

Decade of Determination:

Building an Economic Engine Empowering a Green City on a Blue Lake Through “AI”

By David Cooperrider

Sometime over the next 12 months—and I hope it’s sooner rather than later— we will emerge from the current recession and find ourselves in an era of economic expansion. Clearly it is not too soon, as a city, to aggressively and confidently seek to close the book on what some have called “the quiet crisis.” Our collective attention for at least the next ten years needs to be on building the economic engine of the future. Let’s call it the decade of determination—but determination to come together to do what?

There is one thing we can be sure of: there will be no single pure play. Bio-enterprise will be important. Advanced manufacturing will be essential. Health care, already world-class, will magnify. So will our universities and research centers, the arts, our new design corridors, and our non-profit leadership. But threading across the city’s diverse economic portfolio are exciting signs of a powerful cross-connecting innovation engine: *sustainability* has crossed a new threshold as *the* business opportunity of the 21st century.

The green economy is primed to be the mother of all markets, something that will fuel innovation. As the just-released September issue of the *Harvard Business Review* proposes, virtually everything a business can do to go green today—in any industry—will make it stronger, healthier, more innovative, more competitive, and more inspiring to its customers, people, and partners. But more than that, the sustainability revolution has ushered in what historians call a moment of “basic innovation” a decisive time that creates new industries, transforms existing ones, and over time reshapes societies.

So when Mayor Jackson invited the Fowler Center for Sustainable Value to help co-design and lead an unprecedented sustainability summit and when he said with unflinching conviction, “the time is now for Cleveland, and I refuse to miss this opportunity,” we could not help but respond. Research shows leadership is about resonance and emotional intelligence. But for us, this was not in the head. Mayor Jackson spoke directly to the heart—our heart. We at Case Western Reserve University said “yes” for three clear reasons.

First, the race is on to be the country’s greenest city. A study by the US Conference of Mayors reported: “An economy that shifts to generating 40 percent of its electricity from wind, solar, biomass, and other fuels will generate 4.2 million green jobs by 2038.” Add to this the immediate and dramatic returns on private sector initiatives such as IBM’s “smarter cities” as well as the federal stimulus bill that makes billions in funding available for everything from wind energy to green construction, and what you find is this: cities are poised to move faster than they have ever moved.

The second reason we said yes was our assessment that everything is already in place for Cleveland and Northeast Ohio not only to choose a “compete strategy” to at least keep up with other cities, but that Cleveland can and must choose to take a “lead strategy” to innovate, execute and lead. In fact, a recent regional economic report guided by Blu Skye—the top sustainability firm in the world whose clients include Microsoft and Wal-Mart—concluded that Cleveland is uniquely equipped to become a leading sustainable economy because of its strategic location, huge freshwater advantages, advanced manufacturing expertise, powerful social capital, and much more.

Cleveland’s assets in the sustainability domain are multiplying. The E4S network—Entrepreneurs for Sustainability—has 8,000 members. Sustainable Cleveland is growing rapidly and is bringing together many of the largest, world-class enterprises in the area all focused on the green economy—Eaton, Parker, Key Bank, Forest City, NorTech and the US Chamber of Commerce’s top corporate citizen in America, Fairmount Minerals. There are county and state advanced green energy initiatives, Cleveland State’s focus on sustainable communities, our world-class foundations and advanced-energy research, the Global Forum for Business as an Agent of World Benefit, our participation with the United Nations Global Compact and its 5,000 companies, and David Beach—who has carefully cultivated the seed image and phrasing of “a green city on a blue lake” as a unifying call.

The third reason was the opportunity to participate in the kind of innovation that matters most but happens least - *management innovation* – the chance to ensure that the Mayor’s leadership and any future financial investment is matched by equal attention to and investment in developing more effective management tools, better ways of aggregating talents, and inspiring strategically nimble follow-through. One of those management innovations—described by a CEO in a 2004 UN report issued by Secretary General Kofi Annan as “the best large-group planning methodology in the world today”—is the Appreciative Inquiry Summit (AI) method (another cutting-edge product of Cleveland, by the way).

AI says it’s possible to connect and coordinate the efforts of thousands of people without building up a bureaucracy and creating a burdensome hierarchy of overseers. AI offers an innovative way. It’s not top down, or bottom up. The process is whole. We call it constellation leadership, leadership connecting the whole universe of strengths. It takes the best of top down and the best of bottom up.

So when Mayor Jackson approached us, he had a new leadership model in mind. “What the city and region needs,” he said, “is not just new answers to the question of change, but how do we change at the scale of the whole?”

He liked AI’s whole-systems management approach. He saw its strengths-based management philosophy as essential. And he liked its task focus: not just methods for large group dialogue, but methods for co-design, deployment, and delivery. “The future will belong to those who do,” he declared, “not to those who just talk.”

Truth is there is not a city in America not seriously looking to re-vitalize. To date there is no other big city ready to engage “the whole” the way Mayor Jackson is—and to publically dedicate a decade

not only to the sustainability=innovation equation, but to the management innovation needed to carry out the task.

The many descriptive headlines covering Cleveland's 700-person three-day AI Summit told the story of an extraordinary event. Beyond the dedication of business leaders and their teams (from the CEO of Key Bank to the SVP of Continental), and beyond the dedicated engagement of people from every race and economic class, there were youth leaders and elders, and people from every sector and industry. And, the summit attracted serious engagement from around the world: the head of IBM for North America and his strategy team; the Obama administration's green economy leadership; a team from MIT led by Peter Senge; the Surdna Foundation from New York; sustainable business icons such as CEO Ray Anderson; delegates from Sweden; and leaders with the UN Global Compact.

Charles Michener, former senior editor at the New Yorker, wrote about the three-day green economy summit as "an astonishing feat". He wrote about the "doable job-creating innovations" that were detailed and the upward virtuous cycles that can be established—how one good thing can lead to another. Take the wind energy vision, for example, and play it out: Cleveland's offshore wind prototype becomes the first freshwater pilot in the world; it attracts new companies and major stimulus funds to the region; this in turn re-ignites our region's advanced manufacturing capability, and positions Cleveland as the place for future research, testing and certification for others; as increased scale drives down costs for wind's clean energy, suddenly the GM Volt or Toyota plug-n Prius takes on exciting new importance; industries and new infrastructures are born such as battery-swapping stations where exhausted car batteries are swapped for fully charged ones in seconds; this radically drops the cost per mile below that of oil and gas, eliminates choking air-pollution and breaks the vicious cycle of our uneasy addiction to foreign oil—and then builds an iconic story of Cleveland as a central player in the establishment of a bright green economy. This is the story we are about to tell and this is why Charles Michener said the summit "was like uncorking a giant bottle of Champagne left too long on the shelf and seeing the bubbles explode."

I think it was the end of the "quiet crisis" and that the summit's most important outcome was the unleashing of a decade of determination. Building an economic engine to empower a green city on a blue lake is one of those rare combinations: it's about big profits and big purposes. It's not just about making Cleveland better, but making the world better. It's not going to be something top-down or bottom-up. It's both. It's whole. And its magnetic outreach to you, to me, and to everyone in our region has just begun.

David Cooperrider serves as the Mayor's advisor for the "Sustainable Cleveland 2019" initiative, and is the Fairmount Minerals Professor of Social Entrepreneurship at the Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University. He is the management thought leader and co-creator of Appreciative Inquiry and is the Faculty Director of the Fowler Center for Sustainable Value.

SIDEBAR

The Green Economy Leadership Library

A growing genre of management writing is helping leaders recognize the value and innovation-driving power of sustainability:

Harvard Business Review, September 2009.

Sustainable Value by Chris Laszlo, 2008.

Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change by David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, 2005.

Managing as Designing by Richard Boland and Fred Collopy, 2004.

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