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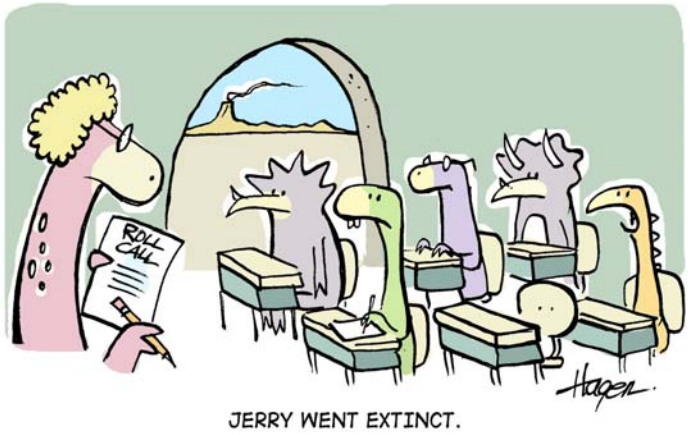

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Leadership Through Learning Part 3Q: Reflexive Practice and Appreicative Inquiry

by Christine Oliver

"In many — but not all — settings and contexts, it is positive experience and expression that have been largely neglected. Thus, AI focused on discovering and amplifying the positive in such contexts represents an inquiry into aspects of the organizational Shadow."
— Steve Fitzgerald, Christine Oliver & Joan Hoxsey, **Appreciative Inquiry as a Shadow Process** (2007).

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is embarking on its third decade of development, marked by the 20th anniversary of Cooperrider and Srivastva's 1987 **Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life** (for more information on AI see *InfoMine* Vol. 4, No. 3 and No. 4). AI has become an influential organizational change intervention, taught in business schools and practised by organizational consultants all over the globe.

Cooperrider and Srivastva define AI as "egalitarian dialogue leading to social-system effectiveness and integrity". However, it has become increasingly associated with working with the positive. As a result, some have argued, AI neglects important aspects of organizational experience, with the effect of discouraging *difficult* dialogues. In general, AI is distinguished by polarities — positive vs. negative, strengths vs. deficits, life-giving vs. deadening, mysteries-to-be-embraced vs. problems-to-be solved. Reflexive practice encourages us to understand that the impulse to create polarity (strange loops) is often defensive, and can be understood as a strange loop pattern (see *InfoMine* Vol. 12, No. 2). The way in which to work through a strange loop polarity is through reflexive awareness or critical consciousness (see *InfoMine* Vol. 13, No. 1).

Fitzgerald, Oliver, and Hoxsey expand the scope of AI to "people inquiring together into the infinite potentials and varieties of human organizing". They show how mechanisms in organizational life can develop that censor the expression of aspects of emotion and cognition. Censored material is referred to as the *Shadow*, and mechanisms for censoring through polarization include judging, discounting, neglecting, directive reframing, and idealising. Reflexive awareness is necessary in making decisions about what aspects of the experience should be brought into the light, and what aspects shadowed. This is contrary to AI's position of making a judgement based on positive and negative.

Choices about what to include in organizational dialogue need to reference multiple contexts, including the cultural, relational, financial, and political consequences of censorship. This allows us to develop reflexive awareness about the organizational *stories told* that shape our impulses to include or exclude dimensions of our storytelling. Fitzgerald and Oliver define reflexive awareness as the "ability to invite and develop a narrative of connection among norms, emotions, cognitions, behaviors, and Shadows through purposefully recognizing, valuing, including, expressing and understanding previously unconnected or unarticulated experience".

An Example of Working with Reflexive Awareness

A monastery in the North of England needed help to decide whether or not to relocate. My colleague and I designed a conventional AI process that focused on articulating the

positive. Through this appreciative process, we hoped to connect the community's religious *calling* to the decision to relocate. Early on, we noticed an unhelpful pattern developing whereby certain voices did not open up, even though they were being invited to participate. As a result, some community members expressed a feeling in their working groups that important things were not being said, resulting in the potential of the dialogue being undermined.

We explored this issue in more depth with the community, and realized that the conventional AI exercise as designed had neglected to pay sufficient attention to the norms in the culture about which voices in the group were privileged. *Priest* voices were treated as more authoritative than *lay* voices. Censorship occurred in the community through subtle and collusive marginalization and discounting of *lay* participation. At the same time, the authority of the clergy was idealized. This enabled some participants to avoid responsibility, and others to take too much responsibility. This promoted angry feelings of exclusion, *us and them* thinking, and withdrawal behavior from some *lay* voices, which reinforced the division. We found that our best intentions for exploring the positive energy of the community's calling inadvertently stirred the demons of the community's *Shadow*. Censoring in the community resulted in festering the *Shadow* content.

It is often assumed that AI structured appreciative exercises have an equalizing effect on participants' voices by minimizing power dynamics. In this situation, the process we designed was insufficiently attentive to the complexity of collective and individual norms. Thus, our assumption of equality inadvertently constrained and censored a *full enough* expression of community interests. We attempted to address this pattern by calling attention to it, and facilitating a process of recognition, inclusion, expression, and making sense of this previously *Shadowed* material. We constructed a new exercise that directly addressed the consequences for all when a decision would be made that some did not want. This intervention framed and valued the pattern as something that the community could work with and take responsibility for. The community learned that it was their responsibility to recognize, and make meaningful, the consequences of some voices *winning* over others.

In groups of three, one participant volunteered to serve as a *steward* to make sure that:

1. The interests of the whole community were met through the discussion.
2. The discussion would not get sidetracked or blocked by personal agendas, which would have enacted the censoring mechanism of discounting.
3. Strong expressions of emotion and *hobby horses* were valued and inquired into.

This discussion about the consequences of a decision being made that some might not want was fed back by each group. Then, in front of other community members, the stewards had a discussion amongst themselves about what they had observed and experienced while carrying out their task.

The intervention placed all members in the same position, rather than in an *us and them* dynamic. The role of the steward helped structure responsibility for the negotiation of *community* voice in an attempt to transcend the *us and them* cultural norm. This reflects a different approach to the AI *wholeness principle* that focuses on higher ground, rather than common ground. Our redesigned approach allowed the community to reach higher ground by focusing on common ground.

"The generative results of AI interventions have often been associated with and attributed to positive focus; however, it may be that its liberating energy has as much if not more to do with collective inquiry into that which has been neglected in or excluded from the organizational conversation, rather than a focus on the positive per se. … Realize that polarities promote censorship and thereby Shadow, and be aware that we always have choice points about what we include and exclude."
— Steve Fitzgerald, Christine Oliver & Joan Hoxsey, **Appreciative Inquiry as a Shadow Process** (2007).

Complexity, Relationships, and Strange Loops: Reflexive Practice Guide, see www.mhainstitute.ca for more information

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