



Appreciative Inquiry in a Broken World

by davidcooperrider | Apr 22, 2020 | blog, change management, leadership, organizational development



Appreciative Inquiry in a Broken World

David L. Cooperrider

University Distinguished Professor

Faculty Director of the [Fowler Center for Business as an Agent of World Benefit](#)

Ring the bells that still can ring,
Forget your perfect offering,
There is a crack, a crack in everything (there is a crack in everything);
That's how the light gets in...

— Excerpt from [Leonard Cohen's](#) song "Anthem"

Organizations everywhere have entered a new reality that few would have imagined at the opening of 2020. In the span of several months, the COVID-19 pandemic has irrevocably transformed economies around the world, infected millions, and will tragically result in unpredictable numbers of horrific deaths. As I write, heartbreak, prayers, and mourning fill this morning's headlines. "US Leads World in Coronavirus Deaths After Deadliest Week" announce USA Today. Businesses and employees in many sectors are struggling to survive and stay afloat in the face of debilitating losses and recession. Leaders are worried about massive revenue loss, human safety, prospects of bankruptcy, and offering sound, transparent, and ethical policies to employees. Leaders and managers must react to disrupted supply chains, enable remote workforces, break bad news to employees and families, as well as maintain their own hope and energy and so that they can continue to serve, guide, and move forward without any trusted roadmaps. For many, there is a sense of brokenness.

But there is one silver lining. It's in times of disruption that the best in human systems can burst forth. Resilience, for example, CAN grow. Values can be lived, come alive, instead of merely espoused. Moreover, while it may seem a luxury to talk about enterprise improvement, betterment, innovation, and [positive organization development](#) during a major dislodgment like this, that's exactly what leaders need to do. To be sure, in the immediate or near term, *resilience and bounce-back capacity* is existentially crucial. And for the long-term, we know this from years of research: *corporate cultures are almost totally tested and forged in the crucible of crises, during the most challenging times of external adaptation and internal integration.* How leaders lead during times of catastrophe has an outsized effect on the future of such things as corporate trust, collective confidence, resilience or brittleness, and strong or [elevating corporate culture](#). Times of crisis almost always reveal or reinforce an institution's "true colors"— and it can be a time of lasting set-back or exceptional co-elevation and unified achievement. And while there are dozens of articles flying around everywhere on "the pandemic's lessons for leaders," there is little on the tools, mindsets, and change management methods for advancing collective resilience *together*. And little on advancing deeply developmental trajectories *together*, or for aiming higher for a better, more meaningful, mission, and galvanizing a purposeful future *together*.

What is Appreciative Inquiry? How Can We Be Positive in a Pandemic?

Isn't This Moment a Problem-to-Be Solved?

While beyond the capacity of one blog-post to go deeply into the theory and practice of Appreciative Inquiry (let's call it "AI" for short), it has been hailed by CEO's around the world, as well as leading researchers, such as University of Michigan's Robert Quinn. In

his book, *Change the World*, Quinn singled out the power of AI and wrote: "Appreciative Inquiry is revolutionizing the field of organization development and change." Likewise, in a NY Times best-selling management book, [Marcus Buckingham](#) concluded that the theory of [Appreciative Inquiry](#), as articulated by my colleagues and I in the early 1980s, was one of the three major catalysts for today's strengths-revolution in management. The other two great sources of the strengths revolution in management included [Peter Drucker's *Effective Executive*](#) and [Marty Seligman's](#) call for a field of Positive Psychology for the study of human flourishing. Together, appreciative inquiry, Drucker's management theory, and positive psychology have created a society-wide positive-strengths movement. Because as Buckingham states, "it works"—and it's being used in places as diverse as Apple and the United Nations to Johnson & Johnson and the US Navy.

What is the big idea of Appreciative Inquiry? It began with the observation that ever since industrial age [Taylorism](#), managers, researchers, and consultants have seen organizations not only in machine-like terms but in deficit-based terms as "problems to be solved" or fixed. True Abraham Maslow's observation that "[if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail](#)," those same managers and consultants became, over the years, quite good at finding, analyzing, and framing problems in organizations. So much so that organizations became problems personified. And hence a whole [vocabulary of deficit-based change](#) grew up centered on concepts like "gap analysis," "organizational diagnosis," "root causes of failure," "resistance," "unfreezing," "needs analysis," "threat analysis," and the need for high levels of dissatisfaction and urgent "burning platforms."

Much like diagnostic medicine with its focus on illness, management early on got locked into a problem-analytic view of the world, especially when it came to concepts and tools for managing change. Early in the 1980s, we began to question the deficit-based change field and the root metaphor that "human systems are problems to be solved." We observed that the pervasive problematizing perspective was constraining and limiting, just as industrial era machine metaphors were also limiting. Peter Drucker often spoke about how bureaucratic organizations too often "feed the problematic and starve the opportunities." Businesses almost instinctively, much as our [negative evolutionary brain](#) does, would almost on autopilot focus on what's not working and then activate 'root cause' mindsets, only to find themselves facing a set of different, but related questions down the line. Questions like, "*How can we fix our lack of engagement?*" "*What do we do about low motivation?*" or, "*why are people just not on board?*" In a world where 70% of all corporate change efforts falter (see the [McKinsey analysis](#), and the growing cynicism about "the next change program announcement") and then in even more personal domains like dieting, where [98%](#) of the "deficit-based" initiatives fail – we in the field of

change theory realized a great need to aim higher, dig deeper conceptually, and better articulate what we mean by the far too casual term “[positive change](#)” for it is and can be, deep and powerful – certainly not superficial at all.

In our earliest work at the acclaimed [Cleveland Clinic](#)—now the world’s #1 heart center and one of the nation’s most exceptional health care organizations– we engaged in a radical reversal of the traditional problem-analytic approach. Influenced by the writings of [Albert Schweitzer](#) on “reverence for life,” we intentionally said organizations are not institutional machines perpetually in need of repair, which deteriorate steadily and over time. Rather organizations are, fundamentally, **living systems** and centers of human relatedness, alive and embedded in potentially ampliative (upward amplifying) networks — our vast “universe of strengths.”

Instead of “problems to be solved,” human systems are “universes of strengths.” In a real way—when you think about how the *appreciable world* is so much larger than our *appreciative eye*—human organizations are the offspring of the life-giving miracle of human interaction and imagination, our cooperative relatedness, and the remarkable story of civilization itself. The more we study “what gives life” versus “what’s wrong,” the more we can move in the direction of or become what we study. Instead of studying low morale, for example, we should, if indeed we want to *accelerate the future we desire*, study *times and enablers of [human flourishing](#)* in the workplace “because human systems move in the direction of what they study.” Quite literally, this is true: all the studies in the world of low morale or disengagement among employees in the workplace will teach almost nothing about the dynamics of exceptional enterprise-wide flourishing. When we study the worst cases of low morale, we learn the details about the conditions that cause or correlate with low morale. But it is doubtful that the causes of low morale are the same thing as the enablers of human thriving, excelling, or flourishing. Moreover, *eradicating* something, like getting rid of low morale or disengagement, is not the same as *enabling* something such as flourishing. Put directly: if we want to learn about the what, when, why, and how of the conditions that lead to human, group, and enterprise flourishing, that’s precisely the topic we should bring to our research frame, rigor and disciplined analysis.

The simple act of observation in a human system changes the phenomenon itself. In another realm, in physics, for example, this concept has been called the [Heisenberg observer effect](#). But in human systems, the result is even more powerful. Inquiry and change are not separate moments. Inquiry intervenes. Let’s say we do 200 in-depth interviews in an organization into the times, the conditions, and the enablers of flourishing. Change, in this instance, is already happening. The attention of people *has* shifted. The stories they *are* learning from have shifted. People’s sense of the possible has, just through the act of asking questions, shifted. Even their dreams and hopes for a

better future are shifting. In marketing, it is called “[the mere measurement effect](#),” but honestly, there is nothing small about it. When we look at how inquiry-is-change—how inquiry-and-change is a simultaneous moment in human systems—we start seeing the power of it. It is something I’ve called “the [exponential inquiry effect](#)” to indicate how our first questions, like the early stage of a snowball, can grow into exponential tipping point movements. That’s why, in the practice of AI in leadership, we say: “We live in worlds our questions create.”

(Before we go on, let me hit the pause button here and ask you to think about it now: what question or questions, amid the pandemic, would you put in front of a team or even everyone in a company, at a time like this, amid trial and upheaval?)

In a privileged and truly memorable conversation with Peter Drucker, I found we shared views in common: a realization that strengths do more than perform, they transform. Appreciative inquiry into strengths, solutions, and strategic opportunities is a meta-strength. For Drucker, the development of an appreciative eye is, in essence, the first task of great leadership. “What is leadership all about?” I asked the father of management thought. He responded without hesitation, and I wrote it down and read it over and over:

“The task of leadership is ageless in its essence,....the task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths in ways that make a system’s weaknesses irrelevant.”

That is what appreciative inquiry does. It provides the theory-base and the many [tools](#) – from the [4-D cycle of Discovery-Dream-Design-Destiny](#) to the cultivation of [appreciative intelligence](#). And from creating concentrated effects of strengths in the [AI Summit](#), to the [power of questions](#) for enabling (1) the elevation of systemic strengths; (2) the configuration and magnification of systemic strengths; and (3) the refraction of organizational strengths outward into society. In other words, the discovery and design of [positive institutions](#) that bring our highest human strengths, such as love, sense of humanity, and courage, into the world.

But AI... in a Pandemic?

Of course, there are also many contemporary debates and questions surrounding the idea of appreciative inquiry. For example, is appreciative inquiry really just all about seeing the world through Pollyannaish eyes and searching for “the positive” and ignoring difficult, painful, even catastrophic realities? In the final part of this blog article, I would like to address this [critique](#) and then turn to the tools you might use, including kinds of AI questions and positive organization development approaches we have used during this time of upheaval. What I would like to share is a set of questions I have recently piloted and with leaders, managers and change agents at major corporations

such as Progressive Insurance, PNC Financial Services, and the Cleveland Clinic. What I can say with certainty is this: Appreciative Inquiry might just reach its highest potential for impact for organizations in the midst of the pandemic. And to understand why it helps to look first at this simple model (below) that I wrote about last year in a remarkable new book by [Joan McArthur-Blair and Jeanie Cockell](#) on building resilience.



At the lowest rung—and perhaps the easiest domain of all to practice appreciative inquiry—is the **appreciative inquiry into the extraordinary**, the best in human experience, those times of “positive deviance” that are literally way above the line and jump out. At the second and sequentially more difficult rung, is the capacity to do appreciative inquiry during times of **the ordinary**—at those times that are so taken-for-granted that we often fail to apprehend, appreciate, or even attempt to search for everything that is giving life. Here we are talking about the capacity for seeing the best in the seemingly ordinary and insignificant events, where there are no starbursts, no mountaintop experiences. Thank goodness, then, for the example of our gifted artists and the many layers of meaning that they help us see and appreciate. Think of how a Vincent van Gogh teaches us to see the extraordinary in an ordinary tea-cup, an unpretentious vase of flowers, or a common scene of fruit on a simple table. William Wordsworth, as another example of the second level of appreciative maturity, encourages the cultivation of **appreciative intelligence in the midst of the ordinary**. He writes: “With an eye made quiet by the power/of harmony, and deep power of joy/we see into the life of things.”

And then there is a third developmental level for the practice of appreciative inquiry—and it’s the least understood. It’s the kind of appreciative inquiry sensitivity, skill, or

literacy as evidenced by someone such as [Victor Frankl](#), in his enduring classic *Man's Search for Meaning*. So, this, the 3rd level of elevated AI capacity, is not an appreciative inquiry into moments of excellence or experiences of the life-giving in the ordinary, but **appreciative inquiry in the midst of tragedy**. Victor Frankl, as we all know, was in the horrific concentration camp where everything was taken from him and others. And yet, in the midst of his studies, he saw resources, relationships, and regenerative possibilities that gave life to many. There are examples upon examples of Frankl's idea of finding the life-promoting meaning amid extreme suffering; they are threaded throughout his accounts of the harsh conditions of the Nazi concentration camps. Frankl believed that "*Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.*" In his 1959 book—"*Saying Yes to Life in Spite of Everything: A Psychologist Experience of the Concentration Camp*"— he said: "What is to give light must endure burning."

What I would like to underscore here is that appreciative inquiry is not about positive or negative. Its call is to transcend this polarity. It's not about positive or negative human experience but *inquiry into life*: the task of AI is the quest and search for *what gives life* and deep meaning—even in the midst of the tragic. Indeed, in so many times of disruption, there is always the potential to surface and summon our better humanity. That's why the best in human systems can *burst* forth just as life, even a blade of grass, can bust out all over, even after a cement highway has been placed over it. Resilience, for example, during a tragedy, CAN grow. It is not a noun, not a thing, but a verb, something that can be built and forged in the crucible of crises. *Resiliencing* is the developmental act where corporate culture and values can be vivified, with their meanings made alive, instead of merely espoused.

Some of the most interesting research moving us even beyond the field of resilience happened when researchers in the area of post-traumatic stress disorder began finding remarkable cases of post-traumatic *growth*. PTG, they discovered, is more common than ever thought and is now being defined as the "experience of individuals whose development, at least in some areas has surpassed what was present before the struggle with crises occurred." Critical elements of post-traumatic growth, in addition to the gift of [conversations worth having](#), and [power of questions](#), revolve around the interplay of at least five dimensions used in surveys:

- Appreciation of life.
- Relationships with others.
- New possibilities in life.
- Personal strength.
- Spiritual change.

What appreciative inquiry does then, in terms of a theory of change, is that it embraces one of the most challenging and meanest paradoxes of change. It argues that we change best when we are strongest. As human beings, we can change best and in the most capacity filled way when we experience the combined power of *every relevant resource*. Even the tiniest seed of hope, available to us across the entire strengths spectrum, outside and inside any given system, including social and cultural assets, technical and economic ones, psychological and spiritual strengths, ecological strengths of nature, and the strengths of moral models, positive deviations and collaborative creativity combines to create incredible change. And if we change best when we are strongest or have access to everything needed for [resourcing our change capacity](#) (encircling the change agenda in a kind of “surround sound of strengths”), then the reverse is also true. [There is a mean paradox inherent in situations where change, resilience, and renewal are needed most](#). For example, when a person is in a dark depression or there are [imminent threats](#) of a company facing bankruptcy or traumatic market shifts—or pandemic – at precisely those moments when we feel the weakest, we are being asked to change? This mean paradox should be reversed, shouldn't it?

Well, that's exactly what Appreciative Inquiry can help you do.

The Question of How To?

What do you think? Might your organization or team benefit by becoming more resilient, by uniting together and by intentionally harnessing the energy and power of this profoundly disruptive but *uniquely developmental* moment? And if so, how might you leverage AI, even in simple ways?

I would like to share with you a set of questions that I've actively leveraged in recent days with change leaders at leading companies such as Progressive, Cleveland Clinic, and Parker. Imagine bringing teams or whole departments or even your entire organization together on Zoom or the platform of choice. Imagine using these questions (listed below) for a paired interview to begin. Person A interviews person B, and then person B interviews person A. After you share the vision, hope, and agenda of the meeting, people can start with the [handout of questions](#); however, they are encouraged to go deeper with their own curiosity and desire to dig deeper. With the Zoom platform, there is a simple way to [give pairs their “own” private zoom room](#). Then, if you have 30 or more people, next place the pairs with other pairs and form groups of eight for “roundtable” dialogues. Have them process the questions by capturing themes, compelling stories, new visions, future dreams, and pathways to action. Finally, bring everyone back together and have spokespersons from each group report out, sharing each group's most empowering stories, and new designs for the future.

My guess is that this meeting, if you do it and adequately tailor it to your context, might well be remembered as one of the most unifying, empowering, and developmental meetings *together* that you have ever experienced as a group conversation. In so many ways, [we live in worlds that our conversations create](#). That's how lives and collective cultures deepen and develop. And to be sure it is not just the AI part of it. More substantially, it is certain that the best in human capacity—profound capacities for respect, kindness, courageous and collectively intelligent mobilization—can be elevated during any crises moment and then *extended as a more durable feature of life* in the future. And please, if you do utilize and adapt the AI questions offered in the last part of this blog, I would love to hear from you about your experiences, insights, and especially how you improved the questions for dialogue. And when you wind down the meeting—whether it happens over one lengthier session or a series of shorter ones, you might want to summarize everything you heard and reflect it to the group. This reaffirms consensual validation and next steps, the kinds of things that help your organization develop resilience, bounce back capacity, and grounded hope, even marching orders, for the future—grounded, now, in more of your organization's "true colors." And then you might move to closure by showing this video clip [called "true colors"](#) and then invite everyone to finish by going around the group—sharing this:

"As I depart from our meeting today, one of the true colors of our organization or community that I'm most proud of is _____, and one adjective that best describes my feelings as we now look ahead to the future is ____."

We are Better Together:

Building Resilience and Preparing for the Future We Want to Create

Opening AI Conversation in Pairs

(Completed by _____ o'clock)

#1. Moments of Magnified Meaning Making. Organizations everywhere have entered a new reality that few of us would have imagined at the start of 2020. In the span of several months, the COVID-19 pandemic has irrevocably transformed economies and organizations around the world, infected millions, and will tragically result in unpredictable numbers of deaths. And yet, moments like this do perhaps offer the opportunity for shifts—big and small. But openings do not last forever, and one way to keep such openings vital and expansive is to magnify meaningful stories through conversation with others.

A) In terms of what you are experiencing in these days and recent weeks, what *is* the most important thing stirring in you right now, and *how do you sense it relates to our future, your most important hopes, or a broader sense of purpose?*

B) All around the world, we are seeing people on the front lines of care in hospitals, in our communities, and in our businesses—everywhere we look, we see individuals responding in courageous, caring, and even unexpected ways. If you

could put the spotlight on just two of the most powerful stories you've seen or heard about (one in society outside our organization and one inside our organization), what would they be? Consider examples that provide you with an image, inspiration, or new understanding of what we as human beings are capable of together—what two stories or examples (again one outside our organization and one inside) would you like to put the spotlight on?

C) Now in your view, at the highest level of our country, and of our world overall, what possible good can come from this crisis, this tragedy, this moment of response?

#2. Leadership is About Making a Difference: Meg Wheatley once defined leadership not in terms of hierarchy or position but in terms of *leaving the world a better place than we found it*. "A leader," she said, "is anyone who wants to make a difference at this time." And that's you, that's me, that's all of us who—at this time—are wanting to make a difference in our families, with our friends, in our faith communities or volunteer networks, in our organization, and in our world. In all of this, what are you/we learning about leadership?

Through the ups and downs of these times, we have all reached down deep and been part of making a difference. As you reflect on your own ups and downs, high points and low points, peaks, and valleys, we invite you to share one of the moments where you worked alone or *together with others* to *make a difference* at this time. It might have been at home with family or some contribution to one of your friends, neighbors, relatives, or even strangers' lives. It might have been in your community or somewhere in the world at large—and it might have been right here, in our organization or work.

A) Wherever it is from, *please share one story of leadership from your life during these times—where you were helping to make a difference at this time—and why it stands out for you. Please share the story. What happened? Where? When? How did you feel? How did you overcome challenges? What contributions? Insights for us here— an organization where we want to empower leadership from every level and from everywhere—what insights can you offer?*

B) Now, from this story, and without being too humble about it, *what does this story and others like it, say about you— your three most important or **signature strengths**? And how might you be able to leverage those qualities in our organization and team conversations here today?*

- 2.
- 3.

#3. The Continuity Question: What are those things we should keep?

Charles Darwin once said: *“it’s not the strongest of the species that survive nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change”*—especially in times of challenge and complexity, like ours.

Likewise, we know that our organization—indeed every organization in today’s world—must change, evolve, and transform in the future. But even in moments of volatility, tragedy, and uncertainty like this, there are examples and signs of our organization’s true colors, best values, or core strengths that we should keep.

Likewise, we know that our organization must learn, change, evolve, and transform in the future—every organization has to change in this constantly changing world. But resilient organizations—those able to bounce back—know how to preserve what they do best *and* they know how to boldly and bravely get better and change at the same time.

A) Before we move to our hopes for our organization’s future, we want to ask you **the continuity question**. *If you could keep three of our greatest strengths, unique assets, or best qualities—where everything else can change—what, in your _____ view, should we keep? What three greatest strengths, assets, values, or historical qualities that you would hope and want us to maintain, grow, and continue to value even as we move into a new and changing future? And think about this as _____ you keep your selection to three things: how will these strengths and values serve us now, to build resilience, and enable us to bounce back?*

Please finish the following sentence: “The things I really want our organization to keep and build upon no matter how much we change in a changing future include_____.”

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

B) Emerging New Strengths and Signs of Promising Possibility:

Now, as you look at our organization in this moment of the pandemic, dramatic challenge, and uncertainty, there are the seeds of **new strengths emerging**—signs and examples of new potentials, progress, and new promise. Think about one _____ or two newly emerging strengths or ways of working —signs of emerging potential and possibility that you believe show promise, not just for the moment but for the future

too. What one or two things are we beginning to do new and different now that you would want to spotlight and have us extend and perhaps keep doing into the future?

#4. Images of a Better Future: Visions of the Organization You Want in 2025

Let's assume tonight you fall into a sound sleep...and it lasts for five years. When you wake up, it is 2025. During those five years, our organization has taken lots of lessons from times of challenge, especially the unprecedented disruption of the coronavirus pandemic and beyond. Out of all of this, we actually became a much better organization. We produced small improvements. We also thought way *out of the box* and created several breakthrough changes and innovations. With both the small changes and the more significant and braver breakthroughs, you love what you see. In the five years—from 2020 to 2025—so many new opportunities, improvements, and good things came together that *it's like a miracle, and our organization became a place that exceeded even your highest dreams and expectations.*

So now it's 2025, and you wake up. You are standing there seeing this organization in the future—it's like the next chapter in a book. You see an organization that created new business opportunities and opportunities to serve customers, partners, and communities. You see a more fully human organization with great relationships, collaboration, and high engagement. You get a tour of everything—from operations to customer experiences. You see the value our organization is creating both as a business and a business leader doing good and doing well in our community and the world. You see a unity of spirit and a stronger culture with values, leadership, and ways of working that you are proud of.

Now it's time to describe what you see and why you like it. What's happening in this vision of the future, that's new, different, or better? And how do you know it? What do you see—in terms of people, business successes, customer success, innovations in services and technologies, or how the organization is designed and managed? In your vision of this ideal future, how do our key stakeholders view our company?

A) Please make notes on what you see. What's happening in 2025 that's changed, new, and better? And please complete this sentence.

"I will be most proud of our organization in 2025 when _____.

B) Now with this future in mind, what is the smallest step we could take now or soon that might have the most significant impact in realizing elements of your desired future?

C) What is one bigger, braver, and bolder thing we might consider, perhaps even

an initiative we've never discussed much before? What is one bold thing that might propel us to new success, new contributions to building a better world, and to the future you want to see?

Now following your interview with your partner, simply share back a few things you learned from them, key insights, or stories for which you feel grateful. Then thank them in any way you want for a generous and powerful conversation.

[Click Here for Downloadable and Printable Questions Handout](#)

If you potentially want an experienced AI professional or your own training to assist you with this AI, or simply would benefit from a *coaching phone call* behind the scenes, feel free to email and set up a call with Jessica Blackman, the managing director of the **[David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry at Champlain College's Stiller School of Business](#)** at jblackman@champlain.edu. Or if you wish, you can contact me directly at dlc6@case.edu and we can access the AI networks and resources we know in in your region and industry sector.

Recent Posts

Why Purpose Matters

Appreciative Inquiry in a Broken World

Leadership as a Catalyst for Change

Organization Development and Managing Change Can Be a Time When People Thrive

Links

- [About.me](#)
- [Appreciative Inquiry](#)
- [Crunchbase](#)
- [Linkedin](#)

- [Medium](#)
- [Patch](#)

Links Cont.

- [Pexels](#)
- [Quora](#)
- [ThriveGlobal](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [Wikipedia](#)
- [Youtube](#)