CHANGE MANAGEMENT IN COMPLEX SYSTEMS:
USING APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY FOR GENERATIVE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The author developed a model as a result of a change management consulting project that was used to facilitate successful change in the organization. The change management tool used to execute the change model was Appreciative Inquiry (AI), developed by [2] David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney (1999). This tool has been used in significant ways since and is rapidly becoming a change management tool of "record" in a number of different situations. The Change Management Process Model uses systems theory to diagnose, design interventions, and manage the process.

INTRODUCTION

A Change Management Process Model was developed for an organizational consulting project. This model uses systems theory to arrive at a diagnosis, design the interventions, and manage the change process. The primary change management tool used in the change process was Appreciative Inquiry (AI) [2] [3] (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; Holman, Devane, & Cady, 2007).

In this case, a public library system had experienced a major meltdown of organizational communications after moving the operations into a dramatically different workspace located in a new building. The organizational culture prior to the library's move was warm, family-like, open, and a high performing organization. A central kitchen that everyone had to frequently pass through provided a place for sharing and collaborating. Everyone knew everything because it all happened in the kitchen: meetings, celebrations, problem-solving, and the sharing of food and fun. It took years for this nurturing culture to build. The shock of losing the physical space that enabled this warm and nurturing culture thrust the organization into a state of high anxiety, causing crippling communication snafus and poor performance. The historic nature of the library system was to maintain homeostasis [9] (O'Connor & McDermott, 1997); to manage change very slowly and carefully and to foster slow, deliberative adaptive policies.

Often, a "quick-fix" approach is used to address organizational crises. When this approach is used, diagnoses focus on the symptoms of a problem [10] (Olson & Eoyang, 2001). These symptoms are usually discrete and situated in one or several areas of the organization. However, in these scenarios, when interventions are executed unintended consequences can occur in the whole system.

Systems thinking, or looking at the whole rather than the parts [16] (Senge, 1990), was used to arrive at a understanding of what was happening in the library system. Kurt Lewin's theory of change proposes that an organization (or individual or community) must progress through the stages of change he described as "Freeze, Unfreeze, and Refreeze," and that driving forces must overcome powerful restraining forces in the system in order for the change to occur [15] (Schein, 1995). Individual resistance can form the most powerful restraining force of all, and in order to alleviate resistance, I developed a collaborative, participatory process [12] (Patton, 1997) that involved all members of the library system. People were brought in from each department and from all levels to work together to articulate the current state of the organization, address the issues, and formulate long-term solutions that would allow adaptation to the new space and the rebirth of a highly successful culture. This initial group formed a Transition Team which served, essentially, as the Champions of Change [1] (Black & Gregersen, 2003). They were tasked with taking the first steps to identify the critical issues that, when addressed, would have the greatest

positive impact on the organization. These strategies or "paths of change" [5] (McWhinney, 1997), p. 120) would then form the direction taken by the whole organization.

FIGURE 1: A CHANGE MANAGEMENT PROCESS MODEL

Old Library System *in the Temporary Space*	*New Library System* *in the New Building*
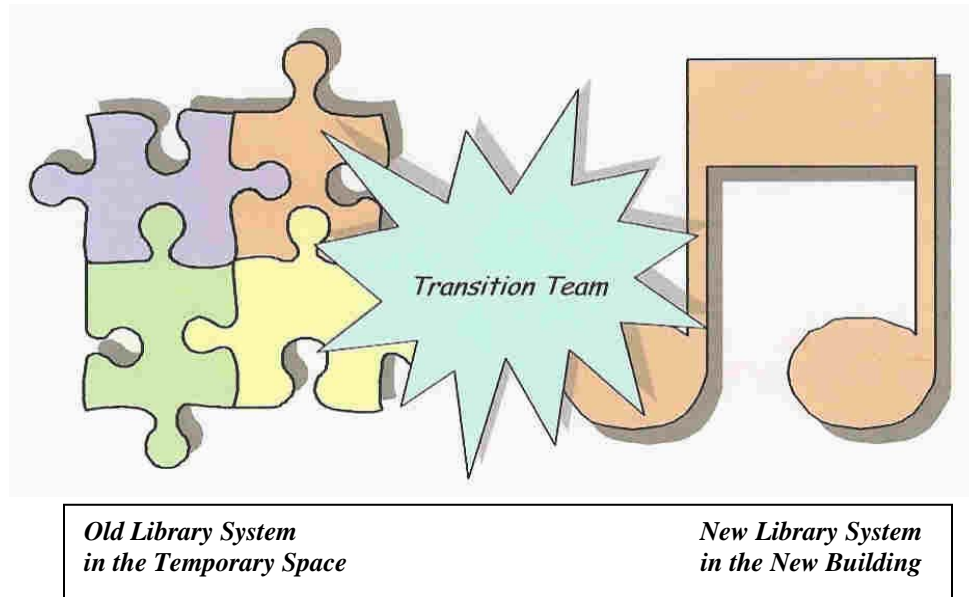
[4] (Mattare, 2004)

Appreciative Inquiry

AI, developed by [2] Cooperrider & Whitney (1999), is based on the idea that a change in language from a problem-seeking/solving perspective to language that assumes and builds on the best in people and organizations will produce positive effects.

> *Appreciative inquiry is the cooperative, corevolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations and communities, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives "life" to an organization or community when it is most effective, and most capable in economic, ecological, and human terms.*

> *AI assumes that every organization or community has "untapped and rich accounts of the positive"—what people talk about as past, present, and future capacities—the positive core. AI links the knowledge and energy of this core directly to an organization or community's change agenda, and changes never thought possible are suddenly and dramatically mobilized [3] (Holman et al., 2007).*

The "appreciative interview" forms the core of the process [3] (Holman et al., 2007). This is a one-on-one dialogue among organization stakeholders that uses questions framed around peak experiences, values, and what gives "life" to the organization at its best [3] (Holman et al., 2007). Some of these questions are:
1. Describe a time in your organization that you consider a high point experience, a time when you were most engaged and felt alive and vibrant.
2. Without being modest, what do you value most about yourself, your work, and your organization?
3. What are the core factors that give life to your organization when it is at its best?

4. Imagine your organization ten years from now, when everything is just as you always wished it could be. What is different? How have your contributed to this "dream organization" [3] (Holman et al., 2007)?

As it becomes clear, this method gets to the positive core of the organization and facilitates a process to build upon that core. As contrasted with our traditional approach to solving problems in organizations, AI is revolutionary.

**TABLE 1: COMPARISION OF PROBLEM SOLVING APPROACH TO AI APPROACH**

Problem Solving	Appreciative Inquiry
Identify "what's wrong"	Appreciating and valuing the best of "what is"
Analyze the causes	Creating a vision of what might be
Possible solutions	Dialoguing what should be
Treatment/intervention	

Adapted from (Holman et al., 2007)

The basic assumption of the traditional approach to organization change is that an organization is a problem to be solved versus the AI method which assumes that an organization is a mystery to be embraced [3] (Holman et al., 2007).

The AI change method is expressed via the 4-D Cycle which is: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny.

FIGURE 2: THE APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY 4-D CYCLE
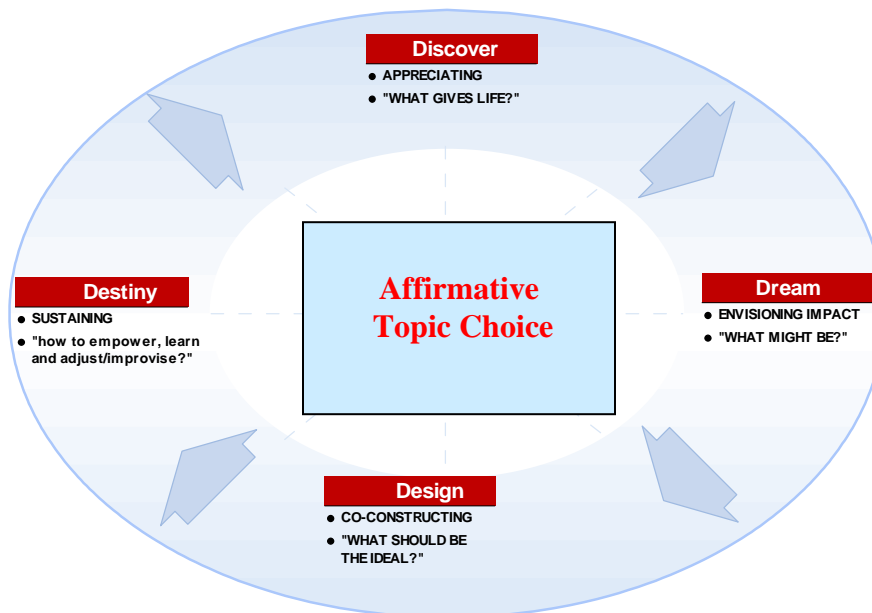
Adapted from (Holman et al., 2007)

The 4-D Cycle contains processes where:
1. The whole organization system "discovers" via inquiry into the positive core.

2. The organization "dreams" by co-creating a results-based vision discovered in the first step of the process.
3. The organization then "designs" by creating what possibilities could be achieved.
4. And, the organization articulates its "destiny" by strengthening the affirmative capability of the whole system [3] (Holman et al., 2007).

The central, unifying concept of the 4-D Cycle is the Affirmative Topic Choice which is the starting point of the AI process. Quite versatile, the AI process may be a quick conversation between boss and employee or a several-days-long gathering of a large community that wishes to address challenges.

The Change Management Process

When concern about the deteriorating process of internal communications first arose, the management of the library felt that the introduction of a library system Intranet would go far to improve things. This proposed solution drew from the traditional discrete problem solving approach rather than attempting to address what was strong and good about the organization that could serve as a foundation upon which to build a new vision of a future state. A failure to successfully implement the Intranet and a lot of staff resistance to it and other changes led the management team to request that I assist them.

In an effort to address the systemic nature of the issue, a more holistic and systematic approach was designed so that the process of addressing the issue became collaborative and consensual. My goal was to move people's thinking from a "problem" orientation to a "systems" orientation. I hoped that the mental models could change away from the problem-oriented view, and that a metaposition" view [9] (O'Connor & McDermott, 1997) could be taken, one that would move outside traditional frames. In other words, I wanted to move thinking from specific, discrete foci to seeing the "whole" [16] (Senge, 1990). Secondly, I sought to encourage and assist in instituting a team-based, collaborative approach to defining the needs, articulating the desired outcomes, and affecting those outcomes. And, thirdly, I wanted to introduce the concept of "culture" and its role in organizational development. In this case the core values, as related to the organizational culture of the library system [8] (Morgan, 1989), had been challenged.

In the culture of the library, empowerment of staff is critical and a key step in organizational development and learning in the system. Since the library is a service provided by the county government, it is closed and bureaucratic in structure, as defined by Max Weber and discussed in *Developing and Maintaining Open Organizations* [7] (Mink, Shultz, & Mink, 1991). The closed organization typically communicates "down" through ranks by omnipotent senior management [6] [7] (Mink, Esterhuysen, Mink, & Owen, 1993; Mink et al., 1991). The organization is not good at obtaining external feedback or responding to any feedback [7] (Mink et al., 1991). This particular system was not strictly a closed organization nor was it completely bureaucratic. It did have a more flexible and adaptive nature than the purest of bureaucracies. However, it needed to be more open, managing "through supportive use of authority by encouraging experimentation and tolerating ambiguity" [7] (Mink et al., 1991). By building these flexible temporary transition task forces, by being more experimental, and by using collaborative and empowering processes, the communication system developed would belong to the developers, rather than be imposed upon them.

The steps in the change process consisted of a series of interviews, focus groups, and workshops, all progressing from one to the other and all using AI. In the first interview step which was an initial discussion with management, I opened the subject of looking at addressing communication issues in a broader way. As an example, I began this process of Discovery by asking: "Describe the perfect day for yourself for giving and receiving the information you need to successfully work with the public and with other departments in the library." This discussion provided the framework for a subsequent focus group that was expanded to include more staff at subordinate levels. The 4-D Discovery and Dream steps illuminated how much the focus group participants missed the frequent opportunities to see each other face-to-face that were available in the temporary library facility. They clearly wanted that feeling of

community and dialogue back again, plus they wanted the information they needed delivered quickly, easily, and efficiently. They wanted the delivery mechanisms to be varied, ranging from the Intranet, to frequent meetings, written memoranda, and social occasions. The consensus was that a complete, well-planned system of communication was needed, one that was collaboratively designed by its users, and included an Intranet as one part of many other methodologies that would form the whole communication system. At this point, a very major leap had taken place that moved people from single-issue, problem-solving thinking to thinking about systemic issues framed by organizational culture. I believe that this leap was accomplished because of the collaborative nature of the search for information, i.e., the management and staff discussions that had occurred. The process thus far had taken what is called a "new direction beginning," where the statements made and questions posed were framed in terms of the opportunities presented by the move [13] (Preskill & Torres, 1999). Finally, a transition team workshop was conducted.

The transition team built on the prior discussions, defined the critical development issues that needed to be resolved, and became the Change Champions for a subsequent series of staff workshops. The establishment of the transitional team served as the first step in the library's transitioning to a revitalized culture with an efficient communication system. The staff workshops, rolled out from the transition team workshop, involved all staff members who were primary patron contacts and those who directly supported them.

The transition workshop agenda is outlined in Table 2. The orientation of the workshop, which was evaluative, follows the format detailed by Owen and is "interactive" evaluation [11] (Owen, 1999). Owen characterizes the approach or use of interactive evaluation as: *responsive*, or focused on the illumination of the delivery of a program (in this case the delivery of communication as a tool); *action research* (which in this case is the essential nature of a brainstorming workshop); *quality review* (or institutional self-study [11] (Owen, 1999); *developmental evaluation* (continuous improvement of a key library process); and *empowerment evaluation* (encouraging the users of the communication system to develop it themselves [11] (Owen, 1999).

TABLE 2: TRANSITION TEAM WORKSHOP PLAN

Time	Activity	Format	Desired Outcomes
30 minutes	• Icebreaker: Think outside the box exercise • Overview • Discussion of next activities	• Whole group exercise • Lecture • Group discussion	• Lay groundwork and goals for workshop • Demonstrate communication experientially • Communication methods
45 minutes	• Using Appreciative Inquiry-framed questions, share and discuss high points • Brainstorm a 'perfect' communication system	• Break into small groups; put ideas on flipchart to share with the group	• Build teamwork across departments • Build collaboration • Arrive at group consensus • Develop new ideas and ways of thinking
45 minutes	• Small groups present ideas	• Whole group	• Thinking 'outside the box' • Collaboration • Consensus • Focus on positive

Time	Activity	Format	Desired Outcomes
30 minutes	• Discussion • Outline of next steps • Ideas for staff workshops • Tentative schedule • Enjoy a bowl of fresh-baked cookies	• Whole group	• General agreement • Outline for staff workshops • Participation • Team building • Excitement • Buy-in to the process • Acceptance of formal style of communication • Commitment to recapture of former family-like culture

Some of the questions asked of participants and discussed in breakout groups were:

    o *Looking back over your experiences at the library, think of a time when you felt that communication among your colleagues and co-workers was at its best. What was going on? What made it successful? Who was involved? What was it about you that made it successful?*

    o *What do you value most about working at the library?*

    o *If you could change, develop, and transform communication at the library now in any way you wished, what three things would you do to?*

CONCLUSION

The use of AI in this change management project allowed an organization in crisis to Discover its core values, Dream of a better communication process, Design a new vision, and rearticulate its Destiny. AI as a change management tool used a specific model of change that created a transition team, Champions of Change, that would be the impetus for the newly defined organization dreams, vision, and values.

This process was unusually successful in that profound, fundamental change was achieved by engaging participants in a joyful and positive experience. All of this was accomplished with the recognition that change in this case occurred all during the process of "building the bridge while they walked on it" [14] (Quinn, 2004).

The initial steps of transforming the thinking of management from a problem-orientation led to a discovery process and the foundation for ongoing positive change and high performance [3] (Holman et al., 2007). Collaboration became an institutionalized organizational process and replaced the usual bureaucratic approach where management pushed decisions down the hierarchy of staff lines. Decisions in the future will be made by the consensus of the staff and accepted by management.

Now, the organization is engaged in active and enthusiastic activity to accomplish many objectives. There is a new, shared sense of what has been missing and what needs to be done to address the loss of closeness in the library culture. The excitement and consensus generated in the discussions and workshops have resulted in a commitment to working together to recapture the sense of family in the system. The staff is now in charge of recreating this sense, and they are supported by their management. In the library system, a living, breathing, vital culture will continue to grow and develop with a new, co-created and shared vision.

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