



Tapping Into the Power of Learning Part 4A: Appreciating Potential and Possibilities

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“High-performing organizations create a vision that challenges members by encouraging them to go beyond familiar ways of thinking; they provoke members to stretch beyond what has seemed to be *reasonable* limits, to redefine the boundaries of what they experience as constraining.”

— Frank J. Barrett, *Creating Appreciative Learning Cultures, Organizational Dynamics* (Autumn 1995)

I have often been asked why my company (MHA Institute) has continued to be successful, and to grow and change to meet emerging customer needs. My response is that all of the people associated with MHA focus on potential and possibilities, rather than on limitations and problems. We do this by being aware of our individual and collective strengths and weaknesses. More importantly, we deliberately look for ways to appreciate and use the leverage

points that are found in each person’s unique abilities as well as the collective strength of MHA.

What MHA is doing is *appreciative inquiry*, based on the work of Suresh Srivastva and David Cooperrider, co-authors of **Appreciative Management and Leadership: The Power of Positive Thought and Action in Organizations**. Appreciative inquiry is one of the most effective strategies for developing reflective intelligence. In this article, I introduce the main principles underlying appreciative inquiry, and compare it to traditional problem solving. In the next article, I describe how to use appreciative inquiry, in order to promote individual, team, and organizational learning.

Organizations today are in a continuous race against time to solve problems produced by change and uncertainty. According to researchers in the field of appreciative inquiry, one of the reasons that organizations continue to struggle through turbulent change and transition is that they focus only on problem solving. However, solving problems — especially complex problems — can actually create more problems, since people see only the problem, and not the opportunity that the problem presents.

Problem solving in the traditional view focuses on detecting errors, causes, and faults, in order to create an action plan that will *fix* the problem. According to Barrett, when using a problem solving

approach, “We notice what is wrong, search for causes, and propose solutions.” This approach leads to limiting behaviours that focus on deficiencies, rather than on strengths. People in organizations work *within* the problem, rather than *going beyond* the problem, thus generating solutions that are based on what *is*, rather than what *could be*. Thus, organizations cannot harness the potential resident in their people and teams, simply because these organizations focus on fixing what is wrong, rather than on creating an environment that taps into the power of potential and possibilities.

Problem solving is a form of *adaptive learning*, which is the ability to respond to, and to cope with, the changing environment. According to Barrett, adaptive learning “focuses on solving current problems without questioning the framework that generated those problems.” Adaptive learning works well in environments that are stable and predictable, and in which the current knowledge is adequate to solve the problem. The traditional problem solving approach assumes that the changing environment is predictable, and that the current environment can supply the knowledge needed to solve the problem. This is not the case in most organizations. Increasingly, organizations are facing complex problems that require them to explore new ways of thinking about the problems. The problem solving process does not encourage people in organizations to consider and to explore new ways of thinking as an option. Even though most teams and individuals can brainstorm possible solutions to problems, they are

actually brainstorming solutions that are problem-specific. They do not consider — or even question — the underlying system that created the problem, or what the situation might be like if the problem did not exist.

On the other hand, appreciative inquiry focuses on creating a vision of *what could be* by appreciating the leverage points that originate in the system and culture of the organization. According to David Cooperrider, "... hope precedes new images of the future, ... hope for change is what makes change possible, ... appreciative inquiry [is] an important way of developing a collective sense of hope about the future." Appreciative inquiry taps into people's aspirations, rather than their fears, because it focuses on what people can do and are inspired to do. This creates organizations that harness the potential resident in their people and teams, simply because these organizations focus on creating an environment that taps into the power of potential and possibilities.

Appreciative inquiry is a form of *generative learning*, which, Barrett states, is the "ability to see radical possibilities beyond the boundaries of problems as they present themselves in conventional terms." Generative learning encourages and supports innovation, creativity, potential, possibilities, and constant change and growth.

Comparing appreciative inquiry to problem solving helps to clarify the differences between the two approaches. Problem solving seeks out deficiencies, whereas appreciative inquiry seeks out qualities. Notice the differences in the comparison below:

Problem Solving

1. Identify problems.
2. Analyze the root causes of the problems.
3. Determine solutions to the problems.
4. Analyze the solutions.
5. Select the best solutions to the problems.
6. Develop an action plan to implement the solutions.

Appreciative Inquiry

1. Discover what is working well.
2. Identify factors that cause the team and/or organization to work well.
3. Create a vision of what the team and/or organization is doing in the future that causes it to be successful.
4. Create dialogue that allows honest and open inquiry into all perspectives of the vision.
5. Select the current factors of organizational strength that can be leveraged to create the team and/or organizational vision.
6. Develop an action plan that uses the leverage points found in these factors of team and/or organizational strength to create the vision.

Appreciative inquiry starts with the current perspectives of the individual, team, and organization. By using a questioning technique to examine the language and the culture of the organization, individuals and teams can discover the unique qualities that can make the organization successful. Appreciative inquiry introduces a modification of the organization's language that is appreciative, rather than depreciative. For example, depreciative language includes phrases such as "This approach won't work here!", "We've done this before and it didn't work.", and "It'll take too

much time." These phrases can be modified into appreciative language:

- "This approach won't work here!" becomes "What does work here?"
- "We've done this before and it didn't work." becomes "What will make it work?"
- "It'll take too much time." becomes "How much time are we willing to devote to testing this idea?"

When people practice appreciative inquiry, they experience a mind shift. They focus on what they can use to go beyond the problem and to create the future that they desire, rather than focusing on what gets in their way. Appreciative inquiry values people, diversity, and strengths, thus creating an environment in which people are intrinsically motivated to achieve, both individually and collectively.

"... modern organizations must create contexts in which members can continually learn and experiment, think systemically, question their assumptions and mental models, engage in meaningful dialogue, and create visions that energize action."
— Frank J. Barrett, *Creating Appreciative Learning Cultures, Organizational Dynamics* (Autumn 1995)

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