Encyclopedia of Knowledge Management

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Chapter 4
Appreciative Sharing for Organizational Knowledge Work

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INTRODUCTION

This article investigates an organizational approach to knowledge sharing (Ludema, Whitney, Mohr, & Griffin, 2003; Thatchenkery, 2005) based on the positive change philosophy of appreciative inquiry (AI) (Thatchenkery & Chowdhry, 2007; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Curran, 1991; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Of specific interest is the context of a community model to enable knowledge work through a participative sharing process (Vat, 2009). Of much concern here is an effort to put into perspective the social dimensions of knowledge sharing (Watkins & Cooperrider, 1996; Brown & Duguid, 1991) which not only deals with the internal and external boundaries of a distributed system of knowledge (Hoadley & Pea, 2002; Tsoukas, 1996), but with knowledge embedded within particular contexts of knowing. The promise of AI is that in every organization something works and change can be managed through the identification of what works, and the analysis of how to do more of what works (Bushe, 1995; Gergen, 1990; Harman, 1990). A key characteristic of the appreciative sharing approach is that it is a generative process. That means it is a moving target, and is created and constantly re-created by the people who use it. The premise in our investigation is that while the support of technologies is essential for a

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community in knowledge sharing, its success rests with its people – organizers, information and knowledge providers, sponsors, users, and volunteers – who support the community in a variety of ways (Hemlin, Allwood, & Martin, 2004). Therefore, when attempting to design technology in support of knowledge communities (Linn, 2000), it is important to remember "what is working around here?" in the organization. Such knowledge includes not only information capture and transmission, but also the establishment of social relationships (Hubbard, 1998) in which people can collaboratively construct their understanding.

BACKGROUND OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

The contributions behind the work of appreciative inquiry (AI) (http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu), is mainly attributed to David L. Cooperrider's (1986) doctoral research at Case Western Reserve University. The term AI first appeared in Cooperrider's feedback report to the Cleveland Clinic's Board of Governors following an organizational diagnostic exercise he had been undertaking there in 1980 (Lewis, Passmore, & Cantore, 2008, p.34). In his work at the clinic Cooperrider noticed the level of positive collaboration in the organization and began to study the life-giving factors which gave rise to this. The context of AI is about the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives life to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. Since the appearance of AI some twenty years ago, researchers and practitioners have described it in many ways. It has been called a philosophy, a revolutionizing force, a transformational change process, a life-giving theory and practice, and even a new world view (Watkins & Mohr, 2001; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). Still, it is helpful to look into AI from the notion of social constructionism developed by Kenneth Gergen (1999), which is so called because it aims to account for the ways in which phenomena (such as knowledge sharing) are socially constructed. Before Gergen, the seminal treatise of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), named *The Social Construction of Reality* is also useful to understand the foundation for AI's peculiar approach to knowledge work because it involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. Further up the AI's origin of research is the name of Kurt Lewin (1946), who is credited with the early development of action research during the 1940s. At the heart of action research is a spirit of inquiry rather than a mechanistic analytical study often considered as an abstract disconnected exercise by observers searching for findings; yet, action research has the potential to bring about change in whatever is being explored as the research proceeds. This characteristic of action research has indeed become an important principle underpinning AI's processes of operation.

The Complexity of Knowledge Work

In 1969, Peter Drucker emphasized that knowledge had become the crucial resource of the economy. He claims the credit for coining the notion of 'knowledge work', which he contrasted with more traditional forms of work such as service work and manual work. Today, the term 'knowledge work' tends to refer to specific occupations which are "characterized by an emphasis on theoretical knowledge, creativity and use of analytical and social skills" (Frenkel et al., 1995, p.773). Knowledge work, interpreted this way, encompasses both what is traditionally referred to as professional work, such as accountancy, scientific and legal work, and more contemporary types of work, such as consultancy, software development, advertis-

ing and public relations. Understandably, these types of knowledge work are not susceptible to be easily imitated because there is a significant application of both tacit and explicit knowledge (Nonaka, 1994). Those engaged in these types of work are often individuals with high levels of education and specialist skills, who demand autonomy over their work processes to get the job done; namely, to demonstrate their ability to apply those skills to identify and solve problems. What is significant about these types of knowledge workers is that they own the organization's primary means of production – that is, knowledge. Today, with the advent of the ICT (especially the Web 2.0 technologies), we are ready to construct knowledge portfolios (Birchall & Tovstiga, 2002; Dove, 1999) for the organization, to track the contributions of individual knowledge workers, and different grouping of the same in the form of group-based project work. Thus management of knowledge workers assumes greater importance for sustaining productivity than the management of machines, technologies, or work processes. Like musicians, Drucker (1988) sees such employees exploring outlets for their creative abilities, seeking interesting challenges, enjoying the stimulation of working with other specialists. This, he argues, poses new management challenges in knowledge-based organizations: developing rewards, recognition and career opportunities; giving an organization of specialists a common vision; devising a management structure for coordinating tasks and task teams; and ensuring the supply and skills of top management people. In the context of organization development, the focus of appreciative inquiry is on bringing people together to explore what works through sharing personal success stories, the dreaming of a future state, the valuing of all people and the assertion that organizations and associated organizational theories are social constructions which together we can choose to change. AI accepts uncertainty as a way of life and that planning cannot be undertaken by any one individual but is a shared responsibility. In its focus on the notion of a positive core at the heart of organizations and, by implication, individuals, AI's bringing together of people in a community as part of the operational process offers connectedness to a higher purpose whose underlying assumption is this: knowledge and power are not vested in the few at the top of the organization but rather are created among all of the organizational members as they interact together. In offering a new way of engaging with one another, organizations practicing AI are expected to meet a deep-seated need in people, to be respected, to be listened to and to have the opportunity to shape the future.

An Appreciative Approach for Knowledge Sharing

In this section, we examine an appreciative approach to share knowledge, based on the context established above for appreciative inquiry. This approach named Appreciative Inquiry Summit (Ludema, Whitney, Mohr and Griffin, 2003), elucidates how organizations could process their experiences to learn from them, and how they can handle this responsibility effectively. It addresses the issue of implementation – how learning capability (Orem, Binkert, & Clancy, 2007) can be developed through changes in attitudes, behaviors, processes and structures. Our discussion is based on the four stages of AI Summit: Discovery – the identification of organizational processes that work well; Dream – the envisioning of processes that would work well in the future; Design – the planning and prioritizing of the processes that would work well; and Destiny – the implementation of the proposed design. This approach involves bringing diverse groups of people together to study and build upon the best in an organization or community through a conversational interviewing process to explore change.

The Discovery Stage

The task of the discovery stage is to explore the organization's positive core. It is an invitation to search for the best in oneself, in others, and in the whole system to create a foundation of confidence and broadened understanding for the subsequent tasks of the dream, design, and destiny stages. At the core of the discovery stage include such activities as:

Introducing AI

To engage a community of participants in discovery, they need to know some upfront information such as: what AI is and why it is being used; what the 4-D cycle (Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny) of AI is and how it will serve as the outline for their summit discussions; what the appreciative interview is and how important individual story-sharing will be throughout the summit. At the end of this introduction, it is also important to go over the specific purpose and agenda of the summit.

Launching the Paired Appreciative Interviews

At the heart of the summit process are the appreciative interviews whose functions include not only making visible the participants' tacit knowledge to the organization, but also the appreciative dislodgment of certainty and the building of new relationships. The former creates openings from which innovations and future possibilities emerge, and the latter creates the energy and connections needed to turn those possibilities into practical action. In launching the appreciative interview, it is meant to provide a unique opportunity to get to know someone with a different view of the world. It is nevertheless important to ensure that everyone has a pair partner and to give directions for the process of conducting interviews (Ludema, Whitney, Mohr and Griffin, 2003, p.130-131; 263-267), including a clear time frame that includes the amount of time to be taken for each interview and the time to reconvene in the whole group.

Debriefing the Interviews

At the end of the appreciative interviews, it is important to share what the participants have learned. Yet, before unpacking the interviews' content in small groups, it is equally important to spare some time as a large group to debrief the interview process, by asking people to share any words or thoughts about what the interview was like for them. This debriefing is important because it allows people to hear from others, and connect with a sense of the whole discovered in the appreciative interviews.

Discovering the Positive Core

After the debriefing, pairs of interviewers and interviewees will convene into small groups to introduce their partners and begin sharing what they have learned from the interviews. This activity allows people to reveal the hidden strengths that have allowed the organization to function at its best. This activity invites people into a new relationship with their organizational history – not one that views the past in terms of problems, but one that learns and leverages its best examples to create new possibilities for the future. It sets the tone for the entire summit by building an environment of collective confidence. There are two important tasks in discovering the positive core:

- *Revealing the Root Causes of Success*

Root causes of success can be at the individual level, work unit level, or organizational level. To reveal such causes in the small-group sharing, pairs of participants in each small group (typically seated around a table, composed of three to four pairs) are invited to introduce their partners by sharing stories and highlights from the "opening" and "closing" sections of their pair-interview. These

are questions about what attracted them to the organization, their high-point experiences, what they value most, and their images of the future. Typically people are invited to listen for patterns or unique experiences of interest as others share their partner's stories. At the end of this sharing, the session recorder (often played by a volunteer participant) makes two lists including the patterns from the high-point stories, and emerging images of the future. Next, people in each group are invited to go back around the table, and each person shares his or her partner's stories and highlights from the "middle" section of the interview. These are topical questions related to the summit task, identifying the strengths, assets, capacities, capabilities, values, traditions, practices, and other factors that drive success with regard to the summit topic. At the end of this round of listening for patterns that support success, the group recorder should have prepared some important details of "stories" and "root causes of success." Each group is then invited to prepare a short presentation (3 to 4 minutes) that includes one exemplar story and a description of their "top five" or "top ten" root causes of success.

- *Creating a Map of the Positive Core*

Once the root causes of success have been discovered in small groups, it is time to share the discoveries with the large group. This is a very important part of the summit process because it is the first time participants will be hearing from one another about the content of the summit topic at the level of the whole. Oftentimes, strengths, resources, and capacities get connected and amplified across all the people in the summit. People gain immediate access to a "logic of the whole" and are inspired by the power and potential of the whole system working in concert. The best way to do this is to create some kind of big, bold visual display called the map of the positive core.

The process of discovering the positive core in small groups should begin to build a sense of community and create a fusion of strengths among diverse participants. Also, creating the map of the positive core should allow people to begin to develop a sense of the whole system and give people a glimpse of the power that is possible if the entire organization were to mobilize their energies in a common direction. The mission of the discovery stage is thereby to enlarge a sense of possibility and to build up people's momentum to dream.

The Dream Stage

The task of the dream stage is to engage the whole organization in moving beyond the status quo to envision valued and vital futures. It is an invitation to people to lift their sights, exercise their imagination, and dream about what their organization could look like if it were fully aligned around its strengths and aspirations (Polak, 1973). By doing this, the organization as a whole creates for itself positive guiding images of the future that expand the realm of the possible. Yet, one aspect that differentiates appreciative inquiry from other visioning or planning methodologies is that images of the future emerge out of grounded examples from the most positive past; they are compelling possibilities precisely because they are based on extraordinary moments from an organization's history. In this sense, this dream is both practical (grounded in the organization's past) and generative (seeking to expand the organizational potential). There are various approaches to dreaming, and the one discussed below is termed creative dreaming (Ludema, Whitney, Mohr and Griffin, 2003, p.152) whose activities include the following:

Envisioning the Future

The envisioning activity begins in the small groups of pair-based participants from the discovery stage. Each participant is to share his or her partner's responses to the future-focused questions from

the paired AI interviews. This is a very important part of the process because it ensures that the distinctive voice of each person is heard before the group begins to explore their images of the future in detail, by adding texture, richness, and depth to their dreams, including topics of purpose, relationships, strategies, initiatives, impact, and others. The small group then begins to weave the threads of individual dreams into a collective tapestry. It is important to look for ways to get the perspective and ideas of each group member into the collective dream. Having done this, the group can add, revise, rearrange, augment, and expand the list of ideas in any way it wishes as it follows its conversational course, affirming and valuing the voice of each member. This envisioning activity should result in a list of key elements of the group's collective dream.

Writing Dream Statements

The purpose of the dream statement is to put the key elements of participants' collective dream into words. Writing a statement in prose provides a way for people to talk through what they really mean and to create a powerful guiding image.

Preparing and Performing Creative Presentations

After articulating the dream statement in words, people are invited to prepare a creative presentation of the dream. This arrangement provides the participants with an opportunity to act out their dream by having people consider at a concrete, hands-on, day-to-day level what it actually means to put the dream into practice. The creative presentations should also allow people to "see" (tap into the imagination) the dreams and develop an emotional connection with them. Oftentimes, such presentations should bring with them a healthy dose of humor, which connects people and creates a new level of positive affect in the group. It is not surprising that over the years these dream presentations are often one of the most fondly remembered parts of the AI Summit experience: people crack jokes, blurt out unrehearsed lines, and act in ways that are delightfully unexpected and pleasantly surprising.

Enriching the Dreams

This activity stewards the opportunity to reflect as a whole organization on the images of the future gathered from the participants. The point is to allow people to talk about the images that make them feel most inspired; namely, those images they feel are most compelling for the future of the organization. This is also a time to refine those images. After the creative presentations, there are usually so many images swirling around that people need a little time to pause, reflect, and sort out their deeper aspirations as to what they really want and what they are truly committed to work on in the design and destiny stages. Typically, each small group is to produce two flipcharts. One contains the images they feel hold the most promise for the future of the organization, and the other contains thoughts about what these images mean for how we organize as we enter the design stage. When all the small groups have finished their lists, it is time to invite people to share ideas from their small group discussion with the big group.

The Design Stage

The task of the design stage is to create an organizational blueprint for sustainable development, which builds on the positive core and makes possible the fulfillment of the organization's dreams. This blueprint should comprise all of the ongoing commitments and approaches that define an organization's identity, culture, values, and potential. More precisely, it also refers to such organizational components as structures, strategies, processes, procedures, job descriptions, workflows, task groupings, alliances, and preferred practices. A vibrant blueprint should create an enabling en-

vironment that propels people forward in a way healthy enough to clarify their shared purpose and to craft a set of design propositions that are compelling enough to empower the entire organization to act in a dynamic, self-organizing way to build the future. Of particular concerns in this design stage (Ludema, Whitney, Mohr and Griffin, 2003, p.175-181) are the two specific activities of crafting and enriching design propositions.

Crafting Design Propositions

A design proposition is a statement of what an organization aspires to be and to do to accomplish its dream. It is an ideal that guides and gives direction to decisions, actions, and results. A proposition must be filled with both ethical, moral content and practical, actionable ideas. There are generally four criteria for a working proposition: Is it provocative – does it stretch, challenge, or interrupt the status quo? Is it grounded – are there examples from the participants' stories that illustrate the ideal as a real possibility? Is it desired – if it could be fully actualized, would you and would your organization really want it? Does it truly lead to your dream? Is it stated in affirmative and bold terms as if it is happening now?

Enriching Design Propositions

The design propositions produced in the small groups must be shared with the large group and opened to a process of appreciative dialogue to enrich them and to integrate them with other propositions. This process is important because it promotes learning and produces a deeper level of collective intelligence on the part of the whole system. People are thereby informed about new directions, see more connections not known before, and are drawn to surprising new possibilities. Moreover, as groups share their work, it is inevitable that one proposition will be in creative tension with another. But where differences exist, more appreciative dialogue is called for. This leads to interest, curiosity, deeper exploration, passionate engagement, and spirited conversations. As these connections multiply, new levels of understanding emerge and the relational bonds of the organization are strengthened. More importantly, dialogue produces commitment to support the propositions on the part of the whole system. When people have an opportunity to give input and have influence, they immediately become more invested in the result. This is especially true when they see their input reflected in the final draft of the proposition.

The Destiny Stage

It is convinced that if the discovery, dream, and design stages were done well, the destiny stage should take care of itself. People now have a new level of confidence in their capacities, a clear image of their purpose and direction, and a powerful set of provocative propositions that give guidelines for action. This comprehensive vision of the future, filled with values and commitments and hopes and aspirations, should energize and inform a wide range of action initiatives. One task of the destiny stage is to unleash and encourage individual passion for action in service of the whole. A unique feature of the AI approach is its commitment to liberate the creative energy for excellence in all people, identifying and mobilizing key strategic action initiatives that will move the whole organization toward its ideal image of the future. Of particular attention in this stage is the power of inspired action – action on behalf of the whole that is energized by a deep encounter with the positive core. The underlying philosophy is that as people connect with their strengths, dream bold dreams, and organize to fulfill their highest aspirations they act spontaneously with vision and commitment. Destiny is a time for integration, commitment, and focused action. It is a time for agreeing on how we will take the work of the earlier stages and move it forward at a practical level, and how we will support each other in that process. Meanwhile, it is also a time for seeding

the organizational ground of transformation so that it can continue to grow new inquiries and lead to more discoveries, learning, and sharing of knowledge and best practices.

FUTURE TRENDS OF KNOWLEDGE EMPOWERMENT

Our experience with students across different undergraduate courses of learning has indicated that through the AI Summit, as people become more familiar with one another, trust grows and the transfer of relevant knowledge between them becomes easier and more efficient. Learning begets more learning; people not only learn who knows what, they learn the most effective techniques for getting their fellow members to reveal and share what they know. More importantly, when students are given access to tools for building conversational relationships over the Internet (Cherny, 1999), community of student members interact for mutual benefit; they get to know more of one another, learn from one another, and collaborate to achieve shared goals. One supporting example of technology-enhanced community-based knowledge empowerment comes from the WELL project (http://www.well.com), one of the groundbreaking experiments in group conversation among home-based personal computer users. Community users are given only a few simple rules to access some discussion tools to make with them what they would. The result, among other things, is a knowledge-sharing community, broken down into hundreds of separate topic areas formed around personalities, expertise and relationships. The content and the database of conversations was created and owned by the members – the knowledge sources and the knowledge seekers who swapped roles constantly. The behavior of the community members in collaborating with one another to achieve shared goals, has been described by Steven Johnson (2001), using the concept of self-organizing systems. Johnson, a leading innovator in the use of the Web as a collaborative publishing medium, uses the behavior of ants to illustrate the emergent behavior of self-organizing systems (Sims & Dornfest, 2002). He describes ant colonies as having some miraculous ability to pull off complex engineering feats or resource management feats without an actual leadership dictating what any ants should be doing at any time. Ants get all this done by following simple local rules through which the intelligence of the colony comes into being (Ochsner & Lieberman, 2001). Namely, they communicate intensively, react to situations, and adapt constantly as they build their colonies, gather and store their food and deal effectively with local disasters like rain and having large ant-eaters stomp on their front doors. In retrospect, the Internet today, looked at as a whole, is a demonstration of emergent behaviors. Most of the communities over the Web have been formed because there was an opportunity and need, rather than a directive from high. To the modern organization, the most valuable thing about emergent behavior is its ability to quickly adapt to changing circumstances. The need to adapt constantly is upon every organization that hopes to survive. This is the key to be a sustainable organization. Yet, what forms of organizing will bring out the best in our people? Dee Hock (1999), founder of the VISA Corporation, makes a compelling case that in today's highly diverse and rapidly changing environment, more self-organizing, innovative, and liberating organizational forms are needed. He points out that many command-and-control institutions are unable to achieve the purposes for which they were created, and their very nature alienates and disheartens the people caught up in them. He calls for organization designs (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) that free people to organize in any manner, at any scale, in any area, and around any priority that is relevant to and consistent with the shared purpose and principles to empower the entire organization. In the context of AI, organization designs that liberate cannot be devised by lead-

ers alone and imposed on an organization. They must arise from the dialogue among members of the organization. They are not frozen mandates to be obeyed under threat of punishment. They are a living set of commitments capable of developing with the participation and consent of the community. Properly done, they are always in the process of creative evolution; namely, a continuous and dynamic inquiry into the new organizational forms that will most powerfully propel the organization toward its emerging dreams and aspirations.

CONCLUSION

The *Oxford English Dictionary* claims that the roots of the modern English word knowledge are in old English terms meaning "confession" and "to play, give, move about." Interestingly, knowledge would seem to come from inside and to be restless at the same time. This fits our experience with knowledge sharing, where people reveal what they hold in their minds within a social atmosphere that is informal, trusting, and generous. In fact, the natural knowledge-sharing behaviors of early and modern civilizations have been influenced by the forms of governance and the media that have developed through the ages. Hierarchical structures felt threatened by the open flow of new ideas, but powerful media such as printing and Web publishing have served to increase the flow and distribution of ideas. As organizations form to do business, management must learn to deal with governance issues and the value of knowledge in the workplace (Figallo & Rhine, 2002). Today, our natural tendencies to share knowledge have been recognized as important to many organizations. Yet, it must be further empowered to bring out the best in the people. In the words of David Hakken (2002, p.362), we have to ask: "…what kinds of theorizations make sense in analyzing what happens when a concerted effort is made to introduce a technology supportive of knowledge sharing in a 'holistic' way – that is, to try to anticipate and address the social context/consequences of the interventions." To answer this question, the basic rationale of the AI approach (Reed, 2007) in any organizational change effort is to begin with a grounded observation of the best of "what is", articulate "what might be", ensure the consent of those in the system to "what could be", and collectively experiment with "what will be". In summary, AI is an attempt to determine the organization's core values (or life giving forces). It seeks to generate a collective image of a future by exploring the best of what is in order to provide an impetus for imagining what might be (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Positively, Thatchenkery and Chowdhry (2007, p.33) says it well, "To be appreciative, we must experience a situation, accept the situation, make sense of the situation (pros/cons), and do a bit of mental gymnastics to understand the situation, with an appreciative lens. Not only that, the appreciative lens that we put on the situation impacts our next experience as well." Indeed, the interpretive scheme (Vickers, 1965) we bring to a situation significantly influences what we will find. Seeing the world is always an act of judgment. We can take an appreciative judgment or a critical or deficit oriented judgment. AI takes the former.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Appreciative Inquiry (AI): A simple but radical approach to understanding the social world. AI concentrates on exploring ideas that people have about what is valuable in what they do and then tries to work out ways in which this can be built on – the emphasis is firmly on appreciating the activities and responses of people, rather than concentrating on their problems.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) Summit: A methodology based on AI to help accelerate change by involving a broad range of internal and external stakeholders in the change process. It is typically a single event or series of events that bring people together to (a) discover the organization's or community's core competencies and strengths; (b) envision opportunities for positive change; (c) design the desired changes into the organization's or community's systems, structures, strategies, and cultures; and (d) implement and sustain the change and make it work.

Knowledge Work: Work (or occupations) characterized by an emphasis on theoretical knowledge, creativity and use of analytical and social skills. Knowledge work is often contrasted with more traditional forms of work such as service work and manual work.

Knowledge Sharing: Activities to leverage the collective individual learning of an organization such as a group of people, to produce a higher-level organization-wide intellectual asset. This is supposed to be a continuous process of creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge accompanied by a possible modification of behavior to reflect new knowledge and insight, and to produce a higher-level intellectual content.

Knowledge Communities: People who come together around common interests and expertise. They create, share, and apply knowledge within and across the boundaries of teams, business units, and even entire organizations – providing a concrete path toward creating a true knowledge organization.

Knowledge Portfolios: Specific records (often digitized) of knowledge work performed by an individual or an organizational unit over a period of time.

AI 4-D Cycle: These are the four important tasks of the appreciative inquiry method to organization change. They are Discovery – Appreciate the best of what is; Dream – Imagine what could be; Design – Determine what should be; and Destiny – Create what will be.