

## **Appreciative Inquiry: Releasing the Power of the Positive Question**

### **Abstract**

This chapter illustrates how appreciative inquiry can be used as a positive mode of action research to dislodge reified vocabularies of human deficit and liberate the socially constructive potential of organizations and human communities. It begins by demonstrating the ways in which critical forms of action research unwittingly diminish the generative potential of human communities by favoring problem-focused modes of inquiry. Deficit-based questions lead to deficit-based conversations, which in turn lead to deficit-based patterns of action. Two case illustrations are offered to show how appreciative inquiry uses the power of the positive question to overturn the tyranny of deficit-based vocabularies and open up new alternatives for conversation and action. It does this by dislodging the certainty of existing deficit constructions, creating spaces for new voices and languages to emerge, and expanding circles of dialogue to build a supportive context for the social construction of reality.

### **Introduction**

In their original formulation of appreciative inquiry, Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) argue that action research has largely failed as an instrument for advancing “second order” social-organizational transformation (where organizational paradigms, norms, ideologies, or values are changed in fundamental ways) because of its romance with critique at the expense of appreciation. Action research, they claim, has maintained an unquestioned commitment to a secularized problem-oriented view of the world and thus has diminished the capacity of organizational researchers and practitioners to produce innovative theory capable of inspiring the imagination, commitment, and passionate dialogue required for the consensual re-ordering of social conduct. In its continuous attempts to determine what is *wrong* with organizations, action research has lost the ability to see and understand what gives life to organizations and to discover ways to sustain and enhance that life-giving potential.

Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) call for a social and behavioral science that is defined in terms of its “generative capacity” (Gergen, 1982), that is, its “capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is ‘taken for granted’ and thereby furnish new alternatives for social action (p. 1346). They offer appreciative inquiry as a mode of action-research that meets these criteria.

More than a method or technique, the appreciative mode of inquiry...engenders a reverence for life that draws the researcher to inquire beyond superficial appearances to deeper levels of the life-generating essentials and potentials of social existence. That is, the action-researcher is drawn to affirm, and thereby illuminate, the factors and forces involved in organizing that serve to nourish the human spirit (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987, p. 131).

This chapter illustrates how appreciative inquiry, as a constructive mode of action research, can unleash a positive revolution of conversation and practice in organizations by unseating existing reified patterns of discourse, creating space for new voices and new discoveries, and expanding circles of dialogue to provide a community of support for innovative action. It all begins with the framing of positive questions that guide inquiry agendas and focus organizational attention in the direction of the aspects of organizational existence – latent and explicit – that are most life-giving and life-sustaining for organizational members. It invites action researchers ask positive questions about what gives and sustains life in organizations and thereby enable the creation of powerful vocabularies of possibility – both in the day-to-day conversations of organizational members and in the social and organizational theory that gets produced – that drive a positive re-ordering of organizational life.

## **The Linguistic and Organizational Consequences of Critique**

Scholars and practitioners alike are becoming increasingly disillusioned with the destructive consequences of critical social and organizational science (Rorty, 1980; Wollheim, 1980; Weick, 1982; George, 1989; Hazelrigg, 1989; De Bono, 1992; Friere, 1994; Brown, 1994; Marcus, 1994). Gergen (1994a) claims that while the initial purpose of this critical and deconstructive work was to attack the assumptions of empiricist foundationalism -- such as cumulative knowledge, value-free theoretical formulations, unbiased observation, knowledge through hypothesis testing, and objective measurement of human processes -- more recently it has expanded to include critique of all kinds. Expressing the pervasiveness and viciousness of critical scholarship, Gergen uses the language of war to describe it. He writes:

We now stand with a mammoth arsenal of critical weaponry at our disposal. The power of such technology is unmatched by anything within the scholarly traditions of longstanding. There is virtually no hypothesis, body of evidence, ideological stance, literary cannon, value commitment or logical edifice that cannot be dismantled, demolished, or derided with the implements at hand. Only rank prejudice, force of habit, or the anguished retaliation of deflated egos can muster a defense against the intellectual explosives within our grasp. Everywhere now in the academic world the capitalist exploiters, male chauvinist pigs, cultural imperialists, warmongers, WASP bigots, wimp liberals and scientific dogmatists are on the run....The revolution is on, heads are rolling everywhere, there is no limit to the potential destruction (pp. 59-60).

Gergen goes on to identify five consequences of the critical effort that destroy or erode human communities and the production of generative knowledge (see Table I for a summary of the linguistic and organizational consequences of the critical effort). The first is the *containment of conversation*. Critique gains both its purpose and its intelligibility from a preceding declaration. An assertion must first be put forward in order for its

negation to have any meaning. In this sense, critique operates to establish a form of binary – a discursive structure in which this is opposed to that. For example, if the assertion is that “command-and-control management is necessary,” critique is bound to a linguistic domain in which “command-and-control/not command-and-control” serves as the critical defining structure. This form of argumentation is by nature conservative because it confines conversation to the terms of the binary. Words, sentences, images, and ideas that lie outside of the binary are ignored. Thus, organizationally, critique limits possibilities for invention. It erects artificial boundaries that curtail the exploration of new knowledge and foreclose opportunities for breakthrough discoveries.

Second, once a binary has been established, the critic’s voice operates so as to reify the terms of the binary and thereby *silences other voices*. Arguments against male dominance simultaneously reify a distinction between men and women; as criticisms are couched in the language of racial conflict, the concept of essential differences between races is sustained; to speak of upper-class domination is to engender the reality of class differences. At the same time, the periphery is dissolved. As arguments proceed within the terms of the binary, other realities, values and concerns are removed from view. As Gergen (1994a) puts it, “As interchange is polarized around a single continuum, there is a ferocious flattening of the world and silencing of other voices” (p. 61). The organizational consequences of this is that the range of perspectives and possibilities progressively becomes diminished, and those involved in the conversation gradually reduce their capacity for a broader understanding and thereby decrease their options for new patterns of conduct.

Third, once the arena of reifications has been established, members of opposing sides often come to depend on an image of the other for their continued sustenance.

Furthermore, under the conditions of critique, the image of the other (and consequently one's own legitimacy) is created through a cunning process of *demonization*. Armed with a vast arsenal of negative questions, the critic sets out to examine, expose, demystify, and debunk the accounts of the opposition. As a result, the image of the adversary is based on an intentional and rigorous search for the opponent's most glaring deficits, deficiencies, and offending characteristics. Human wholeness and complexity get lost, and those engaged in the debate begin to relate to each other in negative, unidimensional, and stereotypical ways. Organizationally, this process of demonization constrains individual potential and diminishes overall organizational capacity. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) point out, organizational members are continuously socialized through language into acting according to the roles and identities granted to them by their institutional "subworlds" (p. 138). As people begin to demonize each other and lock each other into negative descriptions, the "space" granted for acting in ways that are recognized as positive, helpful, or constructive becomes diminished or eliminated.

Fourth, the critical effort leads to rhetorical incitement and *fragmentation of relationships*. Particularly in the Western tradition, to criticize another's view is not a mere linguistic exercise, it is to invalidate the other. Thus it is no surprise that the posture of one who is targeted for criticism is anything other than defensive. Similarly, the means for destroying the other's intelligibility are vast and varied. Sentences may be

lifted from context, concepts altered through recontextualization, arguments pressed to absurd extremes, examples transformed through parody, insidious intentions imputed and so on. Writes Gergen (1994a), “There are, then, myriad means of ambiguating, complexifying, doggerelizing or transforming any utterance to imbecility. Resultantly, there is no principled end to argumentation....” (p. 64). Fighting ensues and relationships are ruined.

A fifth concern with the rhetorical impact of critique is the *atomization of community*. Language serves to sustain communal patterns of conduct. As communities reach normative consensus, their patterns of relationship stabilize. When critique is inserted into a community, a category is created, and all those who fit within that category are placed under attack. Those under attack close ranks, re-affirm their relationships, reiterate the value of their positions, and search for ways to mount effective counterattacks. In turn, the critics increase the intensity of their attacks, reaffirm solidarity within their ranks, and proselytize for further strength. Labels such as good and bad, right and wrong, rich and poor, smart and dumb are used to create distinctions between groups. Each group sanctions its members for attempting to fraternize with members of the other groups (“the crab crawling out of the barrel is pulled back down by the other crabs”). The result is a polarizing split within the community as a whole. Division along ideological lines ensues, and mutually exclusive realities (“incommensurable paradigms”) solidify with little means of reconciliation.

A sixth difficulty is that, paradoxically, critique *supports the very kinds of dogmatic discourse it endeavors to condemn*. By attempting to discredit and destroy the opposition, the critical impulse threatens the democratization of perspectives. As we saw earlier, because critique creates a form of binary, it radically reduces the range of relevant voices. If successful, the critique will open the door to some voices, but it will also stifle those voices placed under attack. As Gergen (1994a) suggests, “It replaces one form of totalization with its opposite number...the other’s totalizing discourse is obliterated in order that the opposition (favored by me) may take its place” (p. 68).

A seventh difficulty is that critique *destroys the grounds of its own rationality*.

Generally, the ostensive purpose of critique is to demonstrate the social basis of scientific fact and thereby rob the opponent’s assertions of any form of validity or rhetorical force. But of course, such critique simultaneously casts aspersions on its own production. If there is no universal basis for truth, then neither is there a basis for the “truth” of my critique. There are no solutions, only problems. No perspective can claim legitimacy on shared normative grounds, and things degenerate into a culture of “might makes right.”

An eighth and final concern is the growing awareness that critical social and organizational science leads to what Gergen (1994b) calls “*broad cultural enfeeblement*” (p. 148). By containing conversation, silencing marginal voices, demonizing the other, fragmenting relationships, atomizing community, encouraging dogmatic discourse and eroding the grounds of rationality, scientific vocabularies of deficit contribute to a pernicious cycle of “progressive [societal] infirmity” (p.155). People in organizations

begin to learn their place in the world through deficit-based vocabularies, and organizations become a community of agreement about “the way things are” in negative terms.

**Table I: The Linguistic and Organizational Consequences of the Critical Effort**

<b>Linguistic Consequences</b>	<b>Organizational Consequences</b>
Contains Conversation	Forecloses Breakthrough Discoveries
Silences Marginal Voices	Diminishes Variety and Innovation
Demonizes the Other	Boxes People In and Limits Their Potential
Fragments Relationships	Creates a Culture of Conflict
Atomizes Community	Destroys Cooperation
Encourages Dogmatism	Produces “Irreconcilable Differences”
Destroys its Own Rationality	Generates Problems with No Solutions
Contributes to Cultural Enfeeblement	Demoralizes and Weakens Organizations

### **Appreciative Inquiry and the Power of the Positive Question**

Appreciative inquiry distinguishes itself from other modes of action research by its deliberately affirmative assumptions about people, organizations, and relationships. It focuses on asking *positive questions* to ignite transformative dialogue and action within human systems. More than a technique, appreciative inquiry is a way of organizational life -- an intentional posture of continuous discovery, search, inquiry into conceptions of life, joy, beauty, excellence, and innovation.

As a method of organizational intervention, the underlying assumption of appreciative inquiry is that organizing is a possibility to be embraced. The phases include: (1) discovering and valuing; (2) envisioning; (3) design through dialogue; and (4) co-constructing the future. The purpose of the first phase is to discover and value those factors that give life to the organization, the "best of what is" in any given situation,

Regardless of how few the moments of excellence, the task is to zero in on them and to discuss the factors and forces that made them possible. Valuing dislodges the certainty of deficit constructions that have become so reified that they seem real. By asking organizational members to focus, even if only for a moment, on the life-giving aspects of organizational life, appreciative inquiry creates enough uncertainty about the dominance of deficit vocabularies to allow organizational members to consider new possibilities.

The second phase is to envision what might be. As alternative voices enter the conversation, new ways of seeing and understanding the world begin to emerge. Because these perspectives have been cued by the asking of positive questions, the vocabularies used to describe and envision social and organizational reality are creative and constructive in the sense that they invite new, positive alternatives for organizing. By generating words, phrases, and stories that illustrate the organization at its best and paint a compelling picture of what the organization could and should become, appreciative inquiry liberates organizational members from the constraining power of existing reified constructions and offers positive guiding images of the future.

The third phase is to design the future through dialogue. It is a process of finding common ground by sharing discoveries and possibilities, dialoguing and debating, and finally getting to the point where everyone can say, "Yes this is an ideal or vision that we value and should aspire to. Let's make it happen." It is through dialogue that individual conversation evolves into group discourse and individual vision becomes a cooperative or

shared vision for the future. The key to this phase is to create a deliberately inclusive and supportive context for dialogue and conversation.

The fourth phase is to construct the future through innovation and action. Appreciative inquiry accomplishes this by inviting ever broader circles of participants to join in the conversation. Each inquirer brings additional linguistic resources and helps to build a language that creates broader and deeper possibilities for action. In the next section of this chapter, a case illustration is shared in which appreciative inquiry is used to transform the discourse between over 120 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) worldwide. The case shows how the positive questions of appreciative inquiry can be used to release a virtual explosion of new vocabularies through which social and organizational innovations can be constructed. In the final section of the chapter, eight positive relational consequences of the appreciative approach are developed and a call is extended to the field to create a positive revolution of learning and change by experimenting with appreciative modes of action research.

### **Transforming Paternalism into Partnership – The Case of the Global Conversation**

The Global Relief and Development Organization (GRDO) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in the United States and Canada that works with about 120 partner organizations around the world. By and large GRDO has had good working relationships with its partners, and yet, like most other NGOs, they and their partners were entwined in a disempowering story of dependency and paternalism as a legacy of

colonialism. Deficit vocabularies perpetuated both by GRDO and its partner

organizations included:

1. Since much of the money originated in the North, GRDO was more concerned about accountability than its southern partners. GRDO felt it had to be in a policing or monitoring role when it came to money.
2. GRDO had superior managerial expertise than did the Southern NGOs because the modern discipline of management had originated in the United States and had been disseminated via North American Universities and publishing houses.
3. Consequently, GRDO felt like it had to monitor the organizational or managerial capacity of its partners and then build programs to help train them or strengthen them in those areas.
4. Some of the Southern NGOs were entwined in a story of cultural Pygmalion – that the United States was bigger, richer, smarter, and their own countries seemed smaller, poorer, and less educated by comparison. Thus they had to defer to GRDO when it came to organizational management and capacity building.
5. Many southern NGOs believed they could not talk as equals to the northern NGOs about these things. So they adopted either a strategy of dependency (“accept the status quo,” “don’t rock the boat”) or a strategy of counterdependency (“resist, critique, attack the imperialist oppressor”) vis a vis GRDO.

None of these vocabularies of deficit were particularly empowering for anybody. In fact, they were eroding trust, creating cynicism about the potential for cooperation, depleting energy, and stifling the capacity to learn and innovate together. Further, within a vocabulary in which deficit categories and negative blaming attributions dominated, members had very few occasions for talking about those moments when the NGO’s had successfully collaborated, when they were successful in achieving dialog and partnership in the capacity building process. Such a way of talking would have been seen as abnormal. Meetings, back stage conversation, gossip centered around deficit, disappointment, and problems that needed to be solved as normal discourse. This discourse that focused on deficiencies and negative imagery was more common and drove out other ways of talking. There few stories about success, few categories to delineate, embellish, or even notice what a successful partnership would look like.

The first and perhaps most important consequence of appreciative inquiry is that it releases a outpouring of new constructive conversations that refocus an organization's attention away from problems and toward possibilities. By asking positive questions, appreciative inquiry draws out and highlights hopeful and empowering words, phrases, sentences and ideas that typically remain unexpressed or underexpressed in organizational conversation.

In 1994, GRDO and its partners launched a three-year global appreciative inquiry into the topic of "Best Practices of Organizational Capacity Building" The purpose of the inquiry was twofold: first, to learn from each other about how to build strong, healthy, vibrant organizations; and second, to discover new ways to work together in a partnership of equals rather than in the paternalistic ways that had characterized many of their relationships in the past. The inquiry was designed to follow a customized 4-D appreciative inquiry process, allowing the positive voice and experience of all the participating organizations to shape the learning and the outcomes of the study.

In the first year of the inquiry, the Discovery phase was carried out. At the beginning of the year, large-group retreats that lasted for four days each were held in four regions of the world -- East Africa, West Africa, Latin America, and Asia -- to familiarize GRDO and its partner organizations with appreciative inquiry and to begin the exploration into best practices of organizational capacity building. During the remainder of the year, each

of the 120 partner organizations went back to its respective country and held similar conversations with members of the communities in which it worked.

In year two, the Dream and Design phases began. At the beginning of the year, a second round of large-group retreats was held between GRDO and its partners. The retreats provided a forum in which the organizations could share with each other the stories and best practices they discovered in their interviews with community members, articulate their dreams for the future, and begin to re-design their approach to building and measuring organizational capacity. During the remainder of the second year, each organization went back to its respective country to experiment with its new approach to organizational capacity building. It was also during this second year the GRDO sponsored a Global Summit meeting at which representatives from each of the regional conferences convened to integrate learnings at a global level.

In year three, the Delivery phase was launched. A third round of large-group retreats was held at which the participating organizations shared the results of their experiments with the new approaches to organizational capacity building, established a set of common commitments, and launched a series of follow-up initiatives. The four phases of appreciative inquiry juxtaposed with the stages of the GRDO initiative are summarized in Table I. They are described in detail in the following paragraphs.

#### TOPIC CHOICE

The very first step in an appreciative inquiry is the affirmative topic choice.

Appreciative inquiry is based on the premise that organizations move in the direction of

what they study. For example, when groups study human problems and conflicts, they often find that both the number and severity of complex problems grow. In the same manner, when groups study high human ideals and achievements, such as peak experiences, best practices, and noble accomplishments, these phenomena, too, tend to flourish. Organizations enact and construct worlds of their own making that in turn act back on them. In this sense, topic choice is a fateful act.

Two years prior to launching its appreciative inquiry into organizational capacity building, GRDO had been the subject of a broad-ranging organizational evaluation carried out by a government funding agency. The evaluation showed that many of GRDO's partner organizations did not like GRDO's approach to organizational capacity building. They found it to be tedious, irrelevant, and in some cases demeaning. So, when GRDO came to us interested in an appreciative approach, the first question we asked them is "what do you want as a result of this process?" At first they said, "We want to find out what is wrong with our organizational capacity building system." We asked them again, "What do you really want from this process?" They said, "We want to know why are partners are so resistant to using our organizational capacity building system." Sensing we were getting closer to the heart of the matter, we asked again, "What do you *really* want from this process? When you explore your deepest hopes and highest aspirations, what is it that you ultimately want?" Finally, at the point of sheer frustration with our denseness, they shouted, "We want to build healthy organizations that help the poor in significant ways! We want to crack the nut of what it takes to build strong, vibrant organizations in any location around the world!" "Ah," we said, "if that's what

you want, rather than inquiring into the deficiencies of your current system, why don't we go out and explore best practices of organizational capacity building from around the world?" And that became the topic of the inquiry.

## DISCOVERY

Appreciative inquiry is a methodology for exploring the forces and factors that "give life" to a given human system. It is a process of discovery – a process that invites the entire organizational system to search for the values, practices, experiences, histories, traditions, hopes and wishes that they share for the organization. Through this process of discovery, appreciative inquiry catalyzes thinking and dialogue about the positive possibilities that are otherwise forgotten in the social and organizational patterns of deficit language.

In the GRDO case, the discovery phase began with the formation of a multi-cultural design team that included representatives from all of the different regions engaged in the study -- East Africa, West Africa, Asia, Latin America, and North America. This team met together twice annually and remained connected throughout the inquiry via email. The role of the team was to design an interview protocol, make decisions about how, when, and where the inquiry would be carried out, and disseminate the ongoing learnings of the study. The members of the design team were also responsible for forming regional teams that represented the countries and people groups in each region. These regional teams were responsible for designing and guiding the inquiry process in their respective regions.

Once the design teams were formed, they held a series of meetings to plan the study and create an interview protocol. Appreciative inquiry asks two basic questions:

1. What in this particular setting or context makes organizing possible? What gives life to our organization and allows it to function at its best?
2. What are the possibilities, latent or expresses, that provide opportunities for even better (more effective and value-congruent) forms of organizing?

Building on these two generic questions, the design team developed the following protocol, as a guide for their inquiry.

### **Appreciative Interview Protocol – Round 1**

1. Think of a time in your entire experience with your organization when you have felt most excited, most engaged, and most alive. What were the forces and factors that made it a great experience? What was it about you, others, and your organization that made it a peak experience for you?
2. What do you value most about yourself, your work, and your organization?
3. What are your organization's best practices (ways you manage, approaches, traditions)?
4. What are the unique aspects of your culture that most positively affect the spirit, vitality, and effectiveness of your organization and its work?
5. What is the core factor that "gives life" to your organization?
6. What are the three most important hopes you have to heighten the health and vitality of your organization for the future?

The protocol and process for using it was adapted by participants throughout the inquiry to fit local context and culture. For example, in some cases the dialogue occurred in a traditional four-day retreat-type setting; in others, it was done in a series of one-day meetings, each day focusing on a different phase of the appreciative inquiry. In Uganda,

the inquiry was completed in the context of the "Vura." Vura is the name given to the regular evening gathering of the community elders around the fire. As the elders speak, others listen to their stories about the clan, the tribe, and the world at large. Moral instruction and training on how to live in the family and clan are also given at these times. For the appreciative inquiry, the Vura was held in a modified form over the course of three weeks to allow for the participation of all community members who wanted to join in.

The inquiry was made as broadly participatory as possible. GRDO staff and their partner organizations were trained in using appreciative inquiry, and they in turn trained the multiple communities in which they work. For example, in East Africa, 22 GRDO staff and members of 31 partner organizations were trained in appreciative inquiry at the first regional conference. They in turn used the same process with the 888 communities in which they work. An average of two people from each group attended each conference or workshop. Thus, in East Africa alone, over the course of the inquiry, as many as 1,800 voices were included in the conversation. The total number of participants worldwide is estimated to have reached as high as 5,000 persons.

When GRDO and its partners began to ask each other the six positive questions, they began to talk about things that previously had gone unarticulated. The interviews were designed so that members would recall and tell one another specific stories of when the organizations were operating at their best. As interviews were conducted and

participants shared their stories with one another, the focus of the conversations between GRDO and its partners began to shift.

1. The organizations regardless of where they came from, recognized that they shared many things in common, both in terms of how they operated when they were at their best and in terms of their hopes and aspirations for the future.
2. In addition, it became clear for GRDO that its partner organizations were as concerned about organizational capacity building as they themselves were and for the very same reasons (i.e., it's the right thing to do, it provides your organization credibility with donors, and it allows for more effective management of your own operations).
3. It also became clear to GRDO that what makes for good management and organization development is highly contextual. They quickly realized that in Southern regions of the world, Southern models of organizational capacity building were as valuable (if not more so) than Western models. Needed were strategies for learning from one another's best practices on an on-going basis.
4. It was by appreciating times the times they had been at their best that the Southern NGOs began to connect in a new way with important indigenous cultural and organizational strengths. Previously many of their most essential values, traditions and capacities had been overlooked by both GRDO and the Southern NGOs themselves because they were trapped in the deficit discourses of "poverty" and "need."
5. The Southern NGOs also began to realize that for them to be outspoken about their perspective was most empowering for everybody involved, themselves, GRDO, and other organizations with whom they related.

This shift in conversation began to occur because GRDO and its partners asked one another for specific examples of best experiences from the past. For example in the first year of the inquiry, a woman from Senegal told of how she and friend started an initiative to combat the rampant spread of AIDS in their country. From the beginning it was an uphill battle. Government ministries denied there was a problem, Muslim and Christian clerics publicly denounced their efforts, organized prostitute rings threatened their lives, and they had no money. Five years after they began, however, they had made remarkable progress. They formed a board of supportive government, religious, medical, and community leaders; they equipped a staff of over forty women to provide AIDS and

health education throughout the country; in collaboration with the Senegalese government, they started a center for AIDS treatment and research; and they attracted an increasing amount of financial support from both domestic and international sources.

When asked what were the forces and factors that made this exceptional growth possible, they highlighted six core ingredients: their own deep sense of call, the compelling sense of hope held by the victims of AIDS and their families, the unwavering support of key individuals and organizations, the unique gifts and contacts of their board, the dedication and skill of their staff, and the grace of God.

A man from Sierra Leone told a story of how he and his community had survived in the destructive wake of a civil war. When the Revolutionary United Front attacked their village, they escaped and fled for the Guinean border. They walked for four days, and on the second day they were attacked again by the rebels. The man was badly wounded in both legs and could not walk any longer. Other men built a stretcher and carried him for three days to safety. Once in exile, they formed their own community and cared for each other. They built a school for the children. They built a church so that people could worship. They built temporary houses so they could live protected from the elements. When the rebels retreated, they returned to their village and rebuilt it – physically, emotionally, and spiritually from the piles of ashes that remained. When asked what were the forces and factors that made this extraordinary cooperation and resilience possible, he identified five important influences: a spirit of compassion, a clear vision of where they were going and what they were going to do, courage and commitment,

organizing skills on the part of community members, and mutual encouragement and support.

During the second regional conference in West Africa, these stories were told and weaved together with literally hundreds of other “peak experience” stories from Senegal, Mali, Niger, Guinea, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. Over the course of four days as participants listened to, discussed, and celebrated each other’s stories, together they identified “core factors” that give life to their organizations when they are at their best.

While all this was unfolding in West Africa, similar processes were under way in East Africa, Asia, Latin America, and North America. A virtual explosion of positive stories were being shared, and the way GRDO and its partners talked about themselves, each other, and their joint work was beginning to shift from a conversation of deficit to a conversation of possibility. Previously, GRDO and its partners rarely heard these compelling stories and rarely explored the core life-giving forces of their organizations, because they rarely asked the positive questions to elicit them. The constructionist principle holds that it is not that these incidents never happened, or were less valid than other incidents. Rather, in the context of a deficit based conversation, these stories were simply not part of the normal discourse. A deficit based culture gleans stories that make it seem more normal and “honest” to talk about one’s disappointing experiences rather than to talk about one’s moments of hope and inspiration. An appreciative inquiry, on the other hand, by legitimizing a context in which members could tell stories that

highlighted these strengths, encourages and entices members to focus on those tacit resources that have already given life and sustenance to their organizations.

## DREAM

Whenever a human systems explores the “best of the past,” it soon begins searching beyond “what is” to imagine new and better possibilities for the future. The dreaming and envisioning phase of appreciative inquiry is an invitation for organization members to go beyond what they thought was possible. It is a time for them to push the creative edges of possibility and to wonder about their organization’s greatest potential. The constructionist principle contends that it is the nature of social dialogue that the topics we dwell on expand naturally before us in conversations as each utterance anticipates forward and tacitly guides what is expected to follow. In this sense the dream phase flows naturally from the discovery phase as organizational members begin to expand the conversation from moments of past success to what “might” happen if they were to dwell further in this context.

In the second round of regional conferences, as hundreds of people shared their “peak experience” stories, conversation began to expand and widen in two important ways. First, more participants were included in the dialogue as positive questions, probes, and excitements became legitimate forms of discourse. Secondly, members began to dream. They began to extrapolate what the future would look like if their organizations and their partnership were to maximize these life giving topics. A group from Honduras imagined their healthy organization as a winding river. A river starts small high up in the

mountains and grows larger as it flows toward the coast and allows other streams to join with it. As it moves downward, it carries with it nutrients of all kinds, thus bringing life and vitality to an entire region. An Indonesian organization pictured themselves as a bus on a road, steadily climbing toward two mountains towering in the distance. On board were the organizations staff, board, and stakeholders, all wearing smiles, and the bus driver was holding on tenaciously to the steering wheel, not letting the potholes or gravelly road deter the bus from moving toward its goal.

In West Africa, building on the “peak experience” stories from Senegal, Sierra Leone, and around the region, the participants described their organizations as fruit trees deeply rooted in the soil of African culture and tradition. As the tree grows it must pass through several important stages – seed planting, germinating, vegetating, maturing, flowering, and fruit bearing – but as it matures it provides luscious life-giving fruit to all around. They identified eight essential capacities that serve as “water, fertilizer, and sunlight” to support the healthy development of their organizations in the unique cultural contexts of West Africa – servant leadership, participatory management, organizational development, resource development, community empowerment, technical expertise, networking and partnership, and spiritual resilience. Then they began to wonder what would happen if these capacities were thriving in their organizations.

DESIGN

The aim of appreciative inquiry is to help the organization in envisioning a collectively desired future and in carrying forth that vision in ways that successfully translate intention into reality and beliefs into practice. If we take seriously the proposition of social constructionism that language provides the means by which knowledge is generated, and knowledge, in turn, provides a conceptual frame which guides collective action, then the range of vocabularies that we have available to us will in large part determine our possibilities for action. The design stage begins as members begin to systematically explore their core topics by asking what factors and forces, what leadership styles, organizational structure, climate, task designs lead to the flourishing of these topics.

Aided by a set of appreciative questions, the participants developed a set of “provocative propositions” that, based on their best experiences from the past and inspired by their highest hopes for the future, described the “ideal” organization. A provocative proposition is a statement that bridges the best of “what is” with what “might be.” It is provocative to the extent that it stretches the realm of the status quo, challenges common assumptions or routines, and helps suggest real possibilities that represent desired futures for the organization and its members. For example, in West Africa, after consulting with the communities in which they work, GRDO and its partner organizations developed the following set of propositions about the characteristics of the ideal organization...

Midway through the second year, GRDO and its partners convened a global conference to integrate learnings from across the regions. At that conference, they discovered that

while much progress had been made in identifying the characteristics of the ideal organization, little had yet been said about the importance of mutual partnership and appreciation in the capacity building relationship. As one participant put it, “Through the dreaming process we began to realize that of all the crucial characteristics of organizational capacity building, none is more important than the need for mutual partnership between organizations. Organizational capacity is essentially and interorganizational activity, a condition that occurs when organizations enter into mutually edifying relationships with one another and to carry out their respective missions in the world more effectively. This kind of transformative growth and development flourishes most fully in relationships between equals.” As a result of this insight, GRDO and its partners drafted the following partnership proposition to guide their relationships.

We commit to celebrating similarities and differences. We are understanding of each other’s values; we are respecting and valuing each other’s cultures; we are appreciating the differences and therefore are learning from each other. We admit our needs and contract with each other to help each other grow. We both give and take and share with each other much that is of value. We deliberately solicit and rely on each other’s input. We assist each other to serve other parts of the world. We compliment each other. We agree to the following list of foundations for our collaborative partnerships:

- Shared vision and mission
- Shared value systems as they relate to development
- Mutually agreed-to terms of engagement as they relate to decision making processes and arenas as well as to the scope and parameters of authority of each partner.
- Agreed-upon information-exchange system
- Concurrence to a long-range plan
- Continued dialogue, inquiry, and reciprocal feedback
- Commitment to regular peer review of relationships and outcomes
- Openness to learning from each other, other people, groups and the environment

This was something that previously GRDO simply could not hear because they and their partners were locked into a form of deficit-based linguistic binary whose terms included “our system of accountability/not your system of accountability.” Within the conditions of the binary, “good” partners were those who used the system and “bad” partners were those who refused. Further, because the restrictive grip of deficit vocabularies is loosened, the positive questions immediately boost energy for action within the organization. People begin to feel a sense of their own authorship within the organization. They recognize the strengths and resources that they and others bring to their jobs and this enhances their sense of esteem and efficacy for getting things done. It also generates new ideas for action, leading to the next stages in the AI process. Things that were previously invisible spring to life and offer themselves as possible solutions or innovations for action.

One of the most important aspects of appreciative inquiry is its collaborative focus. A foundational principle of appreciative inquiry is that, because reality is socially constructed in conversation between people, organizational inquiry must always strive to include as many relevant voices as possible. A unilateral approach would be a direct negation of the phenomenon itself.

## DESTINY

By going out and asking the positive question and listening with the appreciative ear, GRDO and its partners created an approach to “capacity building” that far exceeded their expectations, and indeed their individual imaginations. It reflects the new set of partnership values (Johnson & Ludema, 1997). The original system was primarily

unidirectional, evaluative, and generic. In general, it was used by GRDO to evaluate its partner organizations according to a standard set of organizational capacity criteria determined by GRDO and based on Western management theory. In contrast, the new system is rooted in values of mutual partnership, appreciation, and the integration of management and organizing paradigms from around the world. Rather than beginning with pre-determined programs, they now begin by sitting down at a common table to identify strengths and assets and to share identities, hopes, and aspirations. From there, any agenda for change is established through dialogue.

GRDO has also changed its organizational structure to support their new understanding of partnership. Traditionally a hierarchical organization with rigid lines of accountability and a small span of control, GRDO moved to a team-based organizational approach. It reduced the layers of hierarchy from nine to three and formed regional teams to manage its operations. This structure puts a higher level of responsibility into the hands of the people closest to partner organizations and gives them greater flexibility to establish commitments that respond to local contexts, cultures, and aspirations. By emphasizing the primacy of local relationships and local wisdom, GRDO and its partners have shifted the locus of power (and therefore innovation) from a central point in North America to multiple interdependent points throughout the world.

Finally, GRDO and its partner organizations have also begun to hold regular Organizational Summit meetings to provide a forum for face-to-face dialogue and community building with its partners. Held annually in each region and triennially on a

global scale these meetings provide GRDO and its partners a direct opportunity to strengthen relationships, find common ground around visions for the future, and jointly enact agendas for change.

Appreciative inquiry provides a strong foundation for strengthening community. By inviting participants to inquire deeply into the best and most valued aspects of one another's life and work, it immediately creates a context of empathy, care and mutual affirmation. By drawing out stories that illustrate the most noble impulses of the participants and their respective cultures, it enriches understanding, deepens respect, and establishes strong relational bonds.

### **The Linguistic and Organizational Consequences of Appreciation**

This case illustrations demonstrates how appreciative inquiry can be used as a positive mode of action research to dislodge reified vocabularies of human deficit and liberate the socially constructive potential of organizations and human communities. By dislodging the certainty of existing deficit constructions, creating spaces for new voices and languages to emerge, and expanding circles of dialogue to build a supportive relational context, appreciative inquiry allows for the positive construction of social reality. There are at least eight ways in which it make this possible (see Table II for a comparison of the linguistic and organizational consequences of critique vs. appreciation).

#### *Releases New Positive Vocabularies*

The first and perhaps most important consequence of appreciative inquiry is that it releases a outpouring of new constructive conversations that refocus an organization's

attention away from problems and toward possibilities. By asking positive questions, appreciative inquiry draws out and highlights hopeful and empowering words, phrases, sentences and ideas that typically remain unexpressed or underexpressed in organizational conversation. This process of releasing new conversations has two important effects.

First, it begins to loosen the hammerlock that patterns of deficit discourse have on the organization. By introducing new, previously unconsidered alternatives, into the organization's internal dialogue, it creates new room for movement and mobility. Second, because the restrictive grip of deficit vocabularies is loosened, the positive questions immediately boost energy for action within the organization. People begin to feel a sense of their own authorship within the organization. They recognize the strengths and resources that they and others bring to their jobs and this enhances their sense of esteem and efficacy for getting things done. It also generates new ideas for action. Things that were previously invisible spring to life and offer themselves as possible solutions or innovations for action.

For example, when GRDO and its partner organizations began to ask each other positive questions about when their partnership had been at its best, they began to talk about things that previously had gone unarticulated. They said that their capacity building efforts were at their best when they were developed in a spirit of open dialogue and respectful partnership with GRDO. This was something that previously GRDO simply could not hear because they and their partners were locked into a form of deficit-based

linguistic binary whose terms included “our system of accountability/not your system of accountability.” Within the conditions of the binary, “good” partners were those who used the system and “bad” partners were those who refused. The appreciative questions allowed them to break free of this restrictive binary, envision positive alternatives, and then translate vision into reality in the form of new organizational norms, strategies, systems, and structures.

*Affirms Variety of Experience and Encourages Full Voice*

Appreciative inquiry affirms variety of experience and encourages full voice. If we take seriously the proposition of social constructionism that language provides the means by which knowledge is generated, and knowledge, in turn, provides a conceptual frame which guides collective action, then the range of vocabularies that we have available to us will in large part determine our possibilities for action. Appreciative inquiry encourages full and open interaction with others, especially those most unlike us, and thereby creates an invaluable resource for encountering fresh perspectives and new knowledge.

This is important because it contributes to the democratization of knowledge. Whereas the critical impulse attempts to undermine the knowledge claims of others, the act of appreciation affirms them. It shows a heightened sensitivity to the fact that there are multiple way of knowing (Kolb, 1984), each of them valid in its own realm when judged according to its own set of essential assumptions and purposes (Habermas, 1971) and each of them a contribution to our understanding of the whole. It calls for open,

respectful, productive dialogue between seemingly “incommensurable paradigms” and encourages a posture of empathy rather than attack when confronting differing perspectives.

These two ideas can be seen clearly in the case of GRDO. As a part of the appreciative inquiry process, GRDO entered into dialogue with over 120 of its partner organizations who in turn spoke with literally thousands of communities in which they work. This process unleashed a flood of new and innovative ideas, most of them coming from what is traditionally considered “the margins” of the system. By affirming variety of experience and full voice to all of the organizations involved in the network, GRDO and its partners created an approach to “capacity building” that far exceeded their expectations, and indeed their individual imaginations.

### *Begins by Valuing the Other*

The positive questions of appreciative inquiry invite the action researcher to explore the most positive and cherished aspects of the other. This stands in marked contrast to the need to demonize the other driven by the critical impulse. As is suggested by the Pygmalion dynamic (Cooperrider, 1990) “looking for the best in the other” has important consequences not only for those involved, but also for the broader social system.

### *Fosters Relational Connections*

Appreciative inquiry promotes change by building relational connections that are socially equalizing. Since people can talk from their experience and everyone has an experience, appreciative inquiry allows everyone to enter the conversational space on an equal footing. Through appreciative stories we also express our deepest values that connect us with others. The following example...

As Rorty (1980) points out, the methodological commitments that we make (e.g., to study conflict or cooperation, problems or possibility) are in no way forced upon us by “the nature of things;” it is simply a matter of choice, tone, or moral outlook. Appreciative inquiry fosters relational connections by inviting organizational members to discover the best in each other and thereby to begin working together to create a jointly desired future.

### *Strengthens Community*

One of the most important aspects of appreciative inquiry is its collaborative focus. A foundational principle of appreciative inquiry is that, because reality is socially constructed in conversation between people, organizational inquiry must always strive to include as many relevant voices as possible. A unilateral approach would be a direct negation of the phenomenon itself. Appreciative inquiry provides a strong foundation for strengthening community. By inviting participants to inquire deeply into the best and most valued aspects of one another's life and work, it immediately creates a context of empathy, care and mutual affirmation. By drawing out stories that illustrate the most noble impulses of the participants and their respective cultures, the it enriches understanding, deepens respect, and establishes strong relational bonds.

In the case of GRDO community was strengthened on multiple levels. By going out and asking each other positive questions about when their respective organizations and partnership were at their best, GRDO and its partners radically transformed the way they felt about each other and the way they worked together. They gained a new level of appreciation and respect for each other and took huge strides away from the more paternalistic ways of relating that had characterized their relationship in the past. The same thing happened at the local level in the relationship between the partner organizations and the communities in which they work. In a case in the Dominican Republic, the appreciative inquiry reconciled relationships between a partner and thirteen communities that had been at the point of rupture for over three years. The Program Director of the partner organization had this to say: “Before the appreciative inquiry we were like two roosters in a cock fight, attacking each other at every opportunity. We were determined to expose each other’s faults. The appreciative inquiry helped us to gain more realistic perspective and allowed us to move beyond the bitterness of the past.” Finally, as a result of the appreciative inquiry GRDO has committed to “global summit” meeting with its partners every other year at which relationships are strengthened, culture is celebrated, and joint agendas for action are established.

### *Creates Promising Images of Possibility*

Polak (1973) claims that human beings exercise influence over the future through the images they project, and in turn these images of desirable future events foster the behavior most likely to bring about their realization. He goes so far as to suggest that the image of the future is the single most important dynamic in the process of cultural evolution:

*The rise and fall of images of the future precedes or accompanies the rise and fall of cultures. As long as a society's image is positive and flourishing, the flower of culture is in full bloom. Once the image begins to decay and lose its vitality, however, the culture does not long survive (p. 19).*

Polak's conclusion is that for any collectivity its image of the future serves not only as a picture of a desirable destination but also as a kind of road map that actively promotes certain choices and puts them to work in determining the future. The positive questions of appreciative inquiry prompt stories that contain hopeful images of the future that guide organization development in an otherwise obscure surroundings. Compelling images embodied in best examples from the past and hopes for the future prefigure organizational change and thereby help to create the very future they suggest.

For example...

#### *Reinforces an Affirmative Rationality*

As mentioned earlier, by eroding the foundations of all claims of knowledge, critical action research destroys the grounds of its own rationality. It offers problems without solutions, attacks without alternatives. Appreciative inquiry does just the opposite. It offers an affirmative rationality by focusing conversation on those aspects of organizational life that are most valued and desired by organizational members. It takes seriously the notion that words do indeed create worlds and that the more we inquire into and promote constructive dialogue about our highest ideals, the more we produce positive language resources that allow us to build healthy and vital organizing paradigms.

For example, the village in Sierra Leone that was forced into exile used appreciative inquiry to develop a practical, possibility-focused “theory of community health” that enabled them to persevere even in the face of overwhelming devastation. It would have been easy and perhaps “natural” in their circumstances to identify and critique the root causes of their problems. It would have been easy but not effective in developing the affirmative knowledge needed to boost their spirits, steel their resolve, and unleash an outpouring of reconstructive action. Instead, community members inquired into what made survival and resilience possible in the face of calamity. One factor they identified was “good leadership,” “an attitude of compassion,” “encouraging others and engaging with respect,” and developing skills and competencies that could be brought to bear in the situation.” Then, as they inquired deeper into “best examples” of good leadership, attitude of compassion, and so on, they developed an increasingly robust understanding of what allowed them to prosper. By tenaciously moving in an affirmative (rather than critical) direction, they began to develop a locally generated “mini-theory” of health and vitality that was appropriate to their unique context and situation.

*Generates Social Innovation.*

Appreciative approaches (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) are based on the constructionist notion that organizations grow and evolve in the direction of their most positive guiding images of the future. When we inquire into our weaknesses and deficiencies, we gain an expert knowledge of what is "wrong" with our organizations, and we may even become proficient problem-solvers, but we do not strengthen our collective capacity to imagine and to build a better future. By means of inquiry into the life-giving

dimensions of our organizations, however, we stimulate our collective imagination and aspirations to create images of new possibilities that guide our action and thereby contribute to social innovation (i.e., creating new positive possibilities for organizing).

In the case of GRDO a number of social innovations were spawned as a result of the appreciative inquiry. First, more than 100 organizations and thousands of communities gained a new understanding of what made them strong and developed new strategies for building their capacity. This led to rash of innovative activity. For example in Bangladesh, one, having gained a new appreciation for the importance of networking, invited community members and its funding agencies into its strategic planning process. As a result, it doubled its budget and more than quadrupled the number of families it served in less than two years. In East Africa, the NGO's who had participated in the appreciative inquiry banded together to form an East Africa NGO network that could provide them with training, consultation, advocacy, and new sources of funding. On a global level, GRDO lunched a new initiative to link business entrepreneurs with NGOs and bring their products into the global economy. Hundreds of social innovation similar to these emerged around the world as a result of the inquiry.

Second, GRDO and its partners developed a new understanding about the nature of their relationship. Previously they were trapped in a deficit discourse that placed Northern NGOs in a dominant position as those *with* resources (money, knowledge, power) and Southern NGOs in a subordinate position as those *without* resources. The appreciative inquiry made way for a liberating shift away from paternalism and into true partnership. As a result, GRDO and its partners developed a whole new system for building and measuring organizational capacity that reflected the new set of partnership values (Johnson & Ludema, 1997). Rather than beginning with pre-determined programs, they now begin by sitting down at a common table to identify strengths and assets and to share identities, hopes, and aspirations. From there, any agenda for change is established through dialogue.

Third, GRDO changed its organizational structure to support their new understanding of partnership. Traditionally a hierarchical organization with rigid lines of accountability and a small span of control, GRDO moved to a team-based organizational approach. It reduced the layers of hierarchy from nine to three and formed regional teams to manage its operations. This structure puts a higher level of responsibility into the hands of the people closest to partner organizations and gives them greater flexibility to establish commitments that respond to local contexts, cultures, and aspirations. By emphasizing the primacy of local relationships and local wisdom, GRDO and its partners have shifted the locus of power (and therefore innovation) from a central point in North America to multiple interdependent points through out the world.

Finally, GRDO and its partner organizations have also begun to hold regular Organizational Summit meetings to provide a forum for face-to-face dialogue and community building with its partners. Held annually in each region and triennially on a global scale these meetings provide GRDO and its partners a direct opportunity to strengthen relationships, find common ground around visions for the future, and jointly enact agendas for change.

These are but some of the many social innovations made possible by the appreciative inquiry process.

**Table II: A Comparison of the Linguistic and Organizational Consequences of Critique vs. Appreciation**

<b>Critical Action Research</b>	<b>Appreciative Action Research</b>
Contains Conversation	Releases New Positive Vocabularies
Silences Marginal Voices	Affirms Variety of Experience and Encourages Full Voice
Demonizes the Other	Begins by Valuing the Other
Fragmentation of Relationships	Fosters Relational Connections
Atomization of Community	Strengthens Community
Encourages Dogmatism	Creates Images of Possibility
Destroys its Own Rationality	Reinforces Affirmative Rationality
Contributes to Cultural Enfeeblement	Generates Social Innovation

### **Conclusion**

Ever since Descartes, the Western intellectual tradition has suffered from a form of epistemological schizophrenia (Popkin, 1979). Its intent of building knowledge and “discovering truth” to enhancing the human condition is a noble one, yet its methodological starting point of doubt and negation undermines its intent. It sucks Western science into a never ending vortex of critique and repudiation that leaves it ill equipped to construct compelling alternatives. Appreciative inquiry is in the business of building alternatives. It suggests that the journey into critique is a seductive but unnecessary detour. By asking the positive question it invites organizational members

into a process of continuous affirmation that creates alternatives rather than attacks and possibilities rather than problems.

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