


February 2022

Volume 24 Number 1

ISBN 978-1-907549-50-2

 [dx.doi.org/10.12781/978-1-907549-50-2](https://doi.org/10.12781/978-1-907549-50-2)

# AI Practitioner

International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry



## The Discovery and Design of Positive Institutions

Edited by

**David L. Cooperrider and Lindsey N. Godwin**

Co-publishers

**The David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry and  
Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company**



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# Positive Institutions

The undeniable call of our times is to build a better world together. The work before us as leaders and facilitators of change is to explore how we can serve the change challenges of our institutions. In this decisive moment in our human history, we have an unparalleled opportunity to re-imagine how we approach change leadership and organizational transformation in ways that create entirely new sustainable and net positive organizations, tri-sector partnerships and megacommunities.

The undeniable call of our times is to build a better world together. The work before us as leaders and facilitators of change is to explore how we can serve the change challenges of our institutions, not just with their “internal” change management agendas, but also with their “external” opportunities to lead in response to the call of our times. Consider Alex Steffen’s words from his book, *Worldchanging*,<sup>1</sup> as he situates our current global transition agenda of historic significance and high stakes:

*So here we are. We need, in the next twenty-five years or so, to do something never before done. We need to consciously re-design the entire material basis of our civilization. The model we replace it with must be drastically more ecologically sustainable, offer large increases in prosperity to everyone on the planet, and not only function in areas of chaos and corruption, but also help transform them. That alone is a task of historic magnitude, but there is an additional complication: we only get one shot ... fail to act boldly enough and we may fail completely.*

In this decisive moment in our human history, we have an unparalleled opportunity to re-imagine how we approach change leadership and organizational transformation in ways that create entirely new sustainable and net positive organizations, tri-sector partnerships and megacommunities for mobilizing cooperative change, while in parallel helping to transform existing

<sup>1</sup> A. Steffen. (2008). *Worldchanging: A user's guide for the 21st century*. Abrams

*The global agenda for change  
is truly an invitation to  
organization development's  
(OD's) – and specifically AI's –  
finest hour.*

systems. Such a vision might seem like an unreachable goal to many – that is, to help make these next two decades a momentous success for our greatest economic and world transition – but we know that Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was designed for just this kind of world-changing work. It is with this confidence that we envisioned this special issue of *The International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry: AI Practitioner* on the topic of positive institutions.

We believe that the global agenda for change, as daunting as it seems, is truly an invitation to organization development's (OD's) – and specifically AI's – finest hour. It is time for a new union of a micro-OD and macro-OD, whereby each will become more effective and realize a new level of excellence. And we see Appreciative Inquiry being at the very heart of realizing what we view as the new “north star” for OD; that is, the collaborative discovery and design of what we've called positive institutions. As we define them, they are “organizations and structured practices in culture or society that serve to elevate and develop our highest human strengths, combine and magnify those strengths, and refract our highest strengths outward in the world benefiting ways leading, ultimately, to a world of full-spectrum flourishing.”<sup>2</sup>

Positive institutions elevate the highest human strengths for a world of full-spectrum flourishing



To take on the massive change agenda that we are facing as a global community will require new macro (global) approaches in OD theory, practice and education. The macromangement context of tomorrow demands a reconstruction of OD even greater than the one that occurred when participative change altered the dogmas

<sup>2</sup> D. L. Cooperrider and L. N. Godwin, (2011). *Positive Organization Development: Innovation-inspired change in an economy and ecology of strengths*. In K. Cameron and G. Spreitzer (Eds.) *Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship*, pp. 737-750. Oxford University Press.



*What if organizations are not our clients, but are instead the change agents working toward a world of full-spectrum flourishing, where everything mirrors and reverberates?*

of unilateral power, or when AI proposed the radical shift from deficit-defining change to strengths-based and constructionist approaches.

### The abundance mindset

With the abundance mindset that Appreciative Inquiry invites – that we live in a universe of strengths and that there are no limits to the growth of constructive cooperation – the next stage of organizational change work seems almost inevitable: it is the shift from micro-OD, which is based mainly on the internal needs of organizations, to macro-OD, where even the concept of the change agent moves to a macro or universal level. As we lean into this work as a global community of practice, we invite you to shift your conceptualization of organizations and ask yourself a new appreciative question:

*What if organizations are not our clients, but are instead the change agents working toward a world of full-spectrum flourishing, where everything mirrors and reverberates?*

As we begin to re-imagine the role of organizations in our global change agenda, where we recognize that organizations are not our clients, but are themselves the change agents for building a better world, Appreciative Inquiry is the key to the types of grand-scale interventions that help bring appreciative mindsets to life across entire industries and across sectors. We have begun to identify five positive institution interventions that embrace the appreciative mindset as they accelerate success and scale solutions needed in the world today. Taken together, these five interventions begin to create a portfolio of strategies that we can leverage in our work as appreciative inquirers to accelerate solutions with global impact. These interventions include:

### 1. Applying biomimicry as a discipline for the design of positive institutions

*The biomimicry revolution is a call to relate to nature not based on what we can extract, but what we can emulate.*

Biomimicry is all about innovation inspired by nature. Unlike the industrial revolution, the biomimicry revolution is a call to relate to nature not based on what we can extract, but what we can emulate. Embracing such a mindset has implications for organizations and whole industries as we rethink processes to not only create less waste, but to also serve to eliminate the very concept of waste (where every kind of waste is transformed into a “food” in some other biological or technical cycle). Jenine Benyus, a leading voice in biomimicry, said in a talk in 2010 for the AI summit Sustainable Cleveland, 2019 that there is a tremendous synergy between OD’s AI stance and biomimicry as a way of knowing, and I

*Notice nature's delicate strategies and strengths and echo them outward toward the creation of positive institutions.*

believe that the widespread adoption of nature-inspired solutions will catalyze a new era in design and development that benefits both people and the planet.

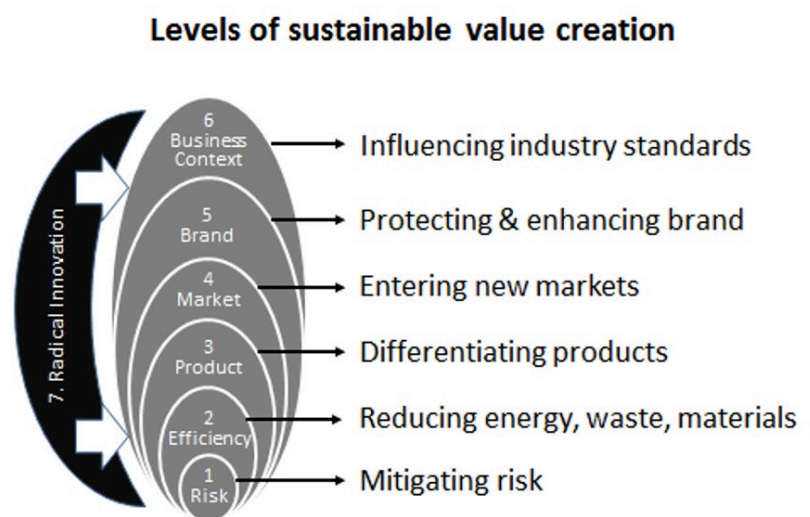
The new appreciative question this work begs us to ask is: What might it look like if we ran a business like the interlocking roots of a redwood forest, or designed its organizational form like a brain, or helped an organizational culture gather energy like a leaf? The invitation, then, is to notice nature's delicate strategies and strengths, sculpted over billions of years, and echo them outward toward the creation of positive institutions that truly create full-spectrum flourishing.

## 2. Leveraging the AI “whole-system-in-the-room” process to create sustainable design factories

One of the most relevant macro-interventions we've seen is a recent mash-up between biomimicry principles and the AI “whole-system-in-the-room” design summit. We call it the “Sustainable Design Factory” because, much like a factory, it is meant to produce something – not just plan – and it uses the power of design inspired by nature to create new sources of sustainable value. How is the Sustainable Design Factory (SDF) done? Figure 1 shows the seven sources of sustainable value creation that is used in the large group, multi-stakeholder SDF.

Figure 1: Levels of sustainable value creation.

From C. Laszlo. (2008). *Sustainable Value: How the world's leading companies are doing well by doing good*. Greenleaf Publishing



Drawing upon AI's 4D cycle, you can imagine the design phase turning a conference hall into a design studio. Only instead of one design team of eight to ten people, you might have twenty distinct design studios set up throughout a ballroom. Design teams are formed around each of the sources of sustainable value. One design domain harnesses the lens of sustainability to reduce risks (the first rung of the value wave.) In terms of risk reduction, for example, a floor cleaning company, in an industry that uses highly toxic chemicals leading to

lawsuits and accidents, asked the designers question: “How might we...create a heavy-duty industrial floor cleaning process that has zero chemicals and zero toxicity, while also lowering costs of operation?” Another design team could turn the innovation lens to increasing efficiencies. The only requirement: the solutions need to do two things; that is, they must be radically better for the environment and radically better for the bottom line.

An event like this can be a historic moment in the life of an organization. Companies such as Ray Anderson’s Interface Carpets (which Mona Amado refers to in her article in this special issue), Apple, Vitamix, GoJo (creators of Purell Sanitizing Gel), Schuberg Philis, Clarke Industries, Fairmount Minerals and Keurig Green Mountain Coffee Roasters have been well documented. The SDF approach makes it possible to hold interactive “roll up the sleeves” prototyping sessions with entire systems, moving them toward the realization of being positive institutions.

### 3. Engaging in “strategic convening” to create win-wins and play at larger scales of impact

*Strategic convening is one of the most cost-effective and high leverage ways that organizations, even small enterprises, can lean into a role as a positive institution.*

Strategic convening is one of the most cost-effective and high leverage ways that organizations, even small enterprises, can lean into a role as a positive institution and play-to-win in ways much larger than they are. Strategic convening draws on everything we know about “the art of hosting” in ways that can rapidly and widely:

1. Elevate the best in people and politics;
2. Help much larger systems move beyond dialogue to design;
3. Take communities beyond good conversation to solid innovation and co-action;
4. Go beyond isolated strengths to magnified collective impact; and
5. Moves from long drawn-out change to big change fast.

Strategic convening is not about public relations and is different to community organizing, networking and even strategic philanthropy. It is action-oriented, task-focused, and has both a clear business logic and positive societal logic. It resides at the intersection between strategic capabilities of a business and the strategic opportunities within and across customer communities, industries, even nations. Most of all, it is based on the applied knowledge base of the

positive psychology of human strengths, OD's best large-group methods, including the AI summit, and the quest for sustainable value. When institutions support "positive impact" causes and when they get the collective convening or "how" right, they can set in motion a virtuous, co-elevationary cycle. This is exactly what Cheri Warren of National Grid did, as you will read more about in her article in this special issue. Strategic convening is an increasingly important way that organizations can lean into the work of positive institution building.

*There are huge opportunities to optimize for all parties in ways that simply cannot be tapped by any individual.*

*The positive power of the tri-sector approach transcends the traditional top-down or bottom-up approaches to change.*

#### 4. Creating strengths-based megacommunities

The concept of megacommunity arises out of a world of geocomplexity and remarkable cross-sector macro-opportunities that require super-cooperation. While early thinkers saw megacommunity as a way to have every part of a system help diagnose "wicked problems," it has now taken on a "solutions economy" mindset which says that there are huge opportunities to optimize for all parties in ways that simply cannot be tapped by any individual person, organization, sector, and sometimes even country. We were with the president of Coca-Cola, for example, when he announced a positive megacommunity innovation consisting of a host of organizations in the water business, several UN agencies, and non-governmental organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund.

Megacommunities are communities of organizations and, as we elaborate further in our article in this special issue, strengths-inspired megacommunities are constellations of positive institutions whose leaders and members have deliberately come together in tri-sector combinations – business, government, and civil society – to actively create sustainable value that optimizes for the whole instead of maximizing only for the single organization. The positive power of the tri-sector approach – an approach illustrated by several articles in this special issue – transcends the traditional top-down or bottom-up approaches to change and instead represents a third type of power; it's what political scientists call "smart power" and helps unleash the wisdom of the whole. Megacommunities create solution ecosystems that, because of their tri-sector leverage, can deploy supply and demand, capital markets, government policy, trade and distribution, network forces, the voluntary spirit, and technology's collaborative advances all at once.

#### 5. Conducting world inquiries to spark appreciative action-research on a global scale

We first started thinking about doing action-research with the world as the unit of analysis the year before the Berlin Wall came down, in a conversation between



David Cooperrider and Bill Pasmore in the former USSR, right before Boris Yeltsin stood tall on the tank in the St Petersburg and the Wall came tumbling down. The essence of the conversation was this: If inquiry and change are simultaneous moments, and if the powerful action-research cycle with single organizations could work such magic – that is, the cycle of data collection, feedback to the client system, shared dialogue, sense-making, and collaborative action taking – then when will we be able to do action-research at a worldwide level? How might we be able to bring OD methods to help the world (through the discovery and design of positive institutions) become more collaboratively capable of creating a world that works for all?

At the time, this felt like a bigger-than-life question, but today it is happening! It's called "the World Inquiry" method, a tenable way to support world learning not as a metaphor but as a real, collective capacity.

With AI's Simultaneity principle in mind – that human systems move in the direction of what they study most frequently and deeply – our first experiment with this unfolded just days after the bombing of the World Trade Towers. In the wake of this tragedy, coupled with the downfall of Enron and Worldcom, there were debates about business brewing at the time, with everyone asking "will big business destroy or save the world?"

### Golden innovations

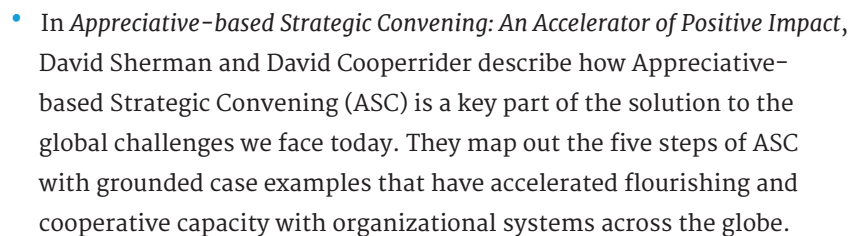
*What does it look like when businesses are agents of world benefit?*

For us even that framing was dead wrong. We instead framed "business as an agent of world benefit" as a topic of inquiry and began a genuine – and global – search to discover: What does it look like when businesses are agents of world benefit? Where is it happening? Who are the pioneers and surprising new leaders? Can we locate the "golden innovations" – stories of courage, strength and elevated practice that are emerging and working successfully which, if further developed and applied, could vitally transform the world toward human, economic and ecological flourishing for all?<sup>3</sup>

Further detailed in the article by Ron Fry and Megan Butcher, the World Inquiry architecture is something that can be replicated for virtually any global change agenda involving the search for positive institutions – a process where anyone, anywhere in the world, can download an AI interview guide and go into their local communities and businesses to interview for the positive deviations or the most elevated business and society innovations emerging in their regions.

<sup>3</sup> For additional history of the World Inquiry – now called AIM2Flourish – see the May 2019 Feature Choice article in *AI Practitioner*, "AIM2Flourish: An Experiential, Global Learning Inquiry about Business for Good" by Claire Sommer, Jackie Stavros, and Lindsey Godwin. <https://aipractitioner.com/product/aim2flourish/>

- In their article, *Positive Impact Companies: Designing Business Organizations as Positive Institutions*, Ignacio Pavez and Chris Laszlo pull from a variety of cases, including companies that have leveraged the AI SDF summit model, to explore the concept of positive impact companies and how Appreciative Inquiry is an ideal social technology to do this work.

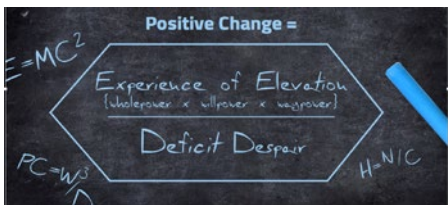


- The power of tri-sectoral collaborations for the creation of positive institutions is brought to life in the article by Sherri Sutton, Kris Goddard, Jens Molbak and Kelly Clarke. They share the case story of the AI summit “Connect & Propel Tampa 2019” and the subsequent post-summit work that is happening via a new tri-sector catalyst project with NewImpact, Connect & Propel Tampa Bay, Inc., University of South Florida and the Urban League of Hillsborough County.





To read the article about tri-sector collaborations in Guyana and Wisconsin, go to page 65



To read the article about megacommunities, go to page 94

- In Jennie Hetzel Silbert's article, *From Guyana to Wisconsin, Seeding Positive Institutions through Inclusive Leadership*, the generative impact of tri-sector collaborations is further illustrated, as well as the positive institution transformation that is seeded when leaders are bold enough to invite and model participatory, strengths, and solution-focused planning and engagement.
- Michelle McQuaid and Michelle Etheve provide yet another inspirational glimpse into the path toward creating positive institutions in their article, *Resetting the Role of Businesses in Our Communities: Using Virtual AI Summits To Bring People Together*. As they explain, the AI summit process can, and needs to, be translated into virtual spaces to effectively bring diverse stakeholders together to create positive institutions in our disrupted world.
- In *An OD Approach to Branding Lessons from Sustainability Pioneer Interface*, Mona Amado overviews the powerful case story of Interface – one of the first companies to truly embrace the values of environmental sustainability and the design practices of biomimicry as guiding organizing principles. Using Interface's journey as a model, she outlines an AI-inspired and OD-based approach toward supporting organizations in their journey to becoming positive institutions.
- In our article, *Strengths-based Megacommunities and Appreciative Inquiry's Complete Convention: Creating Wholepower, Willpower, and Waypower for Our World's Earthshot Moment*, we detail the concept of megacommunities as an increasingly important positive institution intervention. We illustrate "the how" of building megacommunities such as the UN Global Compact and others through AI's "complete convention" – what we call convention 3.0.
- And finally, in their article *Global Inquiry as a Form of Positive Institution Building: A living case story on the generative power of story-getting*, Ron Fry, Megan Buchter and Wasseem Abazza explore the strategy of using world inquiries as a global appreciative action-research intervention for building positive institutions.

Taken collectively, these articles provide an inspirational portfolio of strategies and stories for creating positive institutions through AI-inspired practices. It is our hope that you can see your own passions and practices reflected in these articles and that they inspire you to continue stretching into new domains of impact with your work.

Why? Because we are going to need each and every one of us stepping up and leaning into work that may feel beyond our current capacities if we are going to address the challenges of our times. The next few decades will be decisive for our global community: we must create transformative shifts toward climate action, social equity and inclusion, ecosystem restoration, and health and well-being for all. We believe that Appreciative Inquiry is core to creating the changes we need in the creation of positive institutions to accelerate success and scale solutions needed in the world today. Only together will we be able to realize a world of full-spectrum flourishing ... a world where organizations and economies can excel, all people can thrive, and nature can flourish, now and across the generations.

**David L. Cooperrider and Lindsey N. Godwin**  
**February 2022**

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*AI Practitioner* is published by a partnership between the David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry and Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company.

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ISSN 1741-8224