned something during an appreciative interview that changed how they did their job and got significantly better results. Stories of best practices tell people that something has been done, and therefore that it can be done again, and that they can do it.

Appreciative Inquiry is founded upon the understanding that positive images in the form of expressed hopes and dreams for the future foster positive action. Inviting people to give voice to their hopes, dreams and ideals during the dream phase of an appreciative inquiry is another act of punctuating the achievable. Images move us to action. Positive images move us to positive action. Images of the ideal, whether they are personal affirmations or provocative propositions, move us personally and collectively in the direction of their achievement and realization. Simply said, the more we collectively envision positive results, the more we will collectively achieve positive results.

One more way we punctuate the achievable during an appreciative inquiry is by self-organizing for action during the Destiny phase. By enabling people to volunteer and commit to what they 'have passion to do' we put an emphasis on meaningful results, and therefore more gets done. People achieve what is meaningful to them. Organizations suffer when a small group of people decides what should be done and then 'rolls it out' to others. As mentioned earlier in this essay, people are motivated to work for a variety of reasons. When people have a say in what they are to do, they will choose work that is meaningful to them. Organizations thrive when people have meaningful work. As we engage people in punctuating the achievable, we enrich the collective wisdom of the organization and foster powerful results-oriented transformation.

Conclusion

The opening case provided a fertile ground for AI. In partnership with a dynamic core team we designed and facilitated an AI summit that rapidly engaged over 350 people and led to significant organizational innovation.

Derived from patterns of communication in successful large-scale Appreciative Inquiry processes, communication strategies such as quest for uniqueness, interpretative generosity and punctuating the achievable hold great potential as strategies for making the shift from micro-management of people to macro-management of meaning and identity. Each of the three strategies presented can be carried out through a range of practices. It is my hope that leaders and practitioners of large-scale change will experiment, create and articulate practices, and in so doing expand our collective wisdom of the broad potential for macro-management.

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