

ASAE Launches a Social Responsibility Movement

May 5, 2008 2:49 PM, By Dave Kovaleski

At a landmark summit put on by the American Society of Association Executives and The Center for Association Leadership, approximately 861 people met virtually and in 20 locations around the world, to discuss ways that associations can effect social, political, and environmental change.

In both scope and design, ASAE and The Center's Global Responsibility Summit was different from any conference either organization has held. "This is just the beginning of a historic movement in our profession," said Susan Sarfati, executive vice president at ASAE and president and CEO of The Center, welcoming attendees from the host site, the Gaylord National Hotel in National Harbor, Md., April 30, the first day of the three-day summit. "Give freely, think big, and help create what could become the world's largest social responsibility movement."

The summit was moderated by David Cooperrider, director at the Center for Business as an Agent of World Benefit, which is part of the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, using "**appreciative inquiry**"—a concept that he developed. Cooperrider's process is designed to engage large groups of people in developing strategies and making decisions for the organization—sort of like a massive brainstorming session. He does it by asking questions that uncover the strengths of an organization. "The questions we ask determine what we find," says Cooperrider. "I began to realize that the whole field had defined change as an improvement game, that the system is broken, it needs to be diagnosed and fixed."

"What we're finding, quite simply, is that the more you study the true, the good, the better, the possible within living human systems, the more the capacity for positive transformation," he said.

The summit started by asking small groups to answer questions such as: What was the moment when you felt most effective? How do you see the world in 2020? What role have associations played as catalysts of change in that world?

From there, using Cooperrider's "4D cycle"—discovery, dream, design, destiny—the discussion moved ideas to a list of projects that the association and its members will take on in the coming months and years.

Among the 18 or so projects the group came up with were:

- Develop guiding principles around social responsibility for all associations to adhere to;
- formulate a “freecycle” program, where associations can donate and swap used and unused goods with other associations and organizations;
- launch a global award for social responsibility;
- work through the United Nation’s Millennium Project to provide clean water and help eradicate hunger in poverty-stricken areas;
- create a toolkit to show associations and their members everything they need to know about social responsibility.

A steering committee, with representatives from each project group and ASAE officials, will be established to drive these initiatives forward. A virtual summit has tentatively been set for October, at which concrete proposals for each of the projects can be presented.

The summit was also unique in its design. About 400 people were at the Gaylord National; group of five to 25 people gathered at 19 satellite sites around the world. There were 14 sites in the U.S., including Charlotte, N.C.; Austin, Texas; Tallahassee, Fla.; Seattle; Chicago; and Milwaukee. There were also five international sites: Singapore; Dubai; Brussels, Belgium; Shanghai, China; and Madrid, Spain. Plus, there were more than 100 people participating virtually. On the first day, virtual and satellite attendees were beamed into the host site via video technology. On days two and three, it was just an audio feed.