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# The Appreciative Perspective of the Future

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## Abstract

*The ethics of the positive must be a value that guides futures research for the re-enchantment of society, as we are living in a period of transition without utopia. A growing disenchantment with traditional theories of change, especially those based on human deficit is giving way to more constructive, life-affirming and strength-based perspectives. The call for innovation and sustainable development in fast-moving transitional societies like Brazil is creating the impetus toward greater collaboration with people, groups and organizations in more constructive and spirited ways. Constructionist approaches to exploring and creating social futures like "Appreciative Inquiry" are helping organizations and individuals conceptualize the possibilities they have to create, plan and anticipate alternative futures in more empowered ways. This paper aims to demonstrate this through theory and examples of how Brazilian organizations are increasingly involved with such methods that form a positive core of change strongly synergetic with the energy and optimism that prevails throughout Brazilian culture.*

In everyday life, people are often constrained by a feeling that their day to day reality is limited. This feeling of impotence is a strong constraint on human imagination, vision and enterprise. For that reason, it is fundamental to inquire into the effects of our prevailing images and vocabularies that exist in human relationships. The grand Western/Modernist utopias have lost their prestige, lure, and pull either because they have not kept their promises. By renouncing the revival of utopias, our post-WWII society has also renounced the restoration of the future, in the process creating skepti-

cal and hopeless individuals. As futurists, however, we are responsible for the restoration of images and languages that foster a positive imagination that can help us create better futures. Here lies the key-role of futures methods: to help create new utopias that not only must be imagined, but used effectively in transformational processes to can help societies flourish.

We are living in a "macroshift" type of era<sup>1</sup>, with little time to help foster positive changes. Being a Brazilian futurist and living in the context of global power shifts, and also having Brazil as a point of light in

the global development discourse, I feel comfort and a sense of legitimacy when I use positive imagery and vocabularies in futures research. Brazilian culture is beginning to flourish in the midst of decaying views of the future created by old worldviews - the flower of our culture is in full bloom. In the view of the Dutch sociologist Fred Polak, whose theories have been my inspiration and roadmap in my futures work, "As long as a society's image is positive and flourishing, the flower of culture is in full bloom."<sup>12</sup>

In this context, I help organizations and communities cultivate positive images and language that help create new patterns of life and sustain the positive energy of making things happen. Contemplative and appreciative practices have been very successful in organizational change processes. To create the future from a positive basis, I look for methods that help me achieve meaningful connections so essential to the human spirit opening to new worlds of change. This approach is appreciative inquiry.

The traditional approach to change management is a deficit-based perspective. That is, it views the organization as something to be fixed and the techniques used often focus exclusively on what's not working. Due to the limitations of such "problematique" perspectives, there has been an enthusiastic shift toward more "appreciative" perspectives of the future. This has manifested itself through a growing appreciative inquiry network worldwide. This is part of a revolution in the development of new theories and language aimed at transforming our images of futures that lead to positive social change.

## Methodology

Organizations and communities are looking for methods that discover and amplify the strengths and successes of their people. Applying group thinking on what works, as opposed to what doesn't, creates energy and commitment around a shared vision of future possibilities. This positive energy produces sustainable, positive change. Among the various futures visioning methods, *appreciative inquiry*

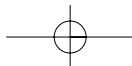
is one of the best alternatives for purposeful change. It is a cooperative search for the strengths, beliefs, and living forces that inspire and mobilize positive change in groups and organizations. By identifying the best of "what is", it gives space and strength to pursue dreams and possibilities of "what could be".

The appreciative approach involves genuine dialogue rooted in Bohm's concept and views. Authentic dialogue liberates the free exchange of ideas and information, giving rise to creativity.<sup>3</sup> By creating a true dialogue atmosphere during visioning sessions I have conducted, I have literally felt the energy level of groups rise dramatically. John Renesch calls this "resonance", when a group is truly open and engaged, and listening and speaking is in perfect balance. In such situations competition among participants is diminished, and there is added pleasure in both the speaking and the listening.<sup>4</sup>

In the mid eighties, David Cooperrider, Professor at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, USA, the creator of the method, introduced the concept of the internal dialogue of a society as the place in which the guiding images of a culture reside. It was a deep change of perspective on the traditional problem solving approach to change management. In his discussion of the power of positive images Cooperrider started quoting Polak: "The rise and fall of images of the future precedes or accompanies the rise and fall of cultures." Cooperrider's theories rely on the premise that organizations are products of human interaction and mind. "The artful creation of positive imagery on a collective basis may well be most prolific activity that individuals and organizations can engage in if their aim is to help bring to fruition a positive and humanly significant future."<sup>15</sup>

## The Heliotropic Factor

Cooperrider presented in 1990 his "heliotropic hypothesis" which is that social systems evolve toward the most positive images they hold of themselves. These images are not necessarily conscious in that they may not be



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discussible by the members of that social system, but nevertheless he argues that such images exist and the more they "affirm" the group the more firmly they hold the group to a pattern of being prescribed by the theory/idea/image the group has of itself at its very best. When these images are out of step with the requirements the social system faces the group will experience itself as dysfunctional and rational attempts to fix itself will not work until the underlying "affirmative image" of the group is changed. Appreciative inquiry, therefore, attempts to create a new and better affirmative image for the social system, one better aligned with the organization's critical contingencies.

### AI Assumptions

Appreciative Inquiry works from a set of assumptions.<sup>6</sup>

1. In every society, organisation or group, something works.
2. What we focus on becomes our reality.
3. Reality is created in the moment, and there are multiple realities.
4. The act of asking questions of an organisation, or group influences the group in some way.
5. People have more confidence to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known).
6. If we carry forward parts of the past, they should be what is best about the past.
7. It is important to value differences.
8. The language we use creates our reality.

These seem to be obvious assumptions in the developing environments of modern organizations, however it is quite difficult to apply them in a daily basis, as we are deeply immersed in cultural consequences of deficit discourse.<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Gerger addresses this deficit discourse as an undesirable impact of our language on the dominant vocabularies. In his analysis, Gerger strongly believes in the "truth bearing" function of language and points out that there are important unfortunate out-

comes of our mental deficit language that lead to a sense of cultural weakening and as a consequence, a sense of impotence.

Facilitators and consultants know how important it is to ask the right questions when we are working with groups of people or individuals. If we focus on difficulties in the past, people become self defeating and feel that life is hopeless. When we ask them about their successes, they become enthusiastic and start to hope again.

### Appreciative Inquiry's "4-D" Cycle

#### Discovery: Appreciating the Best of Our Personal Experience

The Appreciative Inquiry approach to personal or organisational change is to begin by looking for what is working. The task of the discovery step is to appreciate the best of "what is" by focusing on the best moments of individual and organizational experience. Participants then seek to understand the unique conditions that made the high points possible, such as leadership, relationships, technologies, values, capacity building or external relationships. The tangible result of the inquiry process is a series of statements that describe where the person or organization wants to be, based on the high moments of where they have been. Because these statements are grounded in real experience and history, people know how to repeat their success and it has a collective resonance that makes the positive core emerge.

#### Dream: Envisioning the Impact

This is where dreams flourish and the present is questioned, opening new paths for a desired future. What could be? What if? Why not? Those are common questions surrounding the collective learning process. This phase is grounded in the organization history and aims to expand the organization potential. Stories and assumptions obtained from the dialogue interviews are powerful inspirations and motivational elements that goes deep into each participants reality and aspirational mind. People listen to one another about those great

moments that made the organization alive and the future becomes visible through ideals and dreams interconnected with the present reality.

**Design: Co-constructing the Strategies**

What should be the ideal? As soon as the shared vision is identified and presents strength to mobilize the group, participants create a strategy to carry out their provocative propositions. Focus is on the creation of an ideal organization, a design of a perfect system in relation to today's world. Approaches to leadership, governance, team building are re-defined. Strategies are composed to achieve their propositions. Success cases and positive stories are deeply explored to create propositions that present to the future. What already exists that could be enhanced and what could be better.

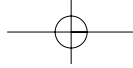
**Destiny: Sustaining and Nurturing**

In this final phase clear actions of how to empower, to learn, to adjust or to implement are defined. This involves the delivery of new images of the future and is sustained by nurturing a collective sense of destiny. It is a time of continuous learning, adjustment and improvisation in the service of shared organizational ideals. People assume the needed tasks to accomplish the shared vision. Because they share positive images of the future, everyone in a community re-aligns their work and co-creates the future. For the continuity of the process it is fundamental that participants assume the implementation of the ideas they proposed. At this moment facilitators must give a credit to the self organizing capacity the group has to keep all actions on track.



Figure 1 – 4D Cycle

As one can see from figure 1, the creative process moves through four phases, revolving around the power of the 'unconditional positive question'. Appreciative inquiry is a continual cycle. The destiny phase leads naturally to new discoveries of community strengths, beginning the process anew.



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Traditional Problem-solving process	Appreciative Inquiry Process
Identification of the problem	Appreciation of what is best
Cause analysis	Vision of what could be
Action planning	Dialogue on what should be
<b>Basic premise</b>	<b>Basic premise</b>
the organization is a problem to be solved	the organization is a mystery to be embraced

Figure 2 David Cooperrider

### How is AI Different from other Planning Methods?

Appreciative inquiry is different from other planning methods because its images of the future emerge from grounded examples of the positive past. They are compelling possibilities precisely because they are based on extraordinary moments from a community's history. Participants use positive stories in the same way an artist uses paints to create a portrait of the community's potential. They think great thoughts and create great possibilities for their community, then turn those thoughts into provocative propositions for themselves.

Another differential aspect between AI and other methods is that images of the future emerge through positive stories of the past, as if a memory drawer containing old good memories was re-opened to replace bad memories with good ones. In other methods containing solve-problem sessions, the past is very often rescued bringing out old "phantoms" that can be crystallized in a negative atmosphere that can inhibit people faith in a better future.

### Different Applications of Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative inquiry has been used as the way of helping people identify their preferred future in companies, governments, and organizations all over the world. It has been combined with large scale interventions such as Open Space Technology and Future Search to great effect in world wide projects such as United Religions Initiative, an inter-religious initiative of

United Nations.

Human Resources departments and consultants are using Appreciative Inquiry to address organizational issues such as internal communication and leadership issues.

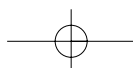
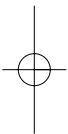
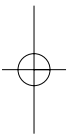
Other examples include: increasing effectiveness of managers dealing with a new role and wider responsibilities through 1:1 and group coaching. (financial services, and local government sector); increasing the effectiveness of a department team; increasing the level of communication between trustees on the board; mediation in the voluntary sector, international conflict resolution situations, City-wide activities like Imagine Chicago<sup>8</sup>, and community activities like Imagine Waterloo.

The purpose is to reconnect with the life giving forces-what is working-and then go beyond that to what could be.

### The Brazilian Experience

#### Nutritional – An Appreciative Business

AI has been successfully applied in Brazil since 1998 when Nutritional Alimentos, a food company, after a deep crisis, had to rearrange its business and find new markets for its products. The company held a large-scale summit with over 700 attendees, focusing on the increased competitiveness in the marketplace by identifying best practices and strengths; average return per worker increased 22% and a 27% increase in sales volume. Since then, the planning process identify circumstances where work is performed successfully, at its best; where good decisions are being made; where quality is excellent; where customers are being satisfied;



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where internal processes flow smoothly, morale is high, and motivation and commitment are strong.<sup>9</sup>

### United Religions Initiative

In 1999 a global inter-religious movement called URI – United Religions Initiative gathered together more than 50 religions to promote a non-violence campaign. Based on common ideals rather than different doctrines, different religious traditions could build up a common project that resulted in a campaign called "72 hours of non-violence" spread out all over the world. The grounding meeting was hosted in Rio de Janeiro and was an impressive experience for me as a contributor of the initiative.

### Movement Media for Peace

In 1999, as a result of the URI non-violence campaign, a movement called "Media for Peace" emerged, aiming to promote non-violence initiatives in the mass media organized an workshop with 32 journalists and the impact of the appreciative dialogues was transformative in each of the participants perspectives in their work.

### ELOS - Spirit in Business

In the year 2000 a think tank of business consultants called ELOS, spirit and leadership for healthy organizations started presented AI as their core method in their change management services and have set up several international conferences in partnership with the Appreciative Inquiry world networks.

### Images and Voices of Hope

Images and Voices of Hope is a unique application of Appreciative Inquiry in its conscious efforts to understand and impact the quality of the internal dialogue of our society. Launched in New York in 1999 and then promoted all over the world, it is an international conversation on the impact of public images and messages produced by the mass media. The Brazilian network is having outstanding results among leading communicators through helping to bring about positive internal dia-

logue in their community. Dialogues, reflections and powerful stories stimulate the development of a practical knowledge of how, through conversation, we can explore and influence the guiding images and stories on which we want to build our future.<sup>10</sup>

### Brasil Vision 2020

Since 2002, with the election of the new Brazilian President Lula, who lead the effort to set up a government roadmap to raise the cultural assets of the country and enhance the population's self-esteem, there is an increasing feeling of national pride involving every aspect of life, including the organizational environment. Within this new emerging "appreciative society", different aspects of our Brazilian culture are being adopted to inspire people's thinking and imagination during visioning sessions. Cultural assets permeate visions of a better future, through human interaction and the fostering of organizational utopias. Throughout this process collective learning takes place together with a sense of harmony, fellowship and true engagement.

In 2003, Appreciative Inquiry took place when Brazilian government and civil society leaders envisioned Brasil's future in a recent 2-day retreat called "Brasil 2020" facilitated by consultants of Fundação Dom Cabral – FDC, a leading business school, organized by the Government Council for Economic and Social Development, chaired by Federal Minister Tarso Genro. There were some 200 participants from business, labor and civil society. AI sessions with different groups developed scenarios around the shared goal of sustainable development.

The futurist Hazel Henderson was the keynote speaker introducing the positive core of Brazilian aspects and its hot spots for a better future. She has written about this special moment and published her article in more than 200 global journals and newspapers.<sup>11</sup>

### Another World Is Possible

There is a whole global movement of inquiring minds, hearts and souls in achieving



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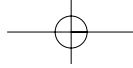
meaningful paths toward creating positive futures, opening doors to new perspectives of change. As an alternative to the economic centered view of the World Economic Forum, Brazil hosted in 2001 the I world Social Forum "as a world diversity expression, polyphony of voices that meet the universal wishes for tolerance, justice, peace and equality".<sup>12</sup> In 2005, Brazil hosted its fifth and biggest edition with more than 200,000 participants. Its rallying cry has been "another world is possible" that has been certainly released from humanity souls willing to step forth and create change. This is the power revealed by the appreciative method: to reveal with vibrant colors the possibilities of a better future which have been faded out by our skeptical society.

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