

The Liberation of Power: Exploring how Appreciative Inquiry “Powers Up the People”

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Over the past 5 years, we and others around the globe (Khalsa and Kaczmarek, 1996; Ludema, 1997; Bushe, 1998) have discovered a way of working that consistently and dramatically liberates peoples' sense of individual and collective power. The liberation of that power, along with peoples' willingness to exercise it on behalf of their organizations, adds “value” to the organizations and businesses in question. That philosophy, practice, and way of working is called Appreciative Inquiry.

In case after case, using Appreciative Inquiry as a process for strategic organizational change, we have seen remarkable transformations in the way people work together and in the results they achieve. We have participated in the drama of personal transformation as people have discovered who they are at their best. We have seen high performance in the face of positive possibility – rather than crisis. And we have heard stories, over and over again, about the positive impact of Appreciative Inquiry on people's *personal*, as well as professional, lives.

Having been repeatedly surprised and delighted, as we've watched the enthusiasm with which people have engaged themselves with their organizations' change initiatives, we have begun to ask ourselves what's happening. Why is it that people get so excited and want to participate with Appreciative Inquiry? Why is it that participation so readily leads to innovation, productivity, employee satisfaction and profitability? What is it that creates such possibilities for personal transformation and for people to discover and be their best at work? What are the conditions that foster cooperation throughout a whole system of highly diverse groups of people? In short, the central question of our reflection, and the question addressed in this paper is, *What is it about Appreciative Inquiry that “powers up the people?”*

The “Power-full” Organization

Think with us for a moment about the questions: What is the *value* of a human being? And, what is it that organizations value about human beings?

Beyond the *inherent* worth and value that every human being on the planet holds, organizations' answers to these questions can and do vary widely. Now, as we've taken our first steps into the 21st century, corporations around the globe “value” human beings' at anything from a few cents per hour (or the equivalent thereof) to millions of dollars per year - depending on their answers to such questions as: Who *are* the people? What *unique skills or background* do they bring to the picture? How capable are they of making independent decisions? Of *actively influencing* their work environment and the world around them? In short, what value can they *add* to the organization or business?

Now, let's restate the question. What is the value of a “*powerful*” human being? A person who knows that *the world is subject to human influence*? Who knows that she *personally* has the power to change the world? Who chooses to *exercise* that power for the good of the whole? Who encourages and grooms the people around him to *join* him in exercising that power? Who invites others into cooperation to discover, dream and design the future?

“Ah,” we hear you say, “now *that* is a different question!” That kind of person is “valued” much more highly, in organizations today, than the person who simply “shows up and does what she’s told.” *That* kind of person is “worth” a great deal more, in organizational and business terms.

When the individual and collective power of human beings is unleashed, organizations become “power-full.”

A power-full organization is one in which people care about and work towards being the *best they can possibly be* - personally, as well as organizationally. It is a place where people seek to work by what we might call “spiritual ideals” – peace, harmony, justice, love, joy, wisdom and integrity. It is a place in which people take responsibility for dreaming and for acting upon their dreams.

A power-full organization is one in which power – the capacity to create, innovate, and to influence change – is an *unlimited* (vs. “zero-sum”) relational capacity and experience. It is shared freely; and in the process of being shared it grows. People exercise power in ways that are inclusive . . . that nurture and expand the people around them.

Imagine an organization in which people are motivated, energized, and committed to being the best. Imagine the possibilities for innovation and excellence. Imagine the impact that such an organization might have on its industry . . . on the world.

This article draws upon our work with just such an organization: Hunter Douglas Window Fashions Division in Broomfield, CO. This thousand-person manufacturing company - the largest and most successful Division of Hunter Douglas International - innovates, manufactures, and fabricates high-end window covering products.

In the spring of 1997, in response to several years of off-the-chart growth and related changes in structure and leadership, the Division’s leadership launched a full-system appreciative inquiry with the intention of:

- Creating a *collective vision* for the future of the organization - one that would engage and excite the entire organization and its stakeholders.
- Re-instilling the *creativity, flexibility, intimacy, and sense of community* that had contributed to the Division’s original success.
- Building leadership within the organization (i.e., enhancing the skills of existing leadership, and building the “bench strength” by identifying and training future leaders)
- Transcending the silos that had recently emerged between management and the general work force, and across business units, as well as between operations and “support” functions.

Just one year into its work with Appreciative Inquiry Hunter Douglas reported significant results in productivity, operational improvement, turnover, and employee engagement. Production and productivity improved, particularly in the lower-yield operations. Operations improvement suggestions were up over 100 percent, resulting in hundreds of thousands of dollars in savings through process innovation and operational improvements.

Turnover was the lowest it had been for six years, despite negligible unemployment in the County in which they operate. Participation in tuition assistance was up, especially among hourly employees. In addition, when Dale Carnegie advertised its basic training, six months into the Appreciative Inquiry effort, *22 people* - most of whom were hourly - signed up to participate. (This was up over 100% from the previous year.) The interviewer from Dale Carnegie commented that she had never seen a more positive and enthusiastic group of people before, and inquired about “this [Appreciative Inquiry] program of yours.” Six months after initiating Appreciative Inquiry, the Company moved to create a Toastmasters chapter on-site at Hunter Douglas. When sign-up sheets were posted, 48 people volunteered to participate *on their own time*. The majority of these volunteers were production workers from the plant, who had connected the importance of their developing communication skills to their future potential in the organization. Over the com-

ing months, attendance continued at extraordinary rates, and the Company moved to establish a second on-site chapter.

On-site research (Chandler, 1998) quantitatively established positive changes as a result of the Appreciative Inquiry efforts. In particular, Chandler's research indicated that since the implementation of Appreciative Inquiry there were improvements in:

- Employees' understanding of organizational goals.
- Employees' understanding of how their work fit with the organization's goals.
- Employee commitment to the organization's goals.
- Employees' sense of ownership for their work.
- Employees' motivation to be productive, innovative, and creative.

All of these quantitative findings were supported by the qualitative employee comments that were gathered during on-site focus groups.

Perhaps most telling were the results of an unplanned series of "Employee on the Street" interviews which were conducted about nine months into the effort. 75% of the employees who were polled had been only tangentially involved in the Appreciative Inquiry effort. Most of these employees described Hunter Douglas as a kinder, gentler, more open place to work than it had been just nine months before.

What is Appreciative Inquiry?

Appreciative Inquiry ("AI") is an organization development philosophy and methodology that enhances organizations' capacities for positive change and ongoing adaptability (Whitney & Schau, 1998). It was developed in the mid 1980's by David Cooperrider, Ph.D. and Suresh Srivastva, Ph.D. of the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1984). It provides a philosophy and tools for leaders to understand and build upon the *best of what has been and might yet be* within their organizations through inquiry into their "*positive core*" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1998). An organization's positive core is described as the collective wisdom, knowledge, and capabilities - often un-discussed - of the organization at its best.

Consider the individual words "appreciate" and "inquire." Webster's Dictionary defines the word "appreciate" as follows:

- 1: *to value or admire highly;*
to judge with heightened understanding;
to recognize with gratitude.
- 2: *to increase in value.*

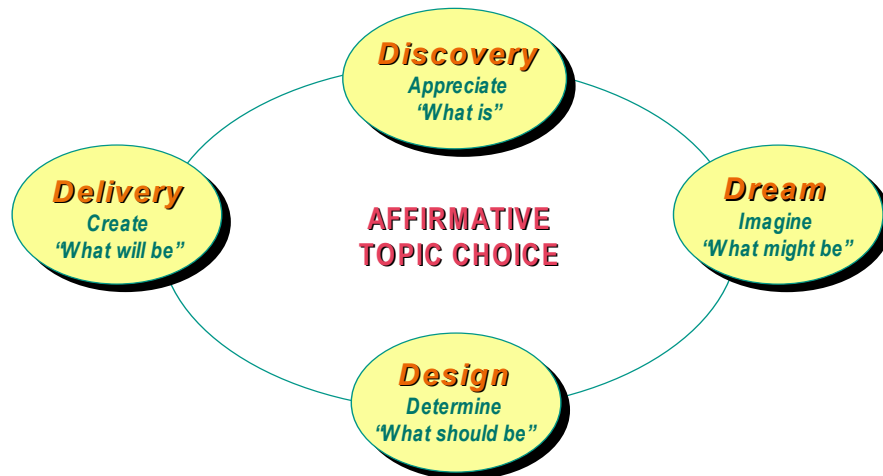
"To inquire" is defined as meaning:

- 1: *to search into.*
- 2: *to seek for information by questioning.*

Hence, Appreciative Inquiry guides us to *ask questions with gratitude and a sense of "valuing" . . . in order to increase understanding and enhance value. AI is the study of what gives life to a human system, when it is at its best.*

Appreciative Inquiry, as a process, takes place over four phases, which are generally described as the "4-D Process." Based on the assumption that change occurs through thoughtful inquiry into and dialogue about affirmative life-giving forces, the four phases of the process are: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Delivery.

The “4-D” Cycle



Discovery: Appreciating What Gives Life

The Discovery phase is a quest to identify positive stories and spread them throughout the organization. It brings into focus those things which give life and energy to people, their work, and their organization. It assumes that the life-giving forces are indeed present in every situation, but that our habits of organizing and talking often overlook the positive in favor of analyzing obstacles, resistance, and deficits. The Discovery phase shifts the balance of organizational attention from what *isn't* working to what *is*, and to what *may possibly work* in the future.

Discovery begins with the introduction of Appreciative Inquiry theory and practice to the organization. The purpose of the effort is clarified, and a “core team” is selected to both guide the effort and select topics for the inquiry. Topics are *affirmative*, and are stated in *affirmative language*.

For example, an organization wishing to reduce turnover might study “employee retention.” Another wishing to reduce conflict might study “collaboration.” In the selection of affirmative topics, organization members are asked to focus on the things they want *more of* in their organization - the things they want to *grow*. (“What would make this organization *even more* the place you want to work?”)

“Appreciative interviews,” the core technology of Appreciative Inquiry, are at the heart of the Discovery phase – and are often woven into later phases of the process as well. Generally conducted as a mutual interview among diverse stakeholder groups, they may also be conducted in focus groups. Interview questions are crafted around the affirmative topics, and an interview guide is created, exploring: a) people’s beginnings with the organization; b) what they value most about themselves, their work and the organization; c) their appreciative stories related to the topics being studied; and d) their hopes and dreams for the organization and its future. Discovery involves interviewing many - if not all - members of an organization, and often includes interviews with external stakeholders (i.e., customers, suppliers, and community members).

At Hunter Douglas Window Fashions, the Discovery phase engaged the *entire organization* (plus key external stakeholders) in one form or another. A cross-section of the organization (100 people from all functions, business units, shifts, levels, tenure, race, and gender) selected topics for the inquiry and wrote four different interview guides. This same group then initiated interviews with colleagues, customers, suppliers, and stakeholders. Beginning six weeks later, another 200 people joined that first group, to begin both second and third “waves” of interviews.

Over the course of the just six months, 450 employees and 75 stakeholder interviews had been conducted and “synthesized,” in preparation for later phases of the process. Interviews were conducted and synthesized with the balance of the work force – another 500 people – over the next six months.

Dream: Imagining What Might Be

The Dream phase is a time for groups of people to engage in thinking big, thinking out of the box, and thinking out of the boundaries of what has been in the past. It is a time for people to describe their wishes and dreams for their work, their working relationships, and their organization.

The activities of this phase often take place in a large group meeting of 50 to over 1000 people. This meeting, known in the field as an Organizational Summit (Whitney & Cooperrider, 1998) encourage participants to consider what their organization (department, business unit, or entire company) is being “called” to do. This connects the work of all members of the organization to a greater purpose and vision.

Working together in small groups of eight, participants share and discuss the data and stories collected in the Discovery phase. Even as these discussions ground them in the most positive aspects of their organization’s past, they inspire them to imagine *possibilities* - what “*might be*” for themselves and their organization in relation to the *world*.

Small group conversations have been preceded by one-on-one appreciative interviews, and small groups have been given guidelines for self-management. Participants have been encouraged to “check their titles at the door,” and listen for the “lone small voice” - the one with a *different* idea or a *different* way of looking at things. This focus on *relationship and dialogue* builds safety and trust, which in turn inspires lively, enlivening, participative, and highly creative conversations. In fairly short order, divergent groups of people begin to converge towards and focus on the things that bind them together, as opposed the things that pull them apart.

Often, small group conversations are followed by high-energy, creative presentations to the larger group - which in turn inspire even greater ease and creativity. Skits, murals, songs, poems, and commercials are all possible modes of expression for dramatizing the positive possibilities envisioned for the organization and its future.

The Hunter Douglas Dream phase – like its Discovery - has been iterative. The Division’s first Organizational Summit – which took place upon completion of the first 500 interviews – very much followed the design described above. Later, Dream activities occurred in conjunction with *whole-system strategic planning* – which was initiated as an annual activity, as a result of the first Organizational Summit.

Design: Determining What Will Be

In the Design phase, organization members and stakeholders (including customers and suppliers) recreate the “social architecture” of the organization, so that *everything* about organizing reflects and is responsive to the organization’s most positive past and highest potential.

Whereas the Discovery and Dream phases generate and expand the organization’s images of itself, the Design and Delivery phases ask members to *make choices* for the organization. Stakeholders draw on interviews and dreams to select high-impact design elements, and then craft “Provocative Propositions” (or Design Statements) which incorporate the positive core into high-impact processes, systems, and programs.

True to the principles of Appreciative Inquiry, Design Statements are *written in the present tense*. They recreate the organization’s image of itself by presenting clear, compelling pictures of how things will be when the organization’s positive core is boldly alive in all of its strategies, processes, systems, decisions, and collaborations. In this way, Design Statements redirect daily actions and create future possibilities for the organization and its members.

The Hunter Douglas Design phase has also taken place over many iterations. The seven “Design Statements” created at the first Organizational Summit continue to guide the organization’s decisions and ac-

tions. Later Design activities included development of Divisional and the Business Unit-level strategies that would bring the company Mission, and Strategic Vision to life.

Delivery / Destiny: Creating What Will Be

Change occurs in *all* phases of an Appreciative Inquiry, as the process provides an open forum for employees to contribute and step forward in the service of the organization. The Delivery process, however, focuses specifically on personal and organizational *commitments* and “*paths forward.*”

During Delivery sessions, commitments are made to ensure that the Design Statements are realized. Individuals commit to applications and action plans, small groups work on areas that require collaboration, and teams may be established for new initiatives. Alignment on actions to be taken is high, as a result of the extensive involvement of large numbers of people in the Discovery, Dream and Design phases. The massive number of people engaged in interviews, large group meetings, and critical decision making helps participants get strong sense of what the organization is really about, and of how they can contribute to the future through their personal actions.

At Hunter Douglas, the Delivery phase was initially manifested through “Action Groups” – collections of employees convened around a topic of mutual interest and passion. These teams formulated their own goals and objectives, set their own timelines for completion, and recruited their own “champions” from among the Window Fashions leadership. Participation was about equal between hourly and salaried, production and professional. Through a unique combination of commitment to action and support, they achieved exceptional results over a 1- to 2-year period of time, in areas that were directly tied to the hopes, dreams and aspirations of the organization as a whole.

The 4-D Cycle and the “Six Freedoms”

So what’s the relationship between the 4-D Cycle and the liberation of power? Personal and organizational power is liberated – unleashed - when certain essential conditions are present for people within organizations. Our work with the people of Hunter Douglas as well as other organizations suggests to us that there are at least six pre-conditions for the liberation of power. We call these pre-conditions the “Six Freedoms.”

The magic of Appreciative Inquiry comes, in part, from the way in which it unleashes *all* of the “Six Freedoms,” over the course of just one complete 4-D cycle. Because of this breadth of impact, it has a greater capacity for transforming personal and collective realities than many of the other organizational change processes we’ve seen to date.

Any *one* of these “Six Freedoms” can significantly affect people’s perception of their power within an organizational context. Because individuals learn and are motivated differently; interventions which provide the opportunity for people to experience *multiple freedoms* have the greatest potential to impact the most number of people and ultimately the organization as a whole.

The journey to liberation - from oppression to power - is one of “social emergence.” Paulo Freire’s work (1970) suggests that the “oppressed” are submerged in reality. They are in a sense “social realists” who believe the world is the way it is and there is nothing they can do about it. They experience and describe themselves without place or power to change things. We have heard this organizational lament all too often, “ This is how it has always been around here. It’s been this way for the twenty years I have worked here. It is never going to change.” These are the voices of the “organizationally oppressed.”

It is our experience that the “organizationally oppressed” live and work in all functions, at all levels and in all sectors of organizations. No organizational group, level, or function is always and exclusively more receptive to organizational oppression than another. In some organizations it is the marketing group that doesn’t feel heard or able to influence decisions. In others it is manufacturing. In some organizations those at the top express great frustration in not being able to influence the market or shareholders – or to “motivate” employees. In others it is front line employees who experience themselves as invisible and

unable to impact the way work (even their own work) gets done. Often, when one group in an organization feels undervalued and unable to influence, so do others.

The first step toward liberation begins when people recognize the world and their organization as open to social change, as created by and through human interaction and creativity. At this stage, people often see and describe positive impact as an attribute of others. (“*She is such a great leader. Since she has been here we have made major improvements.*”) This other-oriented power is a step toward liberation. It acknowledges the *potential* for social change, while still placing the capacity for influence and change with some “other.” Generally, the other is more informed, has more authority, is more experienced or is in some way described as more powerful.

When people realize that they – in relation to others – can and do make a difference, they experience true liberation. Theoretically, we call these people “social constructionists:” people who understand the socially crafted nature of our realities. (Gergen, 1994) Appreciative Inquiry, through the Six Freedoms, creates a relational and narrative rich context which becomes the path on which the journey to liberation takes place. The Six Freedoms are:

1. Freedom to be Known in Relationship
2. Freedom to Be Heard
3. Freedom to Dream in Community
4. Freedom to Choose to Contribute
5. Freedom to Act with Support
6. Freedom to Be Positive

Following is our description of these Six Freedoms, along with examples of ways in which each freedom was experienced and expressed in the words of employees who participated in the Hunter Douglas inquiry. These are voices of the organizationally liberated.

#1: Freedom to be Known in Relationship

“Despite our habit of seeing ourselves as separate, solid ‘things,’ our minds, our beings are not fixed. We exist in a web of relationships.”

Joseph Jaworski
Synchronicity

Human identity is formed and evolves in relationship. “Persons represent the intersection of multiple relationships” (McNamee & Gergen 1999). Our sense of self is a *relational* identity that thrives in communication with others. “Communicative connections to other people are fundamental to the workings of the human mind and self, and to the culture that enriches and sustains our spirits and achievements” (Fogel, 1993). Just as we know and become ourselves in relationship, so do we also contribute to our organizations in relationship. For many people, the quality of their relationships at work is one and the same with the quality of their work life.

All too often in work settings, people are known *in role*, rather than in relationship. They are vice presidents and operators, doctors and nurses, employees and customers – in short, they are perceived as *what they do*, rather than *who they are*.

Appreciative Inquiry allows us to know one another *in relationship*, rather than in role. It calls us to know one another not just as unique individuals, but as a part of the *web of relationships* through which “I” exist. The more fully we are known in relationship, the more fully we can come to work and contribute. John Cade, a printer with the Window Fashions Division, reflects on the fundamental human need to be known in this way. “I want to be known, and to ‘belong,’” says Cade. “The animal takes care of survival, but the heart – the soul – wants to *belong*.”

Being known in relationship includes knowing one another as *relational beings* – as parents, coaches, artists, bowlers, etc. The more fully I am known in *my relational world*, the more fully I can come to work and contribute.

Appreciative Inquiry breaks the cycle of depersonalization that masks people's sense of "being and belonging." The appreciative interview, which is the core technology of Appreciative Inquiry, is powerfully rooted in the personal and relational. It seeks after and explores in depth people's personal peaks . . . times when they have been most engaged, most alive, and most proud of themselves, their organizations, and their work. It asks them to recall those moments in vivid detail, and to share their experiences with people whom they've heretofore known only "in role" – or not at all. The process affirms people in relation to others, enables new relationships to be formed and enhances respect among people working together on a day to day basis. It gives people the freedom to get to know themselves and others as fundamental to high performance.

Renee Chavez, an inspector with Window Fashions, says, "I did my interviews with people who weren't like me. That helped me meet and get to know people who are very *different* from me: different jobs, different backgrounds, different races."

Cindy Stewart, another printer, describes the interviews as "energizing, every time you do them. It's just a really nice process. They build relationships, give you a chance to connect. They tell people that their ideas are important."

Appreciative Inquiry doesn't *just* build relationships. It also levels the playing field and builds bridges across the artificial boundaries that seem so prevalent in late 20th century organizations. For example, Joe Sherwood, a manufacturing and fabrication process coordinator, says, "In asking the right questions, you bring back enthusiasm and renew relationships. [The interviews] give us an opportunity to go to our bosses and speak up for ourselves." Mark Maier, a machinist, says it even more succinctly: "Appreciative Inquiry blew the communication gap wide open."

Similarly, John Cade comments on the ways in which Appreciative Inquiry in general – and the interviews in particular – help to make other people and their ideas more *accessible*. As he puts it, "Appreciative Inquiry gives us opportunities to *be known* across the boundaries." The "contagious spirit" of the interviews results in a sense of *connection* to others. "As our Appreciative Inquiry effort got fully under way, other people became excited, just like me. I didn't feel alone. For the first time, it was 'me *with* the world.'"

Perhaps the best example of the "Freedom to be Known in Relationship", what Brian Bassett, shipping coordinator, called "*human to human contact*" is the story of Germaine Piper, a third-shift operator who interviewed numerous Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodian refugees as part of the original Discovery process. When asked what she'd learned from the interviews, she referred to the "heroism" of the people she'd interviewed.

"They left their jobs, their homes, and their families. They lived in and escaped from refugee camps. They traveled to this country under *inhuman* conditions, and finally arrived in the US. And for what? People who had once held professional positions had to take whatever jobs they could get – just because they didn't speak English.

This just isn't right! I've decided that I want to teach them English on my lunch hour. I've decided that if I can teach them English, I might learn some of their language too."

Within a day, Germaine had phoned the Company's Vice President of Human Resources and offered to teach English classes. Ultimately, she ended up coordinating (rather than teaching) a series of English as a Second Language ("ESL") courses that were brought onto the campus from a local community college. (Ironically, the Human Resources Department had been trying for years to get an ESL program off the ground, with no success.) Germaine's dedication and power – liberated through her experience of *getting to know* new people – made an enormous difference in the lives of dozens non-native Hunter Douglas employees. Through the additional support they received, these employees were also "powered up" to contribute to the success of Hunter Douglas its customers.

In today's business world relationships – teams, alliances, partnerships, colleagues - are essential. Work gets done through relationship. “The central economic imperative of the network economy is to amplify relationships” (Kelly, 1998). Through Appreciative Inquiry, the freedom to know and be known in relationship liberates people's energy and ideas. Personal and organizational power emerges when people are known in relationship.

#2: Freedom to be Heard

“I have seen over and over again – all around the world – what happens when people who are not used to being valued feel heard. The experience of being heard allows them to be present and to offer the best of themselves in a way that could not happen otherwise.”

The Reverend Canon Charles P. Gibbs
United Religions Initiative

In the process of being heard we become apparent. We go from a voice – the expression of “babbling ideas” – to a being. When another hears us – when they witness and repeat our ideas and stories - we become tangible . . . real . . . significant . . . *somebody*. The sense of not being heard, of having no voice, of not having a say, is the experience of the oppressed – people who feel one down and unable to make a difference. To be heard is to have a recognized and credible voice . . . to be known as a source of creativity, innovation, and influence.

Surprisingly little has been written on the experience of being heard, much more on the act of listening. Listening, as we know it, is a trait or skill of an individual. One can listen without truly hearing – or *knowing* – the other.

Being heard, on the other hand, is relational. To be heard requires another to be listening with sincere curiosity, empathy and compassion, and with an openness to learn. It also requires hearing a *person's story*, as well as his or her words. Appreciative interviews encourage this kind of *relational hearing*. They ask speaker and listener alike to reach beyond the mundane, the theoretical, into personal experience and values. They invite an act of “hearing” that draws out the best of another, encourages the cooperative creation of meaning and identity.

During Appreciative Inquiry, people experience themselves as *being heard* – and as hearing others - in powerful, fulfilling, and energizing new ways. The appreciative interviews “*level the playing field*,” says Brian Bassett. Thus, employees who are traditionally disenfranchised – the “organizationally oppressed” – begin to “show up,” think, and imagine in bold and provocative new ways.

But the one-on-one interviews do something equally (if not more) important, to open channels of communication and nurture people's experience of being heard. They unleash a plethora of *stories* – which, through later phases of the process spread and multiple throughout the organization. Ultimately, once the organization has completed its first Design phase, individuals and groups can *recognize* their work, language, insights, and inspiration in the new organization or system. On a practical level, people experience being heard as their ideas and stories are presented, discussed, and put into action.

In 1997, when Hunter Douglas first implemented Appreciative Inquiry as a culture change process, Mark Maier was supervising a group that performed technical maintenance on the company's production machinery. He and his staff felt under-valued, not heard and often ignored – even when it came to maintenance (their expertise). Mark decided to put Appreciative Inquiry to the test. He initiated an inquiry among all of the team's internal customers: engineers, technical support staff, etc. He and his staff collected stories of exceptional support that people had experienced both here and at other companies. He invited people to dream about the service that they'd always wanted, and to describe it in detail. What was the result, when all was said and done? “My people were finally recognized as contributors. (We'd been considered to be the ‘black hole’ for years!) We *built relationships* with the engineers and the technical support staff. We were *really seen* for the first time ever.”

Appreciative Inquiry affords the opportunity to be heard. By setting the stage for the ‘Freedom to be Heard’ it opens doors for people who feel ignored and without voice to come forward with information, ideas and innovations. It creates a rich context for knowledge creation and exchange.

#3: Freedom to Dream in Community

“It is up to each of us. As we move into the twenty-first century let us align with one another to bring our highest vision into manifestation. We can make personal and collective dreams a living reality. Let us work together. We are the architects of our own destiny.”

Rama Vernon
The Fabric of the Future

Visionary leaders have long been recognized assets to their organizations (Kouzes and Posner, 1987). Their capacity to put forth an image, a dream, a sense of possibility that others can rally round has been regarded highly among the traits of transformational leaders (Tichy and Devanna, 1986). But what of the dreams of the people? In today’s highly diverse world, neither leadership vision nor shared vision – alone – are enough. (Starhawk, 1999) We need leaders who invite everyone to dream and to realize their dreams. We need organizations to be safe places where people dream and share dreams, in dialogue with one another. We need the “Freedom to Dream in Community.”

The images we hold, in our mind’s eye and in the stories we tell, directly impact personal and organizational performance, health, and learning (Cooperrider, 1984). Images – be they of a person or an organization – are a kind of *community property*. They are created and maintained in community dialogue, in conversations among members and stakeholders of the community. To enrich an organization’s dreaming is to enrich its communally held images and its potential for greater achievement and vitality.

Through one-on-one interviews, story-based synthesis, and collective dreaming processes, Appreciative Inquiry stimulates people’s imaginations and opens their dreams up to the whole. This can change people’s work and lives, as it did for Brenda Lubben, a ten-year employee of the Company:

“At the end of my interview, I was asked to imagine one thing that would help me do my job even better. I said, ‘It would be going to Mexico.’ You see, my sample books, the products which I produce, go to one of our fabricators down in Mexico. Can you believe it? *They ended up sending me to Mexico!* The trip made me feel like I really knew my job, like my job was really important to the Company. Just seeing who they were and what they needed gave me better ways to communicate with those folks.”

But what is the effect on the *whole*, when these dreams are unleashed? At the second organizational summit, George Sharpe, a business unit vice president, stared at a wall covered with things the organization did exceptionally well. He pondered aloud:

“What does all this say to me, about who we are and what we might become? I have a dream of an organization in which we take this core technology of ours and use it for much more than just window coverings.”

As a result of George’s dream – liberated through conversations, stories, and sensory-based imagining – Appreciative Inquiry transformed the strategic direction of the company.

Time after time, Appreciative Inquiry invites people at all levels of the organization into the dreaming process. It creates an impetus for doing things better . . . for *realizing dreams*, be they big or small, personal or organizational. It puts attention on the visionaries, rather than the squeaky wheels – on the path ahead, rather than the problems of the past. And it enables images of hope, potential and being the best to rise, like cream, to the surface of organizational life.

#4: Freedom to Choose to Contribute

“If each of us would ask, “How might I best use my time, energies and talents to serve the larger world?” we would transform this society and transform the planet. It is not for me or anyone else to tell people what to do. It is up to each of us to do those things that we know in our hearts we should do.”

Marianne Williamson
The Fabric of the Future

Work can serve to separate us from what matters most to us; or it can serve as the vehicle through which we enact and realize our deepest calling (Fox, 1994). In patriarchal, command and control organizations, some other is said to know what is best for us. A manager, supervisor or employment advisor determines the scope of a job and whether or not we are “suited to it.” People are matched to work based on the needs of the organization.

Not so in participatory organizations, where the freedom to choose one’s work and learning opportunities is recognized as essential to creativity, cooperation, and well being. When people are matched to work, a job, or a project (or better yet free to *volunteer*) based on their interests and passion, their capacity to learn and to contribute is significantly enhanced. The scope, success and satisfaction of contribution is directly related to the freedom to choose the nature and extent of contribution.

One thing that differentiates Appreciative Inquiry from a number of other organizational change methodologies is that – at its best – people have complete freedom to choose how, when, and to what extent they’ll engage in the process. They can and do join *only* when they become curious, stimulated, or inspired by a task, activity, or dream.

Many people choose only to participate in the interviews – and yet even that minimal level of engagement (generally no more than 1 to 2 hours of time) has a liberating effect on those who are involved. Joe Sherwood aptly describes the effect of the interviews alone, “When you see your ideas coming out and coming true, it reinforces your sense of influence. The interviews *opened the door* more than it had been open in the past . . . made it easier for people to simply *talk* to one another and share their feedback, thoughts, and ideas.”

Some people get on board later in the process. Kathy Mayfield, for example, didn’t have much good to say about the Appreciative Inquiry effort, initially. A printer with several years’ tenure, she refused even to be interviewed. But eight months into the process, someone recruited her into an Action Group – formed at the first Summit – that was working on a task that piqued her curiosity and profound interest. Soon she had become one of the strongest supporters of Appreciative Inquiry in the entire organization.

John Cade believes this capacity to choose the nature and extent of one’s contribution has a built-in mentoring and developmental quality. “Since some people are more comfortable following than leading,” he suggests, “the Appreciative Inquiry process – which is grass-roots and designed to engage people in their own time and way – gives them “a hand to hold” and “helps train people to take responsibility for their own lives.”

As is often the case with organizational change, there are some people who are more committed to, enthusiastic about, and engaged in the change effort than others. They become the “informal leaders” of the change effort. And again, because Appreciative Inquiry works to locate and channel people’s interests and passions, that kind of involvement is nurtured and supported, rather than contained. Brian Bassett describes the relationship between this kind of engagement and the liberation of power:

“Because our initial efforts flowed from people’s *passions*, people had energy to do the work. This may seem like a no-brainer, but most organizational change efforts give directives, rather than following people’s passions.

Once people had success with the work that the really mattered to them – the work that was so important to them that they were willing to change their old habits and *play* – they wanted to act elsewhere . . . to *continue* acting. That’s why people at Hunter Douglas kept moving from one [Action Group] to another! It wasn’t because they *had* to . . . it was because it felt so good that they didn’t want to stop.

I’ve tasted the fruits of success! I know, deep inside of me, that I have made a difference, and that I’ll *continue* to do so.”

Not surprisingly, our research suggests that the more engaged people are in the intervention, the greater their experience of personal transformation. Joe Sherwood observes, “I’ve seen a *huge* difference in the people who have really embraced Appreciative Inquiry. Those who were more involved, and more willing to become part of the leadership of the process, seemed to grow the most.”

The human gift of free will is exercised in the process of choosing to contribute. “Freedom to Choose to Contribute” brings out the best in people. It leads to learning, a sustained sense of power (the ability to innovate and influence) and an experience of fun at work. When people chose to do a project or piece of work and commit to others to do it, they get very creative and determined about it. They will do whatever it takes and learn whatever is needed to get the job done. And they seem to enjoy both the doing and the results. The “Freedom to Choose” stretches people and their organizations. It invites mutual commitment that is genuine and life giving. In organizations applying Appreciative Inquiry, the workplace is alive with excitement as people creatively contribute to the organization of their dreams.

#5: Freedom to Act with Support

“Leadership is about creating, day by day, a domain in which we and those around us continually deepen our understanding of reality and are able to participate in shaping the future. This, then, is the deeper territory of leadership – collectively ‘listening to what is wanting to emerge in the world, and then having the courage to do what is required.”

Joseph Jaworski
Synchronicity

To act with support is the quintessential act of positive interdependence. It requires that we understand the dreams of the organization, that we are willing to act in their service, and that we acknowledge the resourcefulness of others. To act with support is to act within a web of relationships. It requires an informed understanding of what the organization wants to become; and an open access to valued resources, capabilities and contributions.

In the first 3 D’s, people learn to Discover, Dream, and Design the organization around the things that give life to the system. In the last “D” – Delivery (or Destiny, as it is also known), people are called to *act* on behalf of the things that passionately inspire them . . . the things that they *know* will make a difference in their organization and in the world. They are called to act in the service of the organization, with support from others at *all levels* of the organization.

Much organizational support is limited. To be supported by one part of an organization – one supervisor or one manager – leaves room for doubt, mistrust, and hesitation. Partial support breeds fragmentation. By contrast, when people know that the whole organization is aware of their project and willing to cooperate, they feel safe to experiment, innovate, and learn. In other words, whole-system support stimulates people to take on challenges, and draws them into acts of cooperation that bring forth their best.

Hunter Douglas’ Destiny phase was organized in ways that provided both *leadership and organizational* support. Hunter Douglas business unit managers supported the Action Groups by consistently offering participants access to information, time, resources, skills training, and professional facilitation. They served as champions for the Action Groups and they served on the Appreciative Inquiry Advisory Team.

When members of the Appreciative Inquiry Advisory Team were asked to describe the support they provided and what they had learned about “leading” an appreciative change effort they commented: “We didn’t have to do much [as leaders]. Mainly, we provided guidance and the green light for people. We helped build confidence that people’s ideas and plans made sense.”

In addition to providing counsel and resources, leadership also supported people’s freedom to act by initiating and maintaining a communication network through which the Action Groups’ activities and successes were broadcast to the entire organization. The communication network influenced and promoted *organizational support* for the work of the Action Groups. As members of the larger organization recognized and celebrated that their hopes and dreams (which had been expressed through Discovery, Dream, and Design) were taking form and coming to life in the work of the Action Groups, they offered support. Many people joined Action Groups underway and brought with them much needed creative thinking and organizational resources.

Brian Bassett describes the interplay that is suggested between leadership and organizational support, in this Freedom to Act with Support:

“The Action Groups that were formed at the end of the first Hunter Douglas Summit reeducated people about their power and influence in the organization. *We had always had support* to take action on behalf of the organization, but now – suddenly – people were *making resources available* and paying *attention* to what we were doing. They backed us up, and made it possible for us to follow through on – and finally *do* – the things that we knew needed to be done.”

Of the initial 14 Action Groups, 11 either met or exceeded their original goals. Freedom to Act with Support resulted in:

- Development of a career pathing and mentoring system
- Establishment of an organization-wide recognition and reward system that was tied to Divisional Values
- Creation of a “virtual” university within the organization
- Initiation of a “new hire orientation” program, through which *every employee* could develop a sense of his or her relationship to the entire business
- Implementation of a high-engagement strategic planning process

But what of the three Action Groups that failed to meet or achieve their goals? Surprisingly, our research shows that this Freedom to Act with Support liberated individual and organizational power *even when the actions “failed.”* Tina LaGrange’s story powerfully testifies to that effect. She attended the first Summit just a few weeks after she had joined the company. Completely “fresh” to the process, she dove in and began working towards one of her dreams for the company: a cross-training program that would allow people to move from job to job, business unit to business unit. It was an idea that made impeccable sense, given one of the organization’s greatest challenges, which was significant, regular, seasonal mandatory overtime.

“I came away from that Summit clear that cross-training was very, very important. I talked to my co-workers, and they all said, ‘Yeah, yeah – *they’ll* never support this or let it happen. Sure we need it, but it won’t go through.’

Well, I joined an Action Group and worked hard. We were given the responsibility and authority to act on our vision. We designed a great program, proposed it to the Advisory Team, and got the go-ahead to test it. Then . . . *nobody signed up!!!*

Once we got over trying to ‘drive’ it through, we stepped back and thought about it. We realized, finally, that there was a loud, clear message trying to be heard. ‘They’ weren’t the problem – it was the *organization*. The *organization* didn’t really have a passion for cross training.

When our cross-training program died, I was disappointed but OK. In the end, the only thing I really accomplished was getting an answer – but that was a *big thing*. It meant that I had the power to *get an answer*.”

The capacity to act in the service of the organization is too often limited by the lack of support, perceived or actual. With Appreciative Inquiry, people sense support from one another, from the organization’s management and from the whole system. It is exhilarating and highly motivating to act on your own interests and passions while being backed up and supported by people at all levels of the organization. To take initiative is an adventure and a risk for many, to do so with full knowledge and support of colleagues throughout the organization creates a pathway for innovation, learning and self confidence.

#6: The Freedom to be Positive

“Happiness involves skills for everyday living that few people consistently practice. Instead of taking pride in our accomplishments, we tend to be self-critical. Instead of holding positive visions of the future, we run worst case scenarios . . . Rather than regularly expressing appreciation to those we love, we find fault with them. . . . Genuine pride in a job well done, maintaining hope even during hard times, spontaneously expressing gratitude to someone – these are some of the simple pleasures that can enrich and vitalize our everyday lives, which we just don’t enjoy often enough.”

Stella Resnick, Ph.D.
The Pleasure Zone

Appreciative Inquiry assumes that every living system has untapped, rich, inspiring accounts of the positive. Link this “positive change core” directly to any change agenda, and changes never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilized (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999).

Renee Chavez describes the effect that this last, seemingly simple Freedom had on her:

“I don’t know if it’s me or if it’s Appreciative Inquiry – but *I like to be positive*. I liked doing the interviews, because I heard more positive things. Because of my involvement with Appreciative Inquiry, I got people thinking more positively. I think that a lot of the improved morale, the communication, the sense of community with the other departments came from Appreciative Inquiry and its positive approach.”

Similarly, Tina LaGrange refers to the effect that this Freedom to be Positive had on her and the people around her.

“You know, there were people in the organization who were skeptical about this Appreciative Inquiry stuff. They thought it was just ‘pollyannish.’ But still they were affected by it. My smiles affected them, even if nothing else did.”

What happens to an *organization* when the Freedom to be Positive is unleashed? “You know the old adage, ‘Garbage in, garbage out?’” asks Joe Sherwood. “Well, Appreciative Inquiry replaces the ‘garbage in’ with positive feelings and positive experiences. It creates, instead, a cycle of ‘energy in, energy out.’ It ‘jump starts’ organizational change.”

How odd to think that people need permission to be positive. And yet so it is today, in organization after organization. In too many organizations communication patterns are “deficit based” focusing attention on problems of the past, in lieu of possibilities for the future. Appreciative Inquiry in its choicefully affirmative stance is a radical departure. Appreciative Inquiry is an invitation to a positive revolution in change.

The “Ripple” Effect

The entire 4-D cycle of Appreciative Inquiry gives people the experience of personal and collective power. It gives them practice in exercising it, and in doing so *responsibly*, for the good of the whole. It breeds

confidence, as it offers *support and recognition* for successful accomplishments. Having once experienced this liberation of power and the effect it has on the world . . . people are *permanently transformed*.

Liberation of Personal Power

Renee Chavez describes the long-term effect that her participation in the Appreciative Inquiry effort had on her self-esteem and sense of personal power. “I think this is a good job, but I *made* it that way. The only person who’s going to get me what I want is *me*. Appreciative Inquiry helped me to express myself, and helped me learn to communicate in a better way. It helped me become more of who I’ve always been.”

Likewise, Brian Bassett describes the effect the process had on those whom he observed. “As people tried and got results, they gained confidence. That led to five times as much input, and the desire to *get more involved*.”

Tina LaGrange believes that Appreciative Inquiry had on *permanent effect* on her career at Hunter Douglas:

“Shortly after coming to Hunter Douglas, I applied for a position in the Customer Information Center. I went through the interview process, and was turned down.

So I applied again, and was turned down again.

In the past, I might have stopped after this. I might have felt too discouraged to keep trying. But Appreciative Inquiry told me that I was responsible for doing what I needed to do and getting what I needed to be successful. So I found out what I was missing (which turned out to be technical training), got the training, and reapplied one more time.

This time, I got the job. I had persisted, because Appreciative Inquiry taught me that’s how you get things done.”

One of the more powerful stories about the long-term effect of Appreciative Inquiry comes from Kathy Mayfield – the “latecomer” to the process.

“[Appreciative Inquiry] created a complete turnaround for me. I’m painfully shy. Before Appreciative Inquiry, I would go down the hall and wouldn’t look at anyone. Now I *march!* I talk to everyone – even the ‘suits!’ Since this change happened, I’m even getting a little better on the ‘outside’ [i.e., outside of work]. *Now I know I’m somebody.*”

You know, I’m luckier than some people. I don’t *have* to work. But something happened here that changed the way I saw my work. I realized that I didn’t *have* to be here – but that I *wanted* to be here.”

These and similar experiences tells us that liberated power breeds the ongoing liberation and expression of power. Power is like the proverbial genie in the bottle: once liberated, it won’t be re-contained. It continues to seek ways of expressing itself, within the organization *and the world*.

Liberation of Others’ Power

Within organizations, people begin thinking and acting differently – begin asking questions, thinking for themselves, and engaging people around them in a more positive, more life-affirming way. In the process, they touch the “power” in the people around them. As Dottie Hamilton (stacker) says, “When we use Appreciative Inquiry with others, people feel encouraged to come to us and work with us.”

As a result of this *extended liberation of power*, people who weren’t involved with the original inquiry begin changing the way that they think and act. Brian Bassett’s shipping department is a good example:

“The ‘tag line’ [for Appreciative Inquiry at Hunter Douglas] was ‘All Voices . . . All Opinions . . . All Ideas.’ I took that philosophy to heart and created team meetings in the area that I supervise. I would meet with the two most experienced employees in every part of the team every two weeks. We’d talk about different parts of our process, always asking the same two questions:

‘How can we do this better?’ ‘How can we use what we know *works* - as well as what we’ve *dreamed about and imagined* – to make this the best it can possibly be?’

“Before this, decisions were being made by people who didn’t *do* the job . . . people who didn’t have much *experience* in the area. Now, I was *asking people* for what they knew. It gave people the leeway and the willingness to speak up. It gave them the confidence to make important changes and decisions related to our work.

“The results were incredible. Overtime dropped. Production increased. Our training process was transformed. You see, by asking for ideas and giving the people the information, skills, and support they to take intelligent action, Hunter Douglas has really saved a lot of money. If you look at and see what someone does well, and provide an environment in which they can build on it, *the things that are wrong get taken care of.*”

As power is liberated throughout the organization, people and cultures are transformed. Renee Chavez says, “The [positive changes in] morale, the communication, the sense of community with the other departments – all of that came from the work with Appreciative Inquiry.”

So it’s clear that the Appreciative Inquiry – through its Six Freedoms – unleashes personal and collective power within organizations. But what effect does this have on the world as a whole? Organizations have been called the “next frontier” for personal and spiritual transformation. As the place in which people spend most of their waking hours, they are the place that can – and *should* – have the most profound positive effect on how people live their lives in their families, communities, and world.

At Hunter Douglas, participants in the Appreciative Inquiry effort described long-term changes in their family relationships. Dottie Hamilton, for example, says “This works at home with my kids. It helps me get them involved in thinking things through for themselves and getting what they want.” Bob Parkins, the Operations Maintenance Coordinator, says that Appreciative Inquiry has positively affected the way that he relates to his ADHD son. Rinda Becker, an Executive Secretary, says that her use of Appreciative Inquiry on the occasion of her 30th wedding anniversary led to “one of the most insightful and meaningful conversations my husband and I have ever had.” If these stories are to be believed, the power that Appreciative Inquiry liberates has the capacity to create transformations way beyond the individuals – even the organizations – that it originally touches.

Our Dream

Earlier in this paper, we described what we called the “power-full” organization. We described such an organization as one in which people care about and work towards being the *best they can possibly be*, personally, as well as organizationally . . . in which power is an *unlimited commodity or experience*.

Over the past several pages, we’ve talked about and shown how Appreciative Inquiry creates an environment that liberates personal and organizational power. We’ve illustrated ways in which that liberation unleashes previously unknown capacities for organizational performance. We’ve shown how liberated people tend to invite and welcome the power of the people around them – both within and outside their organization. We’ve talked about “power-full” organizations, and the increased “value” that those organizations enjoy.

Here is our dream: *organizations where people seek out and practice opportunities to be their best, and to bring out the best in others.*

Take a few moments now, to imagine an organization in which *everyone’s* work life is intellectually, socially, and spiritually challenging and growthful. Imagine that “power-full” organization. Based on the transformations we’ve witnessed and experienced, we firmly believe that power-full organizations – even a power-full world – are within reach through the philosophy and practice of Appreciative Inquiry.

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