APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY IN THE AGE OF THE NETWORK

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is about the relationship between Networked Organizations and Appreciative Inquiry. To set a context, Theory about networks is related to the expressed needs of Appreciative Inquiry. Stories follow, from both appreciative and network perspectives. Ideas are put to work through practice as expressed by method – consisting of principles, practices, and processes. Further, method is embedded in technology to support functioning networks. In research, we look at learning about human systems and suggest that online digital places form natural laboratories to collect, analyze, and synthesize data. Concluding with Search, we revisit the question of consciousness in human systems.

INTRODUCTION

In the early years of the 21st century we have passed the "point of no return" in the transition from the Industrial-Bureaucratic Age to the Information-Network Age. This century-long change process was tipped by the sudden coalescence of the World-Wide Web in the early 1990s, a combination of sufficient computer-communications infrastructure with the invention of the browser and the deceptively simple "link." With the Internet, the myriad islands of digital technology become irrevocably connected as a globally-networked computer, and

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with the Web, people connect with people and information anytime-anywhere in a seamless if chaotic global community.

Decades before the net snapped into place, networks were recognized as the emergent signature form of organization in the Information Age, just as bureaucracy was for the Industrial era, hierarchy was for the Agricultural, and small groups were for the original Nomadic era (Hine, 1976; Stamps & Lipnack, 1982, 1994). As the Information Age has matured, networks have appeared at all levels of organization, from small group virtual teams (Stamps & Lipnack, 1997, 2000), to enterprise-spanning teamnets (Stamps & Lipnack, 1993), to inter-enterprise and cross-country distributed global organizations.

Appreciative Inquiry arose in the late 1980s in reaction to the problem-oriented logical-positivist science that provided the intellectual foundation for the Industrial Era. Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) generated the idea as an extension of the trend to action-research initiated by Kurt Lewin in mid-century, embracing the "sociorationalist" approach to science propounded by Gergen (1982). The sociorationalist views human reality as a constructed social reality immersed in a symbolic universe. Our ways of living and working together are not immutable givens, but rather inventions we create together drawing on shared images and languages. Human social science lives everyday with the effects of Heisenbergian indeterminacy as our "instruments" of investigation and assessment directly influence and help shape the very systems being studied. Thus, in the human domain, theory *becomes* practice. Appreciative Inquiry asserts that the moral choice is to discover and follow positive processes and projected images for the created human future.

As awareness has grown that *how* we conduct our search for human knowledge invariably becomes part of the created human reality, it is imperative to examine our method of study and the changes it induces in practice with an eye to *what* direction the social construction can and, most heretically for a science, *should* take. At the same time, as the consequences of our actions synergistically add up to new whole ways of being together, we are obliged to feed back our experience into research and theory to improve our understanding and subsequently enable better and more healthy practice.

Appreciative Inquiry and Networked Organizations are more than just coincidently linked in the epochal transition from one seminal human age to the next. They are mutually entwined in both theory and practice. Cooperrider and Srivastva suggest that action research, in the form of Appreciative Inquiry, supports "the emergence of a more egalitarian 'post-bureaucratic' form of organization," which to us is already evident as the network. Conversely, our experience with networks and virtual teams suggest that the mental models people have and the way they collectively develop and frame their purposes have

everything to do with their ability to generate and sustain distributed organizations that are successful in achieving their goals.

The ideas we explore in this chapter suggest complementary premises:

- Networks arise as the natural organizational outcomes of an ongoing Appreciative Inquiry process; and
- Appreciative Inquiry, recognized or not, under girds the development of successful distributed human organizations.

Stories illustrating these premises are told in a later section, one recounting the appreciative voyage of the Mountain Forum and its birth of a network, another telling of Shell's use of positive questions to flesh out it's aspirations as a Networked Community.

There is practical power in bringing these two conceptual frameworks together. By anticipating the formation of networks, providing appropriate leadership, and supplying environmental nutrients for their development, the remarkable possibilities unleashed by Appreciative Inquiry processes acquire a robust internal organizational infrastructure that sustains the long-term promise of a collectively envisioned future. Where the focus is on people creating purposeful and relationship-rich virtual teams and networks, the action-research methodology of Appreciative Inquiry provides a strong and continuously improving developmental process that scales from very small associations to very large interventions.

What projects the impact of the application of these frameworks far beyond academic interest is the awesome magnifying effect of digital technology and the burgeoning electronic communications infrastructure. The roots of Appreciative Inquiry in face-to-face interactions, ranging from the gathering of appreciative stories to the remarkably effective Appreciative Summits that literally brings a representation of the whole system into a room for a multi-day launch process, become supplemented and enormously extended as ways are found to do Appreciative Inquiry virtually, particularly in the post-summit period. Indeed, a comprehensive approach to Appreciative Inquiry would combine face-to-face with virtual methods to create a process that included both synchronous (same time, whether face-to-face or virtual) and asynchronous (different time) interactions. And the ability to create new "places" for human organizations to form, grow, and perform online vastly expands the territory that an appreciative engagement can cover. Indeed, with virtual methods, Appreciative Inquiry becomes available to connect and engage the immensely vaster worlds of non-geographically defined groups of people.

While we will be co-relating networks and Appreciative Inquiry, our expertise lies in network theory and practice, so our emphasis is on exposing networks to the appreciative community. Our underlying hope is that by knowing more about

networks, practitioners will be more successful in helping people create structures and processes that persist and grow long after the initiating activities, stories, dreams, and designs fade.

THEORY

One of the primary motivators for the rise of Appreciative Inquiry was the perceived need for theory to inform and guide action research. Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) call for a "generative theory" that serves as "a means for both understanding *and* improving social practice." "Good theory," they contend, "is one of the most powerful means we have for helping social systems evolve, adapt, and creatively alter their patterns over time." We concur with this engaged assessment of the role of theory in the life of growing social systems, and have integrated theory with our network research and practice.

As action-researchers, we have engaged as 1st-order participant-practitioners, both in our early experience as part of social-change movements, and later as part of leading-edge business organizations. As 2nd-order action-researchers, we have used the concepts and methods of networking to investigate and understand networks, thus giving rise to theory that could in turn be practiced and tested in the real world. Finally, we started with 3rd-order meta-theory, that there are emergent patterns of organizations that can be understood systemically, to guide our original research. We have continued to refine the meta-theory into a general language of networks that serves in the expression of methods that help people understand and act in networked organizations, large and small.

Network Theory and Appreciative Inquiry

To emphasize their assertion of the importance and power of theory to aid in helping people co-evolve more effective and healthy human systems and societies, Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) offer five ways theory functions in this role. In each way, network theory not only fulfills its promise in its target domain, but also provides a potential framework for Appreciative Inquiry in its formulation of a theory of "intentional collective action . . . to help evolve the normative vision and will of a group, organization, or society as a whole."

(1) *Establishing a conceptual and contextual frame*. The network model, both in its shorthand (People, Purpose, Links, and Time) and its more elaborated taxonomic form, provides a lens for seeing the essential elements of organization, even types that are very difficult to grasp because of their distributed form.

(2) *Providing presumptions of logic*. Structured on a very common input-output systems model, network theory offers not only the (components + linear process + feedback) logic of systemic construction, but also a checklist of interrelated elements to examine in the context of an already defined whole.
(3) *Transmitting a system of values*. As a whole, the network model by nature embraces a participatory, engaged, values-oriented approach to organization, as well as providing active elements of purpose and relationship that both define and distribute shared values. Moreover, basic values like trust and integrity are essential for the vitality of the network itself.
(4) *Creating a group-building language*. Network theory's potency as a shared language for co-construction is illustrated by how well it translates into practice. More personally, in workshops and consulting engagements, we have frequently been told that an important contribution of the model is in providing people a common language for discussing and creating new organizational forms to meet their felt needs.
(5) *Extending visions of possibility*. In networks, people seem to understand that the means is an essential part of the envisioned end, that how they organize and undertake the journey greatly impacts the quality and viability of the end result. Since the theory embodies a participatory and relatively open-ended process approach, not infrequently people find new possibilities beyond those initially conceived, with sometimes unexpectedly positive consequences.

At the end of their seminal article, Cooperrider and Srivastva suggest four principles for guiding Appreciative Inquiry research "into the social potential of organizational life." They contend that such research should be:

- *Appreciative*,
- *Applicable*,
- *Provocative*, and
- *Collaborative*.

To cohere and exist at all, social systems must necessarily have characteristics of order and life greater than the complementary entopic forces of problems and disintegration. Successful networks must find *appreciative*, positive images of the future in order to create the impetus for formation and the will to sustain and grow. Appreciative Inquiry offers concepts, methods, and experience to help people find the positive core that enables them to form healthy networks.

Networks existed in action long before their "discovery" by writers and theoreticians. The theory we have propounded here has been engaged in the real world of *application* since its inception more than two decades ago. It has been tested by thousands of people with whom we have worked directly,

and applied by many more thousands who have read our books. As a final assertion of applicability, we have recently embedded our network theory-infused methodology into a web-based technology that serves to help people create and operate in distributed networks and virtual teams.

As the emergent organizational form of a new era of human existence, networks are frequently perceived as *provocative* challenges to the traditional way of doing things, which inevitably in the modern world means the status quo hierarchy-bureaucracy so familiar to us all. Networks are by nature provocative now in this turbulent transitional time between eras, but in the long run they will become the new norm.

Finally, human networks are in their essence *collaborative*. Indeed, in this time of expansive communications options and increasing recognition of the reality of relationships, collaborative processes like Appreciative Inquiry that lead to co-created social structures will most likely adopt network forms at whatever scale is applicable to the system undergoing change.

General Systems Theory

To understand networks, we have stood on the shoulders of systems.

The first breach in the dominant scientific worldview of the Industrial Age occurred with the transformation within Physics from the presumption of immutable Newtonian Laws to the complexities of Relativity and Quantum Mechanics. Even as the most precise branch of science was throwing off the shackles of the classical logical-positivist analytic-only view, the data-impoverished and law-jealous social sciences were building a siloed, bureaucratic, measurement-centric model of theory and practice, most notably in the organizational fields by Fredrick Winslow Taylor. What became interesting in social sciences became what could be quantified, much like the Greek myth that tells of searching for a lost object under a street lamp because "that is where the light is." Unfortunately, most of what's important to human beings and their associations is not measurable in the classic sense – in the human domain, the qualitative nature of reality overwhelms the quantitative.

But measurement is not everything. Even as action-research was arising to counter the "objective," un-engaged, data-driven paradigm for organizational research and development, a new approach to the disparate, disconnected sciences arose. In 1949, Ludwig von Bertalanffy proposed an integrative approach to knowledge called General Systems Theory (Von Bertalanffy, 1968). Von Bertalanffy's premise was that common laws could be discerned in the realms of the separate sciences, physical, biological, and social. One example is the logistic

growth curve (popularly known as the "S" curve), whose mathematic expression could be seen in phenomenon as different as the formation of galaxies, the growth of bacteria in a petrie dish, and the spread of new ideas in societies. Indeed, this cross-discipline principle underlies the "life cycle," which is both an explanatory vehicle for the development of human organizations, and the basis of processes and practices intended to help such organizations develop in an effective and healthy manner. And, not incidentally, the Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle of Discover-Dream-Design-Destiny is a variant of the general life cycle pattern of change and development.

By the mid-1950s, this idea had given birth to a movement, best exemplified in the formation of the Society for General Systems Research by von Bertalanffy (a biologist), Kenneth Boulding (an economist), Anatol Rapoport (a mathematician), and Ralph Gerard (another biologist). Over the next few decades many of the systems ideas were gradually absorbed into mainstream sciences, such as synergy (the "whole is more than the sum of the parts") and the organization of complex systems in levels (whole-part hierarchies). But the overarching intention of systems to become the dominant scientific paradigm never caught on in the "hard" sciences that felt that they had all the robust theory they needed, thank you very much. The systems perspective flourished, however, in the softer sciences, which grew up without a firm foundation for theory. While it is far from a universally accepted paradigm, almost every human science discipline has a major school of thought based in systems theory.

As the early systems theorists were looking for mathematically expressible lawfulness across disciplines, there soon emerged a wide spread recognition that many of the most important phenomena, particularly in the human domain, could not be rendered in numbers and formulas. Hence, verbal models, common patterns, and "fruitful taxonomies" became legitimate expressions of systems theory. Rapoport's (1970) soft definition encompasses the very broad range of systems that includes people and their complexities, and it recognizes the role of the human knower in the apprehension of a system: "A system is a portion of the world that is perceived as a unit and that is able to maintain its 'identity' in spite of changes going on in it."

As the systems idea has evolved, it has moved from merely recognizing the reality of relationships against the dominant materialist worldview that sees only things, to asserting the ontological primacy of relationships. A half-century after the systems idea was first formulated, a group tasked by the International Society for the Systems Sciences (the successor group to the Society for General Systems Research) to prepare a primer on systems asserted: "Systems thinking's fundamental concept is the connecting relationship – what things are doing to each other." They defined systems this way: "A System is a Family

of Meaningful Relationships (between the members acting as one whole)" (Mandel, 2000).

Things are as they are related. The world is interconnected and interdependent. This is the context in which we have understood networks. And this relational context is also the primal ground of Appreciative Inquiry.

Network Theory

Networks are social systems where relational reality is preeminent in the language used to express the organizational construct. People naturally form a clear model of a networked organization as a system of nodes and links based on common metaphors such as a spider's web or a fisherman's net. Our general model of networks, honed over 20 years iterating through cycles of theory-practice, consists of four dimensions: People, Purpose, Links, and Time. In brief, networks are people (individuals and/or groups) interacting interdependently for a purpose over time.

- *People*, recognized both in the singular as individuals and in the plural as groups, are the nodes in an organizational network and give the model scalability from very small groups (of individuals) to humanity-wide associations of countries.
- *Purpose* expresses the motivation and intent of human groups – what makes a human system meaningful – and is the articulated resultant of the quest for a shared vision as people co-create their organizations.
- *Links* embrace the essential nature of relationships, reaching from very ephemeral connections like trust and love to very concrete linkages such as those provided by communications technologies.
- *Time*, the fourth fundamental dimension, reminds us that human systems are living systems and not machines, so they arise and persist in time, experiencing events as marked on a calendar as well as organic processes of birth, growth, maturity, and death.

The next level of detail in the network model reflects a construction that is both faithful to the needs of theoretical rigor and mindful of the practice consequences of theory formulation in social systems. Elements of the network model are arranged in a taxonomy that is structured by the most basic systems framework: inputs, processes, outputs, and a feedback loop. Because of the common character of the elements in the columns and rows of the taxonomy, we label this assemblage a "periodic table."

We have discussed this model in detail elsewhere (see especially Lipnack & Stamps, 2000), but will elaborate it somewhat by looking briefly at the elements of one dimension, Purpose.

- *Goals* are the major components of an overall Purpose, which might be characterized as a mission or charter. They are most often generated in conversation, and represent aspiration and intention, the motivation for "flinging ourselves forward" into an uncertain but desired future.
- *Tasks* are the activities and processes themselves, the transformations inside the "black box" of the system that connect motivating goals with specific outcomes.
- *Results* are the concrete outputs of intentional activity, and are often contained within goal statements as targets we aspire to hit. They are relatively thing-like, reifications of ephemeral goals achieved.

While the model is framed to grasp the essential characteristics of networks, it functions more broadly as an explanatory vehicle for all forms of human organizations. Since, in our view, human organizational capabilities are cumulative, meaning that as each new age of human civilization provoked new forms, older forms were subsumed in the new. So characteristics of small groups are included in hierarchy, which is reflected in bureaucracy, and networks encompass all prior organizational forms. This is easily seen in networks where the comprising organizations are themselves dominantly earlier forms, such as military alliances, global associations of countries, or grassroots networks made up of small local groups. So it is essential that a model of networks be comprehensive enough to include earlier organizational forms.

STORIES

The telling of stories is basic to Appreciative Inquiry. Collecting stories that communicate positive possibilities is the essential first step in a transformation process. It is the foundation for (1) Discovery, the first stage of the 4-D Cycle of (2) Dream, (3) Design, and (4) Destiny (e.g. Cooperrider & Diana Whitney, 1999). For networks, too, stories play essential generative roles in conveying the underlying purpose and promise to the players in a forming organization, in providing the elements of socialization for new members, and reinforcing relationships through the repetition of common values.

In the context of organization, stories historically have been used to support the status quo, archetypically in tribal cultures. Where stories are used for generative or transformative processes, they are often deliberately initiated through questions. With the sociorationalist recognition that the question and its form (if not its medium, as in McLuhan's "the medium is the message") impacts what is said and how it is said, means that the responsible practitioner-researcher must carefully choose the general direction where the story-teller is to be led

in the process of discovery. Using story-telling in action, particularly in an intentional context such as starting a network or an Appreciative Inquiry, suggests that the discovery process is driven by theory, whether consciously or, as is the usual case, unconsciously.

In our six books on networks, we have always combined stories, theory, and practice – and led with stories. Presented early to an audience of readers or listeners, stories help us to believe that there is a "there" there, something worth paying attention to, a reason to follow the discourse into more challenging theory and practice. Two examples illustrate the complementary premises that Appreciative Inquiry and networks are closely interrelated.

Mountain Forum: An Appreciative Inquiry Story About a Network

In the summer of 1998, one of the authors accompanied a UN mission to Asia to study the effectiveness of networks. Among the stops was Katmandu, Nepal, at ICIMOD, the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development. This intergovernmental organization was founded in 1983 to support sustainable mountain development in the 2100-mile-long Hindu Kush-Himalaya mountain range, which passes through Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, and Pakistan as well as Nepal. In telling this story (2000), we contrasted the vast historical span of communications capabilities represented in ICIMOD's operations: while it took a month to carry a message to northwestern Nepal, and a month to get a reply, since 1996 the Katmandu office has been connected by a very fast T1 line to the Internet and enmeshed in ongoing global conversations and activities about mountain regions.

ICIMOD, we learn from an extensive case study of a successful Appreciative Inquiry process published by Cooperrider and Kathryn Kaczmarski (in Cooperrider & Dutton, 1999), is only part of a larger story about mountain organizing worldwide and the establishment of a global electronic network to connect the many centers of activity. As regional mountain organizations formed, global mountain issues first became recognized at the Earth Summit in 1992, when a chapter on mountain ecosystems made it onto the world's agenda. This led to a series of meetings in 1994 convened by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization to prepare a global conference on the Mountain Agenda, which took place in Lima, Peru, in February, 1995. Lima was highly successful and underscored the need for an ongoing effort. An Initial Organizing Committee was formed and held its seminal meeting in September of that same year.

In the early stages of the organizing meeting, people shared stories and made metaphors about the form of the organization they would like to see

emerge. Most notable was the clear articulation of what people didn't want: "no one . . . articulated a vision of a conventional hierarchy: a secretariat with a secretary general, an organization with a large center and physical structure, and so on." However, one theme repeatedly expressed at this and prior meetings was the "need for an electronic information network," making concrete a key intention from the earliest meetings in Lima, which was "to create an ongoing network for information sharing and mutual learning, leading to innovative partnerships to implement actions."

When, on the last day of the committee meeting, the organizing form finally snapped into place, it was a network – a coalition of organizations, "nodes," that would bridge the local and global, acting together without a permanent center, where "any organization would be able to communicate directly with another through the network without traveling through any one node." And how would they connect? "The electronic information network would be a primary means of enacting mutual support across geographic and organizational boundaries, advancing the Mountain Agenda through information sharing and connecting all concerned parties." And so it happened. The next year, ICIMOD created its web site and connected to the net – and to all its sister mountain organizations as well as the worldwide community of related groups and individuals interested in mountain cultures and sustainability.

Reading the Mountain Forum Appreciative Inquiry story, we saw networking processes at work, the emergence of a network organization, and the symbiotic relationship of the technological support of an electronic network. This is a story about how some of the most marginalized peoples on the planet successfully organized as a network for mutual benefit. Hine (1976), perhaps the earliest observer of networks as the "future socio-cultural paradigm," wrote that this new form was emerging at the two extremes of society, among the poorest social movements and among the richest leading edge global companies. Which brings us to Shell.

Shell: A Network Story with AI

Royal Dutch/Shell is one of the largest and oldest businesses in the world, formed a century ago on a handshake between an English and Dutch company, a handshake that today still remains as the legal foundation of this enterprise. In 1991, Shell Oil Company, the U.S. and largest component of what is known as "The Group," reported its worst results ever. The reasons were the usual for an old-line company caught up in the rapid change environment of a surging global economy and the emergence of hundreds of niche competitors at every point on the value chain

from finding oil to delivering it to your gas tank. What was unusual was Shell Oil's response.

Phil Carroll took over as CEO in 1993, and shortly thereafter inaugurated a years-long process known as "The Transformation." The vision was nothing less than to go from the pits to "the premier company in the United States." Recognizing that it was a classic slow-moving, inflexible, not-very-smart hierarchy that was disconnected from the deep knowledge within the organization, the General Executive Office became the Leadership Council, business components reorganized with greater autonomy and more responsibility, and the top 200 senior leaders were convened as the Corporate Leadership Group. A revolution of relationships had begun.

Four years later, in October 1997, Shell's planners met with the Leadership Council at a retreat and presented this startling new picture of how the now-successful company had morphed: Shell had gone from owning 100% of the companies in which its assets were deployed, to 34%. It had moved from "control through ownership to influence through relationships." Who were we now, and what are we becoming, wondered the executives.

A month later 38 people, from across the company's businesses and diagonally through the ranks from senior management to boilermakers, joined the Leadership Council in a Strategic Initiative. Their mission was to answer four questions and make recommendations for action:

- How will we learn?
- What will it mean to be part of the Shell family?
- How will we develop our people?
- How will we govern?

These questions were very positive and approached in an appreciative way. They were focused not on solving problems but in choosing how to attain a desired future. So a process of discovery was inaugurated, and sub-teams were formed around each question. Interviews throughout the company were conducted and dialogues held. An additional group of 90 people were assembled to act as a sounding board for the Strategic Initiative Team, an assemblage that included members of Shell's larger community such as spouses, the local school superintendent, and suppliers.

When the group reconvened at its midpoint meeting, where we began our involvement as consultant-participants, there was wide agreement that Shell had become what they termed a "networked community." Stories were told of how networks and multi-party win-win partnerships had transformed operations and improved results. The conviction grew that Shell should embrace this new reality and become more conscious about its evolution towards the

post-hierarchical-bureaucratic form. Information from the "discovery" phase was brought into the meeting with a process that proceeded from "dream" to "design" over three days. The question-based sub-teams reorganized to formulate integrated recommendations and to develop a "Network Community Fieldbook."

Two months later, a 7-point path to Shell's "destiny" was presented to the Leadership Council. Approval on the spot was a simple matter, since the Council had been part of the development process. Enactment started immediately, as each recommendation was assigned to one or more of the senior executives to sponsor. However, this was not a top-down-only change processes. The recommendations had been embedded in a practical action-oriented fieldbook that explained the "whys" and "hows" of the development of the networked community. The intention was to equip people throughout Shell with the information they needed to take action themselves to grow towards the enterprise vision. Team members knew that the work of transformation required thoughtful effort by people throughout the company, not just by people in the executive suite.

Shell did not call its process Appreciative Inquiry, but it was. It started with the use of questions, elicited stories, and followed a process that closely resembled the 4-D Cycle. Perhaps the most significant similarity is the fundamental assumption about the positive, essentially good, nature of people and the organizations they form. Shell believes in its people and knows it has a positive core.

Our Network Story

Our own appreciative inquiry story bridges narrative, theory, and practice. In the late-1970s, we decided to go looking for "networks." We were driven by a vision to discover a form of organization beyond hierarchy-bureaucracy. There had to be something better.

Our voyage of discovery was framed by a systems theory (Stamps, 1980) that posited that there were common patterns of organization in human systems, and that human systems evolved over time. Where to look for new forms, however, was directed from the heart.

The original field of discovery was populated by the wildly proliferating non-profit and grassroot organizations that arose during the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, groups and movements like those that we had helped form, sustain, and, in many cases, become disillusioned with over the course of two decades. As practitioners, we were immersed in the new form of organization, vaguely knew it (thus feeding our intuition), but needed to step up a level to truly grasp it.

For our first book, *Networking* (Lipnack & Stamps, 1982), we employed a networking strategy. We wrote to nine people whom we knew to be richly connected networkers, asking them about networking and requesting names of people and groups to contact. We started writing people and asking: "Are you a network or do you perform a significant networking function?" We asked for their stories and for artifacts, like missions, white papers, action plans, brochures, and other tangible reflections of their networking intentions and efforts. And we asked for more names.

The process snowballed. Over eighteen months we had received the names of 50,000 people. We wrote to 4000 of them and, using a "cold-call" letter, we had an astonishing response rate of 40%. *Networking*, which was sub-titled "The First Report and Directory: People Connecting with People, Linking Ideas and Resources," featured these 1600 groups not only as stories in the body of the text, but as entries in a directory that comprised half the book and gave description, keyword, and contact pointers to networks – what we hoped would be of service both to readers and to the organizations profiled in our book. These networks were grouped into seven interest areas, each reflecting a vision of a better, more life-affirming world:

- Health and the Life Cycle,
- Communities and Cooperatives,
- Ecology and Energy,
- Politics and Economics,
- Education and Communications,
- Personal and Spiritual Growth,
- Global and Futures Networks.

Our systems perspective, which led us to see the common network patterns, also led us to construe all of these groups as representing a much larger collection of networks and together comprising an encompassing inchoate meta-network, which we called "Another America" (Lipnack & Stamps, 1986).

Much to our surprise, we got a very strong reaction from a number of businesses, particularly global companies that were early adopters of computers and the then-new network technologies that were used to connect resources internally. For the next decade we worked as consultants with programs and teams spread around the world, trying to use the still clumsy, expensive, and limited connective technologies. As consultants, our mode of interaction was to become participant-facilitators, members of teams with the role to help support its leadership and life-cycle processes, particularly the formative stages. When we resumed writing in the early 1990s, our stories and examples came predominately from the for-profit sectors, especially those leading edge global companies who

had consciously undertaken change processes that moved them from traditional hierarchy-bureaucracy to flatter, relatively decentralized, more participative, more flexible, and faster-changing organizations.

PRACTICE

Since we met and began working together more than 30 years ago, we have chosen a path of action and thought, to be both researchers and practitioners. From the sociorationalist perspective, it would be impossible to be a researcher and not impact the systems being studied, whether desired or not. So, better to be aware of our co-created reality and consciously chose the direction we hope our engagement will lead, while also making our biases and intentions as clear as possible to others.

From Theory to Practice Via Method

Method provides the bridge from theory to practice. It includes *principles*, *practices*, and *processes*. While theory offers the lens to see social reality, method actually embodies the construction kit people use on an everyday basis.

Principles arise from the repeated application of theory in practice. What works survives and modifies the next use of the principle. What we have learned about what works in applying the elements of the model are reflected in the verbs we use to render the elements actionable. Hence, at the high-level of the four dimensions:

- Clarify *purpose*,
- Identify *members*,
- Establish *links*, and
- Live *time*.

At the next level of model detail (see Fig. 1), adjectives reflect qualifying characteristics that we associate with good (i.e. effective, efficient, and value-driven) networks. So, for the exemplary dimension of Purpose, we have found that successful networks clarify and articulate their purpose into:

- Cooperative *goals*,
- Interdependent *tasks*, and
- Concrete *results*.

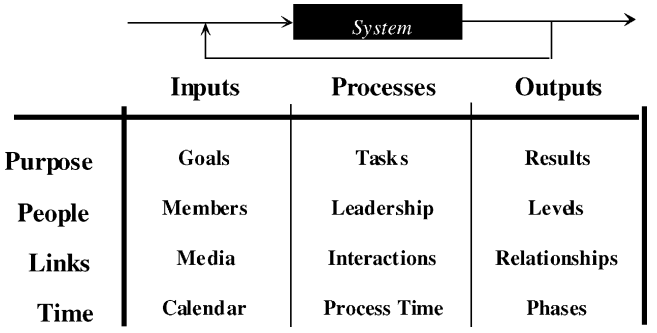

Fig. 1. Periodic Table of Organizational Elements.

Practices are the accumulated wisdom of advice, warnings, tips, and techniques that experienced practitioners share with one another. Sharing of best practices is typically an informal process, but increasingly organizations are looking for formal ways of capturing and making available at least some of this largely tacit knowledge. People who have facilitated and/or led many Appreciative Inquiry processes, networks, virtual teams, or had repeated experience in any professional endeavor, know and apply many practices that help them in the next unique situation, only some of which are explicitly shareable.

Generative principles lead to practices, which express the trial-and-error hypothesis-testing activities that lead back to improved principles and, eventually, more robust theory. This social-scientific process only works if the practitioners are aware of their complementary roles of active participants and reflective thinkers. It is all too easy to adopt practices as "the way we do it" and not subject them to critical assessment as to their efficacy.

From an applied point of view, principles represent strategy, while practices represent tactics. For example, one network principle asserts that "cooperative goals" are key to a successful collaborative organization, so the strategy for group development would include helping a group formulate a set of goals that emphasize common areas of aspiration rather than competitive conflict. Conversations, activities, processes, and techniques used to elicit and make explicit cooperative goals are in the realm of practices. Where the admonition to seek cooperative (rather than neutral or competitive) goals is relatively general, the set of practices that will work in a particular circumstance are pulled from a larger set of possible approaches, and are often further adapted on the fly.

Processes reflect patterns of action over time. While different networks and virtual teams reflect the use of many different processes that flow from their type (e.g. community of practice, strategic alliance, product development program)

and/or sector (e.g. manufacturing, financial, NGO), a process common to all organizations is the life cycle – human groups have beginnings, middles, and ends. In ongoing organizations (which from a long view are, of course, always embedded in a life cycle, even if we cannot recognize it), change and renewal processes follow the familiar "S" pattern of development.

Our experience in working with dozens of organizations that utilize formal life cycle processes (archetypically for new product development) is that everyone cuts the "S" curve into different stages and has a generally home-grown nomenclature that suggests a uniqueness in their process that is often unwarranted. Our practice in using the cross-systems life cycle pattern has resulted in a 5-phase process model with standard labels. In any particular application, we re-cut and re-name the phases to fit the circumstances.

For Appreciative Inquiry, the 4-D Cycle can be mapped onto the more general life cycle model. The 4-D stages are concentrated in the early and mid-portion of the life cycle. As with any real-world organizational application, the process model describes an approach both for the overall development of a group/network/organization and a design strategy for events within that overall development – such as a 4-day Appreciative Inquiry Summit (launch event), that uses the 4-D Cycle to structure the program schedule.

In our experience, the standard "S" curve is not necessarily a smooth one. Practice has taught us that there are predictable points of turbulence in this process, not surprisingly, given the theory, at the two inflection points of the logistic growth curve (Fig. 2).

Using our standard 5-phase rendition of the life cycle, we map the 4-D Cycle onto the generic logistic growth process, using descriptive terms associated with the development of teams.

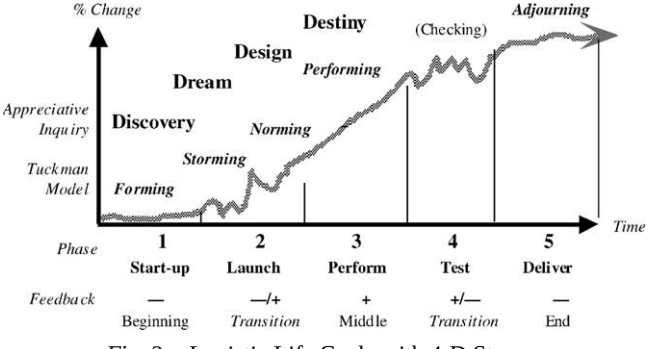

Fig. 2. Logistic Life Cycle with 4-D Stages.

(1) *Startup*. This initial phase can be very long as initial information is gathered, people recruited, purpose explored, and, above all, resistance encountered and overcome. In Appreciative Inquiry, this is the *Discovery* phase, including selling the idea, finding and training interviewers, and collecting the primary data, the stories.
(2) *Launch*. The second phase of development is usually much shorter but predictably turbulent as a critical mass of the organizing members gather to agree on the vision, hash out the initial purposes, settle some key roles, create an organizational framework, and, most importantly, generate the momentum to carry the group into the next phase. The stages of *Dream* and *Design* bracket this phase, with dreams of "what might be" leading into the launch, with the co-constructing design of "what should be" coming out of the launch event(s).
(3) *Perform*. This phase is often the bulk of the life cycle. With a successful launch and plan, this is where the "real work" gets done. The system dynamic is of accumulating positive feedback. Progress races up the long handle of the hockey stick. For 4-D, this is the *Destiny* stage, where the emphasis is on sustaining the evolving organization and "how to empower and adjust/improvise."
(4) *Test*. Unfortunately, progress is not forever. The growth curve begins to reach its maximum. The process runs into challenges from within and without, a second point of predictable turbulence ensues before results are delivered or a new level of stability is established. For the most part, Appreciative Inquiry does not, and most applied development processes do not, recognize this downstream stress point.
(5) *Deliver*. The concluding phase is the endgame, the conclusion for a temporary group, or a new plateau of stability for an ongoing organization. Results are delivered, information and learnings exchanged and archived, and successes celebrated. As a practice, the 4-D process does not focus much on endings. It is too busy with beginnings.

Embedding Methodology in Technology

Part of what defines us as human is our creation, use, and refinement of tools. Our tools have coevolved with our civilizations, economies, and organizations. For many who have looked at the grand sweep of human evolution and perceived major transitions in the human condition – which we have characterized as the nomadic, agricultural, industrial, and information eras – it is our tools and technologies that drive the change from one era to the next, as the very names of the eras suggest.

In the early stages of each new age, technologies lead, even force, epochal changes while organizational structures are slow to adapt. But change they do, engendering a momentum in the change process that enables the promise of the era to unfold on a large scale. Consequently, in the early stages of the next transformation, organizational patterns tend to persist and resist. In the current transformation, technological diffusion and cultural-economic globalization has pushed change to the point where a shift to new patterns of organization is likely and necessary. How and when emergent forms of organization become the dominant form will ultimately define how successful this new era of humanity will be.

Organizational networks have emerged with the development of network technologies. It is a happy coincidence (in our view) that the same word – network – is applied to the new technical systems of connectivity and to the new human systems of relationships. On the very big planetary scale, it is computer-based digital technologies, including digital communications media, that are transformative and driving the era-level change. The new given is the ability to connect anyone anywhere anytime, notwithstanding political and poverty barriers.

On a small scale, we are still very much learning how to converse, share interests, and work together using the new technologies. To date, most collaborative technology has been a collection of utilities supporting document management, online discussions, application sharing, chat, instant messaging, and the like. What has been missing is an understanding of and a methodology for organizing and working together virtually that is seamlessly integrated with the technology.

As a natural extension of our desire to help people develop effective networks and virtual teams, we have created an application on top of a major groupware platform that embeds our methodology in software (NetAge, 2002). This tool – which creates an online place for the formation, development, and sustaining of networked organizations – reflects all aspects of our method.

- The network model and *principles* underlie the interface architecture of the online "room" and the resulting navigation system. The six-sided room has "walls" with themes that include the four dimensions of the model. So, for example, you go to the People Wall to learn who is a member, their role, contact information, level of involvement, and other people-related material. Tools associated with the wall help a group develop and display key data about itself.
- *Practices* are embedded in the application through menu choices, help systems, and other content sources. For instance, the principle of making explicit operating agreements is supported by menu choices of suggested areas for

agreements, and a help system and other material that gives examples of specific agreements that have worked for other groups. And, of course, the online discussion and knowledge management features allow a community of practitioners to ask questions, engage in dialog, and catalog best practices.

- Life cycle *processes* are enabled through a set of tools designed to support teams in each phase of their development, as well as to function in a planned sequence of process steps, particularly in the startup and launch phases. Other processes that sustain virtual organizations, particularly meetings, are conducted in areas designed to enable good meeting practices while utilizing the power of both synchronous (e.g. con call, web conferencing, or even face-to-face) and asynchronous (e.g. threaded discussions, the persisting web room) media. Detailed transactional processes can be facilitated through a workflow capability that routes work objects (e.g. documents) through a network of people following a prescribed logic.

These methodology-infused technologies are at today's leading edge for supporting networks and virtual teams. But tomorrow, they will be widespread. We would expect to soon see the configuration of collaboration systems to specifically meet the needs and possibilities of Appreciative Inquiry.

RESEARCH

Being human systems scientists is tough in an intellectual environment still infused by the glow of Enlightenment scientific ideals. In a nutshell, this is the belief that in a "good" science, objective observers conduct value-free research leading to the discovery of immutable natural laws and absolute truth of a reality existing entirely separately from people and their humanness. To confirm the correctness of this set of assumptions and the connections between them, the "best" sciences create descriptions of the world from pure theory, then test the conclusions through repeatable experiments that by confirmation (or lack of it) enhance the theory and scientific progress is advanced.

From human systems and sociorationalist points of view, subjective scientist-participants engage in value-infused actions that lead to the discovery of relatively-true models and principles of a co-created, lived, and constantly changing human reality. While the meta-theoretical assumptions of these two scientific worldviews are sharply different, many aspects of the scientific program are common and continue to provide a powerful platform for seeking knowledge. Three such characteristics are: explicitness, openness, and community. To make scientific assertions, hypotheses, research protocols, and data must be made

explicit, insofar as possible. Scientific research must be open to permit testing, critical evaluation, and repeatable outcomes. And, the final arbiter of the validity of specialized knowledge is the peer community of interrelating scientific experts recognized in the field.

We will look briefly at the potential Appreciative Inquiry-Network research program through lenses of people, data, and theory.

We are the System

One of the most fundamental challenges to Industrial era science came from Werner Heisenburg's demonstration of the "Principle of Indeterminacy." He showed that at subatomic levels, the observer's instruments of investigation (e.g. light) so influenced what was being observed, most particularly the impact of light "particles" (photons) on the subatomic particles being studied, that efforts to control one dimension (such as speed) increased the indeterminacy of measurement in another dimension (such as location). While this insight was an extremely important part of the scientific revolution in Physics, the subatomic micro-truth of uncertainty seems to have little impact in the human macro-world, where approximate Newtonian principles work well in practice, as in engineering.

But in the world of human systems, the human observer is of the same scale, within a few orders of magnitude, as the observed human system, particularly small ones. Thus the impact of scientists and instruments is very much at a macro-level. We live socially at a level where more control in one dimension leads to more indeterminacy in some complementary dimension. Moreover, it is relatively impossible to bring human systems into the classical laboratory insulated from external influences. As disappointing as it is to try to "bring" a small group into a lab to observe its "normal" behavior, the stretch quickly becomes impractical as larger human systems are considered. Finally, by its connected nature, a virtual, distributed group, large or small, cannot be located in a traditional laboratory.

However, the "problem" of indeterminacy only appears as such from a deficit-oriented perspective and against a background of antiquated assumptions of objective, analytically-parsed, values-free, absolute knowledge. What are the "possibilities" of indeterminacy and human involvement in a scientific approach to human systems? Some benefits to a positive approach are:

- Human theory would be more closely aligned with human reality;
- Recognizing and accepting that engagement leads to a built-in feedback loop between theory and practice and provides for the rapid diffusion and application of knowledge in the real world;

- Engagement denotes acceptance of the reality of values and thus implies a responsibility to consciously choose the value framework of the scientific enterprise;
- Indeterminacy leads to a respect for open systems and an irreducible element of awe and wonder in the mystery at the heart of sentient life; and
- Eventually, the prevailing scientific ethic moves from "knowledge for knowledge's sake" to "knowledge for human betterment."

Human Systems Data and Containers

Human social systems are "something more" than the sum of their human parts, people. The "more" lies in extra-individual characteristics like the system-level emergent properties generated through relationships among members and the motivating vitality of shared purpose and community. Data about collective reality lie in information objects – such as stories, dialogues, and documents – and in transaction records of activities that shine light on "invisible" relationships.

While we have a grasp, however imperfect, on how to understand ourselves as individuals, we have no generally agreed upon means for "grasping" ourselves as groups. Lacking a laboratory for collecting collective data and recording transactions, we have found no container, no systematic and categorically clean way of apprehending social reality scientifically.

> Until now: With computers, the net, and the web, digital technology offers a newly-viable environment for doing action-oriented human systems science.

Consider virtual teams and networks that live some portion of their collective life online. In self-constructed web containers, which we have called "rooms," information objects of all sorts are collected and generated. Whenever interactions between people or between people and information happen through online media, that interaction is logged (or is capable of being recorded). For really-existing virtual organizations, the workplace is naturally the laboratory, a fully-wired container for group objects and interactions. Because of the digital nature of the place, there is no limit to size, nor is there a prejudice against distributed groups.

Such facilities are only now coming online for substantial numbers of people. The relative amount of meaningful group interaction or information exchange that happens online is small but growing. At some point, enough group reality will be expressed through the digital medium to constitute the basis for increasingly sound research. And, since these are living environments, the loop from research to practice can be immediate, particularly for localized tactical adjustments.

With larger communities of self-researching human systems, the path from theory-to-practice-to-data-to-theory may be rapidly iterated and the consequences for improvement fed quickly back into the participating systems.

Integrative Theorizing

Analysis is the modus operandi of the deficit-oriented, problem-centered Industrial approach to science. Synthesis, essential to the emerging systems-oriented sciences, is not the antithesis of analysis, but rather includes analysis and adds an integrative ingredient to interpretation and theorizing. Since the data collected through online containers can quickly become a flood of bits, methodological tools must be built into the digital place to enable people to make meaningful use of the information.

Fortunately, there are many social science approaches being developed that embrace analytic detail and provide useful integrative outcomes. Two examples:

- A Values Science of assessment and development (e.g. Brian Hall, 1994, 2000) that provides methods to measure individual and collective values within a human system through survey instruments. Hall has also developed complementary methods for digitally processing the content of a group's information objects to determine the pattern of values expressed through the shared record. Feeding values information back to people enables them to go from a base of "what is" to consider the constellation of values to which they aspire, to "what should be." Knowledge and method together provides ways for the values of human systems to shift and evolve.
- Social Network Analysis (e.g. Wellman, 1997) provides methods for doing surveys and analyzing transactional data to find "hidden" network patterns of, for example, influence within an organization. Such networks of influence can be compared and contrasted with the overt, formal networks of hierarchical power represented by the typical "tree" organizational diagram. Revealing patterns of influence to the system of course immediately influences those patterns, and may lead to changes in the overt structure.

Methods such as these would be immensely valuable to Appreciative Inquiry. A values analysis of appreciative story content, as well as other organizational expressions of its core self, offers a standardized view of this subjective data to supplement the active and engaged interpretation that arises through dialog about the stories. Using a normalized framework of cross-organizational, cross-cultural values as developed by Hall and others, allows comparison of discovery information across instances of Appreciative Inquiry.

Social Network Analysis would not only provide a map to guide the discovery phase, but also suggest the most fruitful places to ask questions with impact. Research that acknowledges and takes responsibility for the changes engendered by the scientific process needs to know how information and influence really flow in human systems.

SEARCH

To do re-search, you must have an idea of what you are searching for or looking at. It is a founding premise of the sociorationalist perspective that scientific worldviews act as primordial preconceptions that bound the search for truth. We "see" what we already think "is." Ontology (what is real) is interdependent with epistemology (how to know the real). Scientific revolutions are marked by new ways of seeing (Kuhn). New lenses and conceptual frameworks reveal previously "hidden" realities and open up large new territories for the exploration of knowledge.

Human Systems Are

Appreciative Inquiry assumes the entitivity of social systems, most specifically of organizations. If organizations were not really real, it would be meaningless to search for a "positive core." Without the assumption of systemic coherence, it would be pointless to engage in collective data gathering, convene groups to interpret the data, or take responsibility for influencing the co-creation of organizations by their members.

From the earliest conceptions of system science, there has been an acceptance that truly cross-system principles would include the social disciplines as well the established scientific fields of physical and biological sciences. This belief is shared by people from all the major sources of modern systems thought: General Systems Theory (e.g. especially Kenneth Boulding), Operations Research (e.g. Herbert Simon), and Systems Dynamics (e.g. Jay Forrester).

The given that social systems are ontologically real is only the first step in a useful foundation for knowledge. What kind of systems are social systems? To the Industrial mindset, the answer was obvious – organizations are machines, constructed artifacts built to last and fixed as needed. Even the most devout socio-rationalist often uses the mechanistic language of construction to refer to the way people create their organizations (e.g. Gergen, *An Invitation to Social Construction*, 1999). When we are being especially careful, we treat our organizations as "living

systems," taking advantage of all the organic language attendant to the use of biological metaphors.

There is a third view, one we have quietly inserted into this discussion – that social systems are *human* systems (see Stamps, 1980, for comparison of the Mechanistic-Organic-Human paradigms). The argument is simple: since the components of social systems are human, then the resultant system is human. That is, a system is at least as complex as any of its constituents, and it is an unacceptable simplification to comprehend social systems by evolutionarily less complex physical and biological models.

Are Human Systems Conscious?

Are human systems conscious? Is there a "group mind?" This issue has been the "third-rail" of social science theorizing for most of this century. Early in the formative decades of analytical social sciences, such speculation was routinely and loudly rejected as "anthropomorphic" and "metaphysical," redolent of the pre-Enlightenment scientific dark ages. As organizational development practitioners would say, consciousness has been the un-discussible "elephant in the room."

Social systems arise from interacting people. Regarding the intensely symbolic nature of groups, one might say, along with Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), that organizations result from "interacting minds." For systems generally, emergent wholes inherit the characteristics of their parts, and generate "something more." Given the conscious nature of its parts, the leap to conscious human systems is short indeed.

Why is it important to recognize the conscious nature of our human systems? Some reasons:

- First and foremost is the integrity of the scientific search for truth. We can't know what we can't see, or be permitted to see. We must be willing to see things as they are in order to progress beyond convenient myths about our social condition together.
- By accepting the degree of complexity and mystery that accompanies the use of mental metaphors for understanding organizations and societies, we are better positioned to develop knowledge from a solid base than by obscuring simplifications.
- Awareness of group consciousness and using a Mind Metaphor points us to the fundamental importance of understanding the symbolic, informational, and communications-infused relational human universe.

- Alongside the Mind Metaphor would be renewed attention to the Brain Metaphor and the complementary role of concrete communications media in the evolution of human organizations (i.e. the analogy of connective technology infrastructures with the human nervous system), and the revolution inevitably unleashed with the development of new communications technologies – and in particular the current evolutionarily dramatic leap from analog to digital media and processing.
- Individual consciousness is by no means well understood, and we are far from an agreed upon way to conceive it, to say the least. Recognizing the probable existence of group consciousness and searching for systematic ways of representing and testing it may redound to the benefit of understanding consciousness generally and ourselves as individual mental beings.

The search is on for viable models of consciousness that include both individual and group domains. One example in the field of Appreciative Inquiry comes from Gervase Bush (1999). He uses the consciousness metaphor to contrast relatively conscious formal, "official" organizational meetings and artifacts from the relatively unconscious "inner dialogue" reflected in informal conversations and stories. We have suggested (2000) that the cross-cultural "category-image schema" approach to individual consciousness (e.g. Lakoff, 1987) can be fruitfully applied to understanding group consciousness. In both cases, such speculation informs the design of tools and processes to support and improve organizations.

The really big benefit, however, is improving our organizations for the betterment of humanity. By recognizing group intelligence, we can search for ways to improve that intelligence, to improve learning together, and to improve our collective outputs. Of course, smarter groups may not be better groups in the ethical sense; after all, networks are values-based organizational forms that can be used to support peace or terror, change or tradition. But while there may be conflict around "good" values, at least the debate is engaged in a framework that admits the reality and centrality of values.

Ultimately, the stance of optimist or pessimist on the eventual "goodness" of the human enterprise rests on a spiritual apprehension of people and the world we co-create as fundamentally good, bad, or randomly neutral.

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