Interview: David Cooperrider And Appreciative Inquiry

By David Creelman   *Pub.Date - 09-Jul-01 appearing in* http://www4.hr.com/

David Cooperrider is a professor at Case Western Reserve University. He is one of the only business school professors offering genuinely radical and revolutionary ideas about management.
David W. Creelman spoke to Dr. Cooperrider.

DWC- Let's begin with a description of appreciative inquiry?

DC- An appreciative inquiry is a form of organizational analysis and development. It can be applied in very informal ways within a team or department, or it can be a more formal organization-wide intervention.
There are three principles underlying appreciative inquiry. The first is that what I call the *constructionist principle*. To a much larger degree than we normally take into account, we construct the realities that we live in through our modes of analysis. As HR managers, we are constantly involved in analysis. We are constantly doing strategic planning analysis, needs analysis, attitude survey analysis, performance appraisal analysis and so on. Our capability as HR professionals depends on how well do those inquiries. Our success depends on how well we read the world around us. The constructionist principle tells us that the way we know the world, the kind of analysis we do, is extremely fateful to where we end up.

The second principle is called the *principle of simultaneity*. Very often, we think of analysis and change, or inquiry and change, as very separate moments. First, we'll do the attitude survey and then we'll design a change intervention. The principle of simultaneity says it's not quite that simple, and that, in fact, inquiry and change are completely simultaneous moments. Inquiry equals change; inquiry is one of the most powerful methods for creating change. The seeds of change are planted in the very first question that we ask.

The third principle of the appreciative approach is an *open book principle*. We were brought up with the metaphor that organizations are like machines, and, therefore, we can measure, study, predict and control them. A more apt metaphor is that organizations are an open book. They are open to endless interpretation, reinterpretation, and multiple interpretations. Just like an open book, we can read just about anything into any organization.
In any organization we can study fragmentation and moments of low morale. We can also choose to study moments of inspiration, hope, courage and creativity. We can study in any human organization moments of debilitating bureaucratic red tape. We can also study entrepreneurial innovation that brings people together in new configurations.

What that means is that the questions we ask about our organization and the way we approach our work doesn't depend on the world out there because we can study anything. What HR people do ask in practice is based on the habits we have been taught.

I realize those three principles are abstract. Let me share a concrete exercise I've done that HR professionals could try. Let's say you're training a group of managers and you give everybody a case study of IBM. You tell the managers to go off in sub-groups and analyze the

case.

Now listen to those instructions. I didn't say what kind of analysis, how to go about it and so on but, and you can try this, 98% of the time is the group will come back with almost exactly the same underlying structure to their report.

They'll come back and say, "Here's the big problem we see at IBM." They'll go to the flip chart and say something like, "The biggest problem at IBM is that people have lost touch with the customers in the field." Then they'll flip the flip chart over and go to the next step and tell you, "We wanted to go beneath the surface to discover the root causes of this problem. And here are the five major causes: IBM has not invested in enough in R&D, the leaders have lost touch with the people in the field, the hierarchy has gotten too tall…" and so on. They'll flip the flip chart over again and 98% of the time the next flip chart will be the solutions to this problem at IBM, and in the last flip chart, "Here's the action plan we propose to solve this problem."

This is interesting because I did not ask for a problem-based analysis. All I said was to go off and do an analysis. But 98% of the time it comes back with the underlying grammar and structure of a problem-based analysis and intervention.

Somewhere in the past we started thinking that organizations don't just have some problems, organizational life is a problem. Our tools and approaches to human resources management, and management in general, assume organizing is a problem to be solved and, therefore, to do good organizational analysis is to identify real problems. Thus, to be an agent of change means addressing problems we have identified.

In my own work in the early 1980s, I starting saying to myself, "Wait a second. I'm not sure I want to buy into that root metaphor." Organizational life is not a problem to be solved. There was no organization that was created as a problem. All organizations were meant to create a solution.

I began to shift my root metaphor. Organizational behavior isn't so much a problem to be solved as a solution to be embraced. With that change in metaphor I noticed we started shifting our questions, but I realized I'm still using a problem/solution framework of language. So we tried a different root metaphor, organizational life isn't a problem to be solved, organizations are homes of infinite imagination, infinite capacity. Organizations are in some sense a mystery. We have no idea where they are going to end up and what the limits of the human imagination are. Organizations are a gift; they are centers of human relationships and human development.

DWC- I think everyone will immediately recognize that 98% of people will tackle things in this familiar problem-solving framework. I also think that 98% of people don't know there's an alternative. It's not that they chose to do it this way; it's the only way they know.

DC- Like a right-handed person will, without reflection, always throw the ball with the right hand.

DWC- The other thing I'd note is that as managers and consultants we all have used this problem approach and have found how unsatisfactory it often is. We are always doing an analysis, coming up with a solution, which we try to implement, but more often than not, we don't really solve the problem. I think there's a feeling in people's guts that the

problem/solution approach is not a very fun way to be living our lives.

DC- You're exactly right. Not only do we not solve the problems, but, in fact, we multiply the very problems we are trying to deal with.

When we started thinking that organizations are homes, are centers of human relationships filled with infinite capacity, it shifted the way we asked questions. Instead of asking what's wrong, our job became discovering everything that gives life to this system, when it's most alive, and most effective.

What we noticed, in about 1982, was that the more we started asking questions about the true, the good, the better, and the possible, the more we were able to participate in the creation of positive change. For example, instead of studying low turnover, we'd search for the qualities when the organization created magnetic work environments, where talent would stay. We would do studies on magnetic work environments and find that that would have more impact on reducing turnover than doing a low turnover study.

We learned human systems move in the direction of what we most persistently ask questions about. For example, if I wanted to create an organization that fostered enthusiasm and engagement I could ask: Would I do better by doing a low morale survey leading to some intervention or would I move much more rapidly if I jumped right into the very topic I want and studied moments of the greatest and most exceptional engagement, commitment and enthusiasm.
It doesn't matter whether it's an economic topic, a cultural topic, or customer related topic, human systems move in the direction of what we most systematically and deeply ask questions about.

What evolved was a process we call *appreciative inquiry*. The term appreciative and inquiry are very simply understood. Appreciation means 'to value', 'to see the best in others', 'to notice positive potential'. Appreciation also has a second, economic or developmental, meaning. We talk about how the stock market has appreciated in value. So, the term appreciation isn't that mysterious.

The term inquiry refers to study, systematic analysis, and openness to discovery. By putting the two words together, we are talking about a methodology of positive change. That contrasts with the problem/analytic, deficit-based theory of change.

We have been locked, and it's not just in management but in many fields, into a view that the most effective way to change a system is to first look at the deficiencies, its faults, its problems, its diseases, and so on. That is the diagnostic methodology of a physician, the editorial methodology of an editor, the methodologies of the lawyers, the nurse and so on.

The positive theory of change argues just the opposite. It argues that the most rapid way to mobilize change in human systems is to create a connection between every member of a human system and the entirety of what I'll call the positive core of the past, present and future.

What do I mean by *positive core*? I thought, "What would it look like if we created a systematic

map of all the achievements of an organization over the last twenty years, all the moments of innovation and breakthrough. What if we mapped out the economic, technical and human aspects of the organization. Not only that, how about if we map the moments they felt inspired, a sense of courage, and optimism. What if we also map the strengths of their suppliers, their external partners, and customers?"

If we mapped all of that, we couldn't call it corporate culture because some of our cultures are very, very negative and don't work well. Everything here that I've been talking about works well. If we could map all of it, it would almost be like mapping the incredible bio-diversity in the Amazon. I struggled with what to call it. I just decided to call it the positive core. Every living system has this huge positive core of capability and opportunity and vision and wisdom.

Appreciative inquiry is a way of doing inquiry—whether we are talking about customer focus groups, team building, or performance appraisal—that systematically and deeply maps the positive core to make that knowledge public, accessible, shared.

DWC- What's also striking is its relevance to life outside of business, because it's really a fundamental way of how you are looking at getting things done in the world.
I like your comment on thinking in terms of systems, of how I am going to get this system, all of these different people, doing something constructive and positive. When you get right down to it, it's a fairly simple technique.

DC- What's not as simple is implementing it because people want to hang on to the deficit-based theory. For example, a major Fortune 500 company began to try seriously to address sexual harassment. They hired a very effective consulting firm from New York to work on this issue for several years. The consultants analyzed the litigation and its cost to the company. They brought in counselors, they created a whole series of sexual harassment programs to raise awareness and communicate company policies.

Yet, one day the president of the consulting firm called me and said, "Dave, I'd like to talk. I've been working in this area for twenty years and for the first time in my career; I'm starting to admit to myself that maybe my help is not helpful. When we look at the statistics, we're finding that every single measure shows the sexual harassment problem is getting worse. Litigation numbers have increased, the cost to the company has increased, the numbers of people engaged with counseling has increased, and the reported incidents have increased. Our sexual harassment training programs are not going well, people are voting with their feet, the rooms are half-empty now. We are finding that those who participated in our training feel more distance between people of the opposite gender. They feel less ability to talk with one another. They feel more distrust, and feel less comfortable approaching each other. Every single thing we've done is making things worse."

So, the question was how to take an appreciative inquiry approach to sexual harassment.

I started asking questions: this is the important starting place for the appreciative approach. As you ask questions, they begin to shift the framing of the situation. I said, "What is it that you want to see happen as a result of the work?" She replied, "Well we want to reduce sexual harassment". I said, "No. Let's say that's very successful, what do you really want to see?"

and she blurts out "Well, of course we want high quality cross gender relationships in the workplace." I said "Aha, what happens if instead of doing a diagnostic study of the problems we started doing a full out search for moments where people felt most effectively connected in co-leadership between men and women in the workplace?" The point here is that humans move in the direction of what we ask questions about.

I asked her, "This isn't my area of expertise but is there one book or a study of high quality co-leadership relationships between men and women in a corporation?" She said "You know, there are thousands of studies about sexual harassment, there's not one in the entire literature on the highest quality dynamics of men and women." What does that mean? Does that mean that those highest quality shared relationships do not exist? No, it just means that our habits of analysis have taught us that it doesn't count.

In this case, we started a cycle of appreciative inquiry. It moves from discovery, to dreams, to designing the future, to destiny. At the center of everything is topic choice, not what is the problem, but what are the topics that we are going to launch the organization-wide analysis around? In this case, the topic was men and women working it out, standing as a team, as shared leaders. We put an invitation in the company newsletter for pairs who felt like they had something to teach the world about the high quality of co-leadership. We were hoping for maybe a dozen volunteers to share their stories. We had over 100 pairs volunteer to come to this workshop!

At the workshop, we did a thorough analysis of the stages of development of their relationships, what the environmental factors were, the tasks, and the nature of leadership in this situation that helped them develop the highest quality co-leadership. At the end of the workshop they said that we couldn't just stop here, we needed to take this methodology to the entire company. So, these 100 pairs went out and they each interviewed five other pairs. So, all of a sudden, you had five hundred interviews going on throughout the company searching for moments where there was exceptional high quality "co-leadership" in the workplace. We gathered up all those stories, put together a book of about 500 pages with one story after another looking at the stages of development of the high quality relationship, looking at how men and women overcame stereotypes of each other.

We then created an appreciative inquiry summit. The summit is a large group planning technique where we bring between 100 and 2,000 people together for three days to address a question. In this case the question was, How do we develop the 21st century organization for maximizing the potential of high quality co-leadership between men and women? We used those hundreds of stories to analyze the root causes of success in that area.

The first stage was discovery and mapping the positive core, all the capacities this company had to build high quality co-leadership between men and women. Then they began to dream about the 21st century vision that they had for that company. Then they began to create design principles. How should our company be structured? What are our principles about career development? What are our values about shared power and decision-making? They designed a picture of the ideal organization and then finally set in motion plans and processes for making that happen. Two years later, this company won the Catalyst Award for Best Organization in the Country for Women to Work. It's a powerful story and it begins to illustrate how we can go beyond the deficit-based theory of change and unleash the power of positive

change.

DWC- What excites me about this way of thinking is that it has a solid basis in a very profound understanding of how humans work, and, more importantly, when we actually try to do it, it succeeds. I was also struck how the consultant hit a point where they finally admitted to themselves that what they were doing wasn't helping. It's something that people are very loathe to admit.
Appreciative Inquiry is about change. What do you think of other academics' views on change?

DC- John Kotter has a Harvard Business Review article on successful change. He argues in the same old conventional way using a deficit-based theory. He actually argues that leaders of change first have to create a "flaming platform". They have to talk about how things are falling apart and create such a fear-based sense of urgency that people will be open to change. In other words, we start change by emphasizing the deficient and the broken. In fact, he goes so far as to praise times when CEOs have actually made up the flaming platform by fudging the financial data to make people feel that the company is going under. He holds that up as a standard and I can't believe it!

DWC- Let's round out this discussion with some closing advice for HR managers.

DC- Appreciative inquiry involves a decisive shift from a deficit-based theory of change to a more social constructionist perspective. The other is the shift from piecemeal change to whole systems change. Wholeness is a really important principle that we are working with in the appreciative inquiry.

Ask what the most effective group size is, and almost everyone will say six to eight people. About 1,800 studies have been done that indicate that the small group of six to eight people is the most effective. Almost all of our change methodologies are pulled from that assumption. Almost all of our change methodology involves task forces of 6-8 people, maybe 20 at the most.
The assumption in all of our methods is that this is the most effective sized group, but what we didn't do was ask, "Most effective for what?"

If the goal is to break down the walls between silos in the system and to help create a common perspective on direction, then maybe a group of 500 people working interactively for three or four days is more effective than a group of six to eight. If it's to create a whole new implementation capacity across entire systems maybe a group of 1,000 people doing strategic planning and change work together is more effective. If it's to create a momentum of trust and connect genius that exists on all levels in the system, maybe a group of 2,000 people working interactively on something is more effective.

My favorite way of doing the appreciative inquiry is in groups ranging in size from 100 to 2,000.

In one factory, the CEO was courageous and shut down the entire factory for three days. He brought all 750 people together to do strategic planning. Every level, every part, the whole plant was closed for three days. He also brought 100 external stakeholders, suppliers, customers and partner organizations. The results were extraordinary. A year later, their

absenteeism rate was down 300%, which translated to millions of dollars in savings.

What you notice when you do this process is that it is easy to facilitate. There were 750 people and all we had were two facilitators because the groups doing the work during the cycle of discovery and dream, and designing the future didn't need facilitating. Everyone can manage themselves. We are all adults but what we do need to do is create conditions that help bring out our full capacity as an organization.

When people experience the wholeness of their system, something happens to bring out the best in our capacity. It's like when the astronauts for the first time saw the planet from a distance: what happened was instant global consciousness and it changed the lives of those astronauts. The same things happen in organizational life to the extent that we can capitalize on this principle of wholeness.

It is so easy to do this work it's unbelievable

DWC- That's really stunning. I would have predicted with great confidence that if you had 100 or more people in a room like that you'd get nothing done. It shows my understanding of how these things work is wrong because I would have put money on it being a total fiasco.

DC- Absolutely the opposite.
You know, a couple of years ago I met Peter Drucker and asked him, "What is your definition of good management?" He said, "It's very simple. The task of the manager is to create an alignment of strength and make people's weaknesses irrelevant."

It could be argued that all leadership is appreciative leadership. It's the capacity to see the best in the world around us, in our colleagues, and in the groups we are trying to lead. It's the capacity to see the most creative and improbable opportunities in the marketplace. It's the capacity to see with an appreciative eye the true and the good, the better and the possible.

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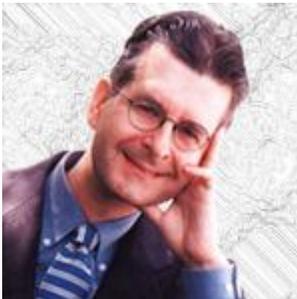
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