

Conversations Worth Having

Conversations Worth Having

**Using Appreciative Inquiry to Fuel
Productive and Meaningful Engagement**

Second Edition

Jackie Stavros *and* Cheri Torres

**Introduction by
David L. Cooperrider**



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For those in conversation

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Preface



*Sometimes the greatest adventure
is simply a conversation.*

—Amadeus Wolfe

Conversations lie at the heart of how we interact. We are almost always engaged in either internal dialogue or external interaction. But how often are those conversations worth having? We've heard from countless numbers of people who long for positive change in their lives, communities, and organizations and in the world. They are tired of meaningless interactions and conversations about change that are negative, drag everyone down, and zap energy—and then nothing happens. They are weary of wasting time on conversations that focus on what's wrong, without producing any actionable results. They are frustrated with the destructive conversations broadcast nationally and globally that fray relationships, pit people against one another, and generate fear, distrust, and hopelessness. They long for meaningful engagement that builds connection, fuels productivity, and generates positive change.

This book is about those meaningful conversations. It tells how to have conversations that are productive while strengthening relationships and generating possibilities for a future that works for everyone. Conversations worth having energize people. They foster efficiency, fuel meaningful engagement, and generate creative possibilities. They matter because they inspire collaboration and cooperative action that has a positive impact for individuals, organizations, and communities. We believe that living into our potential begins with these kinds of conversations.

As authors, both of us are longtime practitioners of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), one of the most widely used approaches for fostering positive change in individuals, groups, and organizations. Our journey into AI began in the 1990s when we met David Cooperrider, cofounder of AI. At its core, AI is about discovering the best in people, organizations, and the communities around them. AI is grounded in the notion that we create each moment, and ultimately our social systems, through conversation and shared meaning-making. Appreciative Inquiry is the inspiration of our work as well as the foundation of this book, *Conversations Worth Having*.

In its pages, you will learn two simple AI practices, a strategy to support intentionality, and five powerful principles to make any conversation one worth having. We guide you to ask questions that can change the direction of any conversation, surfacing assumptions, creating shared understanding, building trust, and inspiring connection, new knowledge, and innovation. Rather than heading down a negative path, we show you how to frame conversations in ways that make people you're talking with want to engage and take action. Principles we lay out in the book will influence how you think about your experiences and challenges, helping you reflect on them more

constructively and productively. And our technique for tuning in will allow you to be more mindful about who's driving your conversations, increasing your capacity to intentionally foster ones worth having.

We were inspired to write a second edition of the book for several reasons. First, more and more people have been using and sharing the practices from *Conversations Worth Having*. From the first year it was out, there was a request for training and certification in the practices. Since the book was first published in 2018, we've learned a lot about explaining the two AI practices, and we discovered an important factor for success—*tuning in*.

In this second edition, each chapter is still built around real-life stories drawn from our personal and client relationships; some new stories have been added. Each story demonstrates practices and principles that were used to transform both conversations and outcomes. These include primarily applications in the business world, as well as several stories from the realms of education, community change, and family dynamics. Throughout the book, we have improved explanations and clarified concepts to make it easier for people to successfully apply the two practices. This includes clarifying generative questions and offering more examples of using the flipping technique to create a positive frame. At the end of the book, you'll now find generative discussion questions to use for individual reflection (conversations with oneself) and team engagement.

In working with others to apply the practices, we realized a key factor in being successful is our ability to be intentional about our conversations. To support intentionality, we have added a new chapter on tuning in, which is a strategy for recognizing what might be driving our reactions and impacting

our interactions. Our work with clients and trainers has taught us that to use these practices effectively, it is important to be aware of our body-mindset and how it is influencing our conversations and well-being. Chapter 3 offers an evidence-based technique for tuning in to your body-mindset. This is a practical way to recognize what's influencing our perceptions, emotions, and thoughts.

In addition, the research in neuroscience, neurophysiology, and positive psychology has continued to grow, adding to the grounded evidence for the efficacy of *Conversations Worth Having*, for individuals, families, organizations, and communities. We have added current research to chapter 7. Finally, we added a discussion guide to support book clubs and teams wishing to take their communication to the next level.

From our vantage point, one of the most exciting things about life is the power of a single conversation to make a significant, positive difference. We invite you to join us in creating a positive change in your life and work by engaging in conversations worth having.

We are on a mission as conversation change agents to share how simple it is to foster conversations that help all people thrive. We are especially grateful to be working with Berrett-Koehler, whose mission is connecting people and ideas to create a world that works for all, and that will happen through conversation. We hope that our contribution to BK's important work will help influence positive change and wellness on the planet. We invite you to be one of many agents who are stimulating conversations to support a world that works for all.

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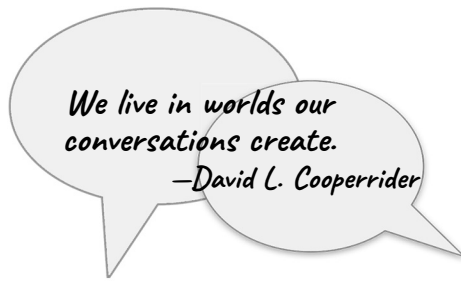
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Introduction



“I am struck by the simple fact that my impact as a leader, and even my whole day, goes better when I share my amazement, when we open minds, live into deeper and better questions, and interdependently emerge new things in every conversation.

“Life worth living . . . must be made of affirmation.”

These are the words of one of the most remarkable chief executive officers I’ve ever worked with, arguably one of the greatest, most thoughtful corporate leaders of modern times. In one of its classic cover stories, *Fast Company* called him the Trillion Dollar Man. The article featured Dee Hock’s leadership theory and his founding of Visa, one of the largest, most innovative, and most successful organizations of the past half-century. Today, Visa has a market value of some \$446 billion and annual financial transactions approaching \$11 trillion.

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During Dee's tenure as CEO, the corporation increased its profits by 10,000 percent, but more importantly it reinvented the very concept of organization itself. In many ways, it was an early prototype, not a final model, for the more fully human organization we are seeking and even seeing emerge today. The exciting story in Dee's career is his belief in people, which he expresses this way: "The truth is that, given the right circumstances, from no more than dreams, determination, and the liberty to try, quite ordinary people consistently do extraordinary things."¹

I had the privilege to work with Dee for more than five years. We were uniting the positive power of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) with his concepts of the more fully human organization—a collaborative, intrinsically motivating system capable of liberating the human spirit without reverting to tired, old command-and-control forms of bureaucracy. After years of working with Dee, I began to search for the core of his success. Yes, he was courageous. True, he was tireless. Right, he was an amazing learner. For example, when I visited his home he had just turned his dining room into a massive library spanning the fields of complexity science through the new biology of living systems to the humanities, including many of the classics in art, history, and literature. There were well over eight thousand titles in that "dining room" library, and each one had his underlines, exclamation points, and margin notes. His insatiable love of learning, of course, was a signature strength. And yes, he was skilled as a CEO, with talents in global finance, negotiations, and the future of digital technologies. Yet I still could not put my finger on his mystery. What was that unique difference, that "something more," that made all the difference and made Dee so extraordinary?

It was not until I opened this *very special and graceful book*, by Jackie Stavros and Cheri Torres, that I understood

the secret to that CEO's exceptional career and success. Dee Hock had a gift: a Jeffersonian belief in “we the people” and the idea of “organization as community,” which I would summarize as this:

Our organizational lives and the lives of others flourish or flounder, one conversation at a time.

For Dee, the difference between success and failure in leadership was all about the art of the “conversation worth having”—precisely the kind that this book describes with such clarity and practicality. Peter Senge, commenting on how Visa was conceived and co-created through literally thousands of conversations and dozens of disciplines, said that the early days of the company “may simply be the best business example of an emerging revolution in organizing.”²



Change begins with a single conversation.

As CEO, Dee Hock instinctively knew that all the abstract notions of management—corporate culture, strategy formulation, organizational alignment, change management, living the brand, joint venturing, winning the customer, enabling innovation, recruiting top talent, creating atmospheres of aspiring versus fearing, improving connectivity, and scaling up excellence—were accomplished one conversation at a time, with teams, persons, and both small and large system meetings. Dee called “this abundance of interdependent diversity that was the deeper meaning.” When I look back at our years of working together, what most stands out was how Dee, when at his best, was a maestro of vital conversations—some of the

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greatest I've ever been part of. Many of them became defining moments. This experience led me to believe this:

Every organization and every life's destiny is a series of defining moments—moments that shape us, change us, and have a huge impact on our development and strategic choices. Our research indicates that almost all of these moments involve the power of vital and caring conversations with significant others.

After numerous virtual conference calls and telepresence meetings with Dee (not his favorite way of conversing), I recall thinking: “I have never seen a CEO giving so much time and positive energy to each conversation, with such purity of attention, curiosity velocity, and mutual inquiry across boundaries; getting everyone engaged like a contact sport; inviting full voice; and modeling the beginner’s mind with real listening. Everyone felt appreciated, honored, elevated, and heard.”

In one instance, drawing on lessons from the Visa startup story, we were working with an organization to help its members articulate its body of beliefs, those constitution-like principles that provide the core values for years to come. My job was to apply the mindset of Appreciative Inquiry, an approach that values all voices, seeks to inspire generative theories and possibility thinking, opens our world to new possibilities, challenges assumptions of the status quo, and serves to inspire new options for better living.³

Dee called for a conversational process in which a diverse group of all relevant and affected stakeholders would meet and deliberate for three full days, every forty-five days, for an entire year. This schedule provided the time for vital conversations to get at the essence of what matters. Looking back, in a world where relationships are often superficial, this process

was astonishing. Because of those inspired conversations, the organization doubled in growth, doubled again, and continues to grow exponentially. So deeply held and valued were its guiding principles that, because of the power of conversations worth having, the organization had the courage to craft one final and concluding principle for the entire global system, with over 850 centers in some 150 countries. This principle stated, “Any individual or organization in this global system can do anything it wants, at any scale, and in any manner—as long as it advances our shared purpose and principles.”

This was a radical principle. It asked everyone to be a leader—to build the culture via every conversation. In effect, it told the organization’s people that they needed very little traditional supervision. It eliminated the need for a large, expensive, central office hierarchy and thick books on standard operating procedures. It realized that the intrinsic motivation that comes from inspirational beliefs is much more powerful than extrinsic forces. One lesson derived from that principle is highly relevant right now:

When you approach each vital conversation as if it could become the most important conversation you might ever have, you can create a positive legacy. How often do we think of our next conversation with this kind of alertness and high anticipation?

Originally, the prospect of deliberating for three full days, every forty-five days, for twelve months took everyone by surprise. Now, as I look back, I realize it was not the number of days that was important; it was the tough-love message Dee was sending. He was raising the bar on how we conceive of leadership work and think about conversations. In his book that shares the Visa creation story, the word *conversation* is

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used ten times more than the term *strategic planning*. Conversation is a meeting of hearts and minds. I believe this:

When hearts and minds meet, they don't just exchange facts and create atmospheres of hope or despair: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new explorations of possibility. Such conversations are literally living systems, living on the edge of chaos and order—like all of life, when it is most alive, busting out all over with pattern and coherence but also alive with novelty and emergence.

When you think of conversations worth having, think engagement, interweaving, co-creation, inspiration, respect, illumination, emergence, enriched relationships, trust, empathy, and bringing out the best: *think legacy*.

We live in worlds our conversations create.

Moreover, leadership is a tapestry of both failed and successful conversations that weave the fine threads of our cultures and relationships, budget alignments, customer communities, innovation trajectories, and best places to work into ethical environments where people can thrive and enable their individual and collective greatness to emerge.

On the reverse side of the tapestry, we've also experienced conversations that have caused irreparable damage—destructive conversations. Consider marriages and partnerships where people wish they could replay history and avoid that one unfortunate and explosive conversation that caused a rupture. Consider another life-depleting form of conversation: the boss who begins every meeting by treating the world or

the organization as “the-problem-to-be-solved”; where every agenda item is about threats to the business, failure rates, anger about missteps; and where the main life-depleting atmosphere left in the aftermath is fearful and toxic, some combination of disappointment and distance. And, with all of this at stake—each conversation part of a legacy—recall your schooling. Did you ever take a course on conversations? Not just any kind of conversation, but life-giving ones that serve to open your world to new possibilities, elevate greatness, and build bonds of mutual regard and positive power, not “power over” but “power to.”

This book, then, represents a breakthrough in the combined fields of Appreciative Inquiry and Peter Drucker-like strengths-based management, positive psychology, and design thinking. What you hold in your hands is the course you’ve likely never encountered in only one book but always wanted. *Conversations Worth Having* can change your life at work, certainly. Perhaps even more significant, however, is the difference it can make in creating precious, growth-promoting moments and relationships with significant others, family members, partnerships, and community.

Why my excitement? After all, a handful of books out there today describe courageous conversations, confrontational meetings, conflict resolution, and even “ferocious conversations.” And while they, too, show how our lives succeed or fail one conversation at a time, I believe this is the *first* book of its kind to take Appreciative Inquiry’s profound promise of positive leadership into legacy-creating conversations.⁴ Imagine taking the innovation-inspired tools of design thinking, the strengths-based leadership philosophy of Peter Drucker, the science of positive psychology, and the generative power of Appreciative Inquiry for bringing out the best in people and

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organizations—and then making all of these accessible as the operating system, even the DNA code, inside every conversation worth having.

The possibility that every conversation can start with a positive frame and end in an even more positive way is the central idea of *Conversations Worth Having*. In pursuing this radical idea, the authors take us into the principles of AI, now being applied at places such as Apple, Johnson & Johnson, the US Navy, Coca-Cola, Verizon, Vitamix, Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, and even the United Nations.

For example, instead of the metaphor that “the-world-is-a-problem-to-be-solved”—which almost automatically triggers a deficit-analytic search into breakdowns, gaps, and root causes of failure and places most of our attention on yesterday—we might consider instead an assumption that organizations are living systems, alive, embedded in “universes of strengths.” The most vital conversations, this book’s authors have discovered, begin in a wide-angle, valuing way—searching *the appreciable world*, which is always larger than our normal *appreciative capacity*, one where the starting assumption is this:

It is not only that we live in a universe of strengths and unlimited human imaginations, but surrounding every change situation we are part of—whether internal to the system or external to the system—there exists the strength combinations and innovation potentials, including consciousness shifts, greater than any organizational challenge or opportunity we will ever face.

Complexity science describes the concept of “sensitive dependence on initial conditions,” which can turn tiny snowballs into mountains of avalanches. We see many of those same

dynamics in conversations, right from the fateful moment when they are first framed. Small beginnings can have huge consequences, especially in human systems, which often become what those in the system ask questions about most frequently, authentically, systematically, creatively, and rigorously.

So, *Conversations Worth Having* is not at all about turning a blind eye to anything. Instead, it is about something quite artistic, ever so subtle, seeing *beyond the problem* and inviting a different kind of inquiry or search that creates an empowering environment, one that has a high-strengths density and a prospective, future-forming power. You will witness this different kind of inquiry in the first two stories the authors share in chapter 1, about a large teaching hospital and a struggling bank.

This book is built on the authors' relentless optimism, yet it is anything but Pollyannaish. Indeed, in this book, the authors take us into some of the hardest moments any manager, family, business, government, or community might face. *It skillfully provides exactly the right amount of theory for those who want the science of it, but mostly it's about practices you yourself can use and engaging narratives that illustrate and vivify.* The storytelling is honest, heartfelt, and real. You cannot help but reflect on your own life as the authors narrate their own and other transformations.

If you read nothing else, turn to the end of the book for the gripping account of the daughter of one of the authors: it's the true story of a mother and daughter and their response to a young father's harsh and untimely diagnosis of stage four lymphoma. The story, which moved me to tears, was written by the thirteen-year-old daughter, Ally. Courageous Ally teaches us how *Conversations Worth Having* is also about loving and being loved. The bottom line:

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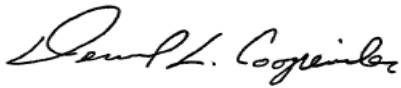
You learn that in any time, any place, any situation, no matter what people tell you, conversations matter and that words, generative questions, and the cognitive power of love—seeing through the gift of new eyes—can change lives, relationships, and organizations.

If you could choose only one inspiring and resource-rich book on leadership as conversation, what do you suppose it would be? For me, the answer is right here in your hands. Jackie Stavros and Cheri Torres—as well as Ally and her father, Paul—have given us a gift. In business, it will strengthen relationships because the relationship *is* the conversation. In homes and schools, it will help you see and bring out the best in your children and young people—because those, too, are relationships where the conversational ecology is precious and can produce life-defining moments. And when you read this small volume through the lens of your own conversational history, it will likely resonate with something you and many others have experienced:

Relationships come alive where there is an appreciative eye, when we take the time to see the true, the good, the better, and the possible in each other and our universe of strengths, and when we use this concentrated capacity to activate conversations that open our world to new possibilities, elevate collective genius and purpose, and build bonds of mutual regard and positive power—not “power over” but “power to.”

In the end, Jackie and Cheri have given us the gift of hope. Conversations worth having are those that allow us to grow the most and, in the process, also contribute the most. In a world

where so many conversations separate us from our vast potentials, may this book change not simply our world but also the world of conversation.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "David L. Cooperrider". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "David" being the most prominent.

Distinguished University Professor, Case Western Reserve University, and Honorary Chair, The David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry, Champlain College, Stiller School of Business