

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AND CULTURE CHANGE AT GTE:**

#### **Launching a Positive Revolution**

**Diana Whitney**

**David L. Cooperrider**

**Maureen E. Garrison**

**Jean P. Moore**

The intent of this paper is to reflect upon the process of culture change at GTE - the focus of our work and learning for the past three years. This is a story about a highly successful large - scale change effort that draws into question many of the traditional theories and practices of change management. It is a story of “grassroots change” – change that is emergent and generative rather than programmatic and directed. It is about the power of voluntary effort to bring about positive change within a large well-established bureaucracy. We hope it is a story that invites you the reader into the journey and toward your own revelations and understandings - about the philosophy of positive change and the practice of Appreciative Inquiry for large scale organi-

zation wide change.

It has been three years since the introduction of Appreciative Inquiry to GTE. As we reflect back over this time, we realize that there have indeed been ups and downs, and bumps along the road. In recalling highpoints, the times when we were most engaged and excited working with members of GTE, many come to mind - the first distance learning (satellite broadcast) Appreciative Inquiry training program, the union management partnership launch, the Appreciative Inquiry call center initiative, the Zealots Program. Each a success on its own and a formidable part of the systemic culture change.

Upon reflection, however, it is the approach taken to culture change, with its grass roots revolutionary focus, that has held our attention for nearly three years and continues to enliven us as students of organization life. We continue to learn from stories of the “wild flower” initiatives sprouting up and growing naturally throughout the organization, and from stories of the positive impacts of Appreciative Inquiry upon the organization and its members. The approach taken to culture change was founded upon four principles. Designed into each culture change initiative, these principles created a context for change that was at the same time an image of the ideal organization culture and a living practice of that image. Briefly, the four principles are:

1. **An unquestionable commitment to front line employees** - over and over again we found ourselves asking what we could do to demonstrate our confidence in front line employees to do the right thing. In addition we sought to be partners with front line employees in creating the needed transformation. We wanted to relate in a way that gave life to employee self-sovereignty and invited their best to come center stage.
2. **A willingness to invite and innovate new forms of cooperation** - we began with an extraordinary stance toward cooperation among those contributing to the culture change effort. The change team consisted of public affairs, human resources, and organization

development staff who worked closely with senior management to ensure quality and sustainability. Throughout the company there was a commitment to new forms of organizing based on cooperation rather than hierarchy. We took up the challenge of helping the organization image and practice cooperation, partnership and unity in all that we did.

**3. A “storytelling” narrative model of organization culture** - early in our working together it became evident that we all recognized the power of stories to guide human life personally and collectively. It was Tom White, President of GTE Telops, who gave us a rallying cry for the culture change process when he said, “Culture is the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, and then we forget they were stories.” We built upon this idea in numerous ways: storytelling as the theme of the annual President’s Leadership Awards Ceremony, a “success stories” column in the company newspaper, a study of the organization’s inner dialogue - the ratio of positive to negative stories told about the company by members of the company, and a storytelling focus to training and learning.

**4. A commitment to Appreciative Inquiry as an organization wide, integrative change process** - approximately one year after the introduction of Appreciative Inquiry to the organization, the organization’s Culture Council decided to use Appreciative Inquiry as the integrative approach to culture change. The Culture Council decided not to create Appreciative Inquiry as a stand-alone program, but to use it as the core methodology for change in all company initiatives. As a result Appreciative Inquiry has been woven into numerous programs and processes including: frontline employee training, management and leadership training, the union management partnership initiative, an organizational improvement process for call centers, the positive change network and a diversity initiative.

## **Background**

At the time of this writing, GTE has merged with Bell Atlantic to form Verizon, the largest telephone company in the United States, serving both commercial and retail customers, with broad international reach and growth potential. Like all companies in the telecommunications industry, GTE has weathered great change in recent years. By mid year 1995, it had undergone major reorganization and consolidation, a substantial acquisition, process re-engineering and significant downsizing. The prospect of new national telecommunications legislation was looming and every indicator pointed to more change ahead. All employees, regardless of position, were experiencing the effects of massive change with no end in sight.

In the summer of 1995, the senior executives of GTE Telops gathered for their annual conference. With the recognition that opportunity and risk run hand in hand in the newly competitive, increasingly high technology telecommunications industry, the mood at the onset of this conference was one of cautious optimism. With the awareness that customer driven, market opportunities could only be realized by a fully engaged workforce, this team gathered to hone its leadership capacity. It was during this conference that Appreciative Inquiry was introduced to the GTE Telops leaders. Conference feedback ratings showed Appreciative Inquiry as the highest ranked session in the entire conference. The seeds of positive change were sown. It was not yet evident, however, how fertile was the ground.

In February of 1996, the senior leadership team found the results of the annual Employee Opinion Survey disturbing and responded with a call to action. Management scores were up in six of nine categories. Non-exempt employee scores were up in seven categories. Hourly employee scores were up in only two categories while flat or down in seven of nine categories. Knowing that GTE hourly employees serve in excess of ninety percent of GTE's customers, the

Telops senior team was in agreement; something must be done to positively engage front line employees. The goal was clear: to ensure a connected, committed and passionate front-line workforce, knowledgeable about the business and dedicated to customer service, by focusing resources on the front line. The ground was tilled for systemic culture change.

### **Invitation to a Positive Revolution**

The senior team's favorable reaction to Appreciative Inquiry led the internal change management team, comprised of organization development and public affairs consultants, to choose Appreciative Inquiry as the process for bringing about the much needed organization change. David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney joined the team as external resources. The goal was to introduce Appreciative Inquiry to the organization, beginning with the front line, and to support its use across the organization in a way that enhanced employee engagement and business success. What initially appeared as a call for an organization-wide Appreciative Inquiry quickly became an invitation to participate in a positive revolution, the momentum of which has been created and sustained by employees throughout the organization.

The first fateful question emerged: "How can we engage the positive potential of all 64,000 employees toward the transformation of the company?" The focus was clearly on changes needed at the front line to enthusiastically and effectively serve customers. The external consultants submitted a proposal using the company communication technology for company-wide education and inquiry. The change management team went back and forth between the idea of a company wide inquiry and the idea of building critical mass and receptivity to positive change through training of front line employees. We discussed the possibility of a company wide inquiry. We were excited by the potential of a 64,000-person inquiry. We considered a strategy of face-to-face interviews, focus group interviews, and online interviews. Some wanted to launch

a nation wide inquiry as the leverage process for change. Others believed it was important to build a critical mass of awareness about Appreciative Inquiry with in the organization before launching a whole system inquiry. We chose to build critical mass by introducing Appreciative Inquiry to employees as a process they could use, as they believed warranted, to help them be more effective.

We knew that our first initiative would indeed be fateful. Committed to the continuity and sustainability of this endeavor, we chose what we thought would be a moderate first step - front line employee training in Appreciative Inquiry. Little did we know that we were about to unleash a positive force so powerful, that once liberated it would multiple on its own, enhancing learning, cooperation and customer service as it went.

### **Birthing a Positive Change Network**

This was the birth of what is now called “The Positive Change Network.” Initially called the “Zealots Program,” it started as a two-day Appreciative Inquiry training for front line employees. When asked what he would like to accomplish with this program, Tom White, then president of GTE Telops replied, “I want every employee to be a ‘zealot’ for this company - an enthusiast whose cause is the satisfaction of our customers. I am the number one GTE zealot and I want a whole company full of zealots.” Even though we were uneasy about the word zealot, his enthusiasm struck a cord in us. Had we envisioned the role of organization change as behavioral transformation we would have gone no further. Believing as we do, that within all people and organizations there is a positive core - a source of positive potential that is brought to life when recognized and evoked through inquiry - we proceeded with a sense of bold possibilities.

We clearly wanted whatever we did to recognize and invite frontline employee self-

sovereignty. We wanted to avoid the all too familiar empowerment trap. Having senior management tell front line employees they are empowered does not an empowered workforce make. We did not want to prescribe to people how they should behave. And we certainly did not want to impose Appreciative Inquiry on anyone. We wanted in every way possible to demonstrate confidence in and commitment to front line employees. As a result, we decided to introduce Appreciative Inquiry and to invite participants to explore applications and practices in their own areas of work, rather than prescribe a standard set of follow up actions for everyone. At the end of the workshop people asked, “what are we supposed to do now that we’ve been through this session?” The answer we gave, with some concern that we were not satisfying peoples’ need for clarity, was, “It is up to you. Use these ideas and practices however you’d like and only if you find them useful - in your personal life or your work life.” As a result, people began to realize that the future of the company is indeed their responsibility . . . that the images they hold and the questions they ask - be they positive or negative - do make a difference.

One further question emerged as we prepared for the first Zealots training. What do we say when asked, “What is a Zealot? What does a Zealot do? And more specifically, what does the company expect of Zealots?” We knew that the habits of discourse are such that if asked these questions during a question and answer period, senior managers would answer them. And that no matter how good the answers, it would be a losing position in that it would set up the hierarchical discourse pattern where employees ask and executives tell. This would undermine all we were attempting to bring forth.

We thought about the transformation desired. Our image of an organization at its best is one where self-sovereign front line employees have full voice - where they comfortably share best practices with one another and with management. Where they inquire into the myriad ways that customers are satisfied; and where they openly talk about what is needed for them to better

serve customers. And so we decided to experiment. What would happen if we turned the executive - employee relationship around and in this case have front line employees tell senior managers what it means to be a Zealot and what Zealots need to thrive and succeed in GTE.

The result was indeed a highpoint of the first Zealot workshop. As the wrap up of the session, senior executives came to lunch to hear what the Zealots had to say. Six groups of Zealots had prepared presentations addressing questions such as: What is a Zealot? How can we best grow Zealots throughout the company? What communication vehicles will help Zealots stay connected? What do Zealots need to thrive in GTE? And what do Zealots do? The enthusiasm was high as lunch was served to the tables of Zealots now joined by 2 – 3 executives at each table. Zealots talked about Appreciative Inquiry, the value they saw it having for the organization and when asked, described their plans for taking Appreciative Inquiry back to their work and their homes. Lunch ended and it was time to hear from the Zealots.

The first group to present surprised us all by asking everyone in the room - including in some cases the company president to whom they report, three or four levels removed, to stand and recite “The Zealot Oath,” a pledge they created in answer to the question, “What is a Zealot?” They assured everyone that Zealots were here to stay and that they would make a positive difference in the company.

### **The Zealot Oath**

“GTE Employee Zealots Always Act With:

**Zeal**

**Enthusiasm**

**Attitude (We’re Can Do)**

**Leadership**

**Openness**

## Trust

I solemnly affirm to support and display, daily,  
my personal commitment  
to the ZEALOT Way.”

Each presentation built on the enthusiasm of the previous while also making the business case for liberating the “power of the positive” through Appreciative Inquiry. Tom White concluded the session by asking for additional questions or comments. Even the number one Zealot was surprised by the question that followed. One participant stood and quietly asked Tom White and the senior managers present if they were ready for the positive revolution that had just been born. He went on to say that people want to be recognized for what they do well, they want to learn from the best practices of others and they want to be the easiest and best company to do business with in the telecommunications industry. He said that now - with the power of Appreciative Inquiry to study our best and to build on it - there is no stopping us.

### **Grassroots Initiatives for Positive Change**

We wondered if, indeed, that would be the case until we began hearing stories of how this first group of Zealots were using Appreciative Inquiry and the tremendous impacts they were having. For example,

- One customer service representative created an interview guide and, by herself, interviewed over 200 customers to discover just what it is that they value about GTE service.
- Another participant asked the internal consulting group help her conduct a full cycle Appreciative Inquiry in her organization of about 300 people.
- Several people presented an Appreciative Inquiry overview to their work teams,

which included appreciative interviews about teamwork.

- Others began the practice of starting meetings with good news stories.
- A group designed an interview guide and interviewed customers about images of quality service.
- Several initiatives focused on measuring service successes rather than service failures.

It quickly became evident that the change management team could (and perhaps had to) support the Zealots by building a communication architecture that gave evidence to their successes throughout the company. They needed a vehicle that allowed them to share stories with one another, that enabled them to learn from one another and that fostered cooperation among them. Articles about the Zealots appeared in the company newspapers, a Zealots' intranet address was established, Zealots' conference calls were used to gather input for executive decision making, and computers were set up so Zealots who worked in the field could stay connected and contribute.

Thousands of people throughout GTE were introduced to Appreciative Inquiry and trained in the basics of topic selection, crafting appreciative questions and conducting interviews. In the first year, 800 employees attended the Zealots' Appreciative Inquiry training sessions. Hundreds of people were involved learning Appreciative Inquiry as front line facilitators; and even more learned about it at annual Leadership Retreats where some of the authors were keynote speakers.

There were numerous Appreciative Inquiries underway within the organization. Zealots and others who had learned Appreciative Inquiry along the way had spontaneously generated several inquiries on teamwork, customer service and communication. There was an inquiry guide developed by a team of Zealots wanting to conduct a simultaneous inquiry throughout the entire

organization. Any of the Zealots who so wished could conduct interviews. The topics chosen were: Quality, Teaming, Ownership, Inspirational Leadership, and Fun at Work. Over 100 Zealots participated and over 400 interviews were conducted. The lessons learned from these interviews were supported by an Intranet site for stories and best practices. It became clear that the positive revolution was growing, as was the sense of contribution and enthusiasm among those who were participating.

### **Changing Culture Through Storytelling**

It is through the stories we tell about an organization, its employees, its leadership, its customers and its ways of operating that an organization is known. An organization becomes real to us through the stories we tell and the stories we hear about it. We give life and meaning to an organization as we engage with others in talking about the organization, the work it enables us to perform, our visions, plans, and customers.

James Hillman, noted Jungian psychologist, in his recent book, The Soul's Code, draws attention to how we construct our sense of childhood and childhood identity through the stories we tell and read.<sup>1</sup>

*“Because the “traumatic” view of early years so controls psychological theory of personality and its development, the focus of our rememberings and the language of our personal storytelling have already been infiltrated by the toxins of these theories. Our lives may be determined less by our childhood than by the way we have learned to imagine our childhood. We are, this book shall maintain, less damaged by the traumas of childhood than by the traumatic way we remember childhood...”*

This suggests that the stories we tell about who we are - more than a set of personality traits, or even our past experiences - truly constitute our identity. The same maybe thought about organi-

zations. Organizations are created and exist in the narrative processes of inquiry, conversation and storytelling among members, customers and other stakeholders.

Organizations are made and imagined through narrative processes. This view of organizing suggests that the keys to organization culture change are the organization's narrative processes. The collective conversations that go on within and about the organization can be considered a form of "inner dialogue" or organizational "self talk". Research shows that healthy people, healthy marriages and healthy organizations demonstrate a positive inner dialogue. That is, the sum total of conversations is more positive than negative by a ratio of at least 2 to 1 for individuals<sup>2</sup> and 5 to 1 for couples<sup>3</sup> and organizations.

Dan Young, Assistant Vice President within Human Resources, starts front line employee meetings on culture change by asking participants to share their definitions of organization culture. Generally, participants describe organization culture in two ways. Some offer a behavioral definition ala Deal and Kennedy,<sup>4</sup> "It's the way we do things around here." Others describe culture in terms of deeply held values that guide decisions and actions, "It's our core values and how we use them for decision making and it's the way our values are lived in our relationships with one another and with customers." Dan Young replies, yes these are common definitions of organization culture. He then asks in a light voice, "How many of you think we really can change our core values and behaviors? Furthermore, how many of you want to." Not many hands rise in affirmation to either of his questions. Dan concurs, "I don't think we can or should change our values, but we can change the stories we tell about ourselves. And that's what we mean by culture. He goes on to emphasize how often we tell stories about problems and complaints, and how seldom we tell stories of success, customer satisfaction or a job well done. He challenges participants to change the stories they tell about the organization, their colleagues and even themselves. That, he assures them, will change the culture of GTE.

Creativity, innovation and positive change stem from an affirmative, narrative rich environment. In many organizations today, human communication means memos, reports and - at best - negotiations. All are forms of communication which tend to be reductionist and linear. They do not encourage “out of the box thinking” nor enhance the generative capacity of the organization. Narrative forms of communication such as storytelling and inquiry, on the other hand, invite exploration, ignite the imagination and satisfy the human need for connection and cooperative meaning making.

Our image for the GTE culture change process was to create a narrative rich culture in which the ratio of positive to negative stories was at least a 5 to 1 positive to negative. We approached this in a number of different ways.

- First, we taught Appreciative Inquiry with a focus on storytelling. We developed a unique module on transforming negative discourse to positive discourse. Training was provided for the Zealots, for front line core course facilitators and as part of the launch for a union-management partnership initiative.
- Second, we created opportunities and processes for collecting and sharing “good news” stories. One executive volunteered to be the center for all the stories. They came into his office and he sent them out to other groups in the organization, to be shared and replicated when appropriate. He began all his meetings by reviewing success stories and discussing “root causes of success.” Many were passed on to the company communication department for publication in the newsletter.
- Third, storytelling was embedded into various processes in the company. For example, the President’s Leadership Awards program focused on storytelling about the winning employees, their teams and customer service.
- Fourth, we added open-ended questions to the company employee survey and tracked

the ratio of positive to negative images, stories and comments. We collected responses to questions such as “Assume for a moment you have a crystal ball that can see into the future, realistically, what kind of company will GTE be 5 to 10 years from now?”

- And fifth, we created a parable - a storybook - about Appreciative Inquiry as a teaching tool for all employees. Through these and many other activities, we focused the attention of GTE employees all throughout the organization on their power to positively impact self esteem, identity and success - their own, one another's and the organization's - through the quality of their conversations and the stories they construct, share and spread.

### **The Union Management Partnership**

Two years into the effort the winds of change circled around us in some very unexpected ways. GTE went through a major reorganization. The culture change initiative continued and indeed served as a centerpiece for communication to employees about the reorganization. Focus on front line employees continued as business units were reconfigured to meet the competitive market environment. In the process some executives used appreciative interviews to select their new teams and to quickly build cooperative capacity in their new organizations. Membership on the change management team changed. The overall initiative, however, continued seamlessly with Appreciative Inquiry at the center. And GTE was awarded the ASTD Culture Change Award for 1997. For many of us it was indeed an exemplary process and a career highpoint.

And then the winds of change blew stronger. It seemed that the company's two major unions - the Communication Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) were curious about the culture change initiatives, especially the

Zealots Program.

During this time, the CWA and IBEW national leadership and GTE leadership were working on a new partnership. They were meeting with the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Council in Washington DC to craft the purpose and principles of their partnership. The company soon realized that the culture change efforts which had at once been organizationally (managerially) empowered also needed to include union involvement and ownership.

David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney were called to Washington to attend a meeting of the Partnership Council. Union and company leadership, alike, greeted them with skeptical curiosity: How if at all, might Appreciative Inquiry be used to support the newly conceptualized partnership? Comments were made like, “we don’t know what Appreciative Inquiry is but it seems to have caught on in the company.” “We don’t know what Appreciative Inquiry can do but we sure know that what we have been doing for the past decade isn’t working anymore.” And of significance, “we are committed to being a company that values its unions; and unions that support their businesses. And we need all the help we can get.” After a very candid and wide-ranging meeting, it was agreed that leadership - union and management together - would be given an opportunity to learn about Appreciative Inquiry and to vote on whether or not to use it as a cornerstone for the new partnership. The consultants were asked to come back the next morning with a draft agenda for a two day meeting to introduce Appreciative Inquiry to 200 union and management leaders from across the company and country. It was not the only sleepless night that led up to the meeting and vote. The next day the agenda was thoroughly discussed and approved. A team of CWA, IBEW and GTE people was designated to organize and host the meeting. The meeting was held about 3 months later.

Two hundred and twenty people showed up in Dallas: 120 union leaders and 100 company managers. During the first evening, the air was thick with old hurts, current frustrations,

and a determination to see the good and the just prevail. The next day started with some nervousness but managed to set the context and get people into interviews with their union or management counterpart within the first 30 minutes of the session. The subsequent day-and-a-half training session went well. The 220 people sitting at tables of 8 gradually relaxed into the ideas and practices of Appreciative Inquiry. And then it was time for the vote. Dan Young, then AVP of Organization Effectiveness, took the stage. David and Diana went to the back of the room and waited in great anticipation of the vote. Dan gave the group 30 minutes to discuss whether or not Appreciative Inquiry should be used to build a new relationship among unions and management at GTE. The groups' task was simple – to cast a table vote of yes or no.

Thirty minutes later, Dan called the question. He asked each table to voice their vote and their reasoning. What we heard was surprising, “Table One votes 100% yes on the condition that every employee in the company has access to learn Appreciative Inquiry.” “Table Two votes yes, and asks that union stewards and coaches (front line supervisors) attend training programs together.” Tables three, four, five and so forth - until all twenty some tables were heard, said yes! The conditions for success were laid out in the process, full participation, partnership at all levels of the company and a focus on initiatives that benefit employees, customers, the unions and the company.

We quickly went into action to design and host the partnership kick off meeting. A Partnership Summit involving 250 people would be the first introduction of the Partnership Council and the purpose and principles they had drafted. It would give local leadership an opportunity to chart their course for the partnership. The unions' training and development staff, the company's labor relations staff, public affairs staff, organization effectiveness staff, the Federal Conciliation and Mediation consultants and the Appreciative Inquiry consultants were now a team. Appreciative Inquiry served as a backdrop upon which to design the summit, provided a common lan-

guage and guided the organizing process for the meeting, allowing the partnership principles and the work of local teams to be the foreground.

### **Noteworthy Results**

The results have been unprecedented. The local support for the union-management partnership was contagious. Local Partnership Councils formed to provide direction and to ensure that, whenever possible, local decisions are made in partnership. Efforts already underway have become showcases for how to address essential business issues such as overtime, the company's use of contractors, and workforce retention in call centers, through real partnership.

As local Partnership Councils formed they asked for support from human resources, organization effectiveness and labor relations. Information, training and consultation programs have been put in place to respond to the requests for support. All employees have access to a 4 hour program on "Appreciative Inquiry and the New Partnership" and a process called Appreciative Issues Resolution has replaced conflict resolution.

The positive orientation toward partnership is spilling over into relationships between the front line and headquarters staff. The company culture council, seeing the potential of Appreciative Inquiry to bridge differences and to help create a truly employee centered culture, decided to use AI as the integrative philosophy and methodology for culture change. This led to the reinvention of the Zealots Program as the Positive Change Network – a virtual process for generating employee enthusiasm and capacity for positive change. And most significantly, stories are traveling through the company about the recent contract negotiations. They are being described as the smoothest negotiations in the history of company's union relations. This is indeed a story worthy of being told.

## **Four Powerful Lessons**

As stated earlier, the lessons have been many. The GTE culture change initiative is a story of real time, on the job learning. Each of us started with ideas about how Appreciative Inquiry could best serve GTE. We all began with models of how human systems change. Along the way all of us have been challenged to let go of what worked in the past, and to create what was needed at the time. We did this with the Zealots Program, the Union-Management Partnership and a host of other Appreciative Inquiry applications in support of the culture change. Four lessons come forward from this work.

### 1. The Power of Liberation

We have been repeatedly surprised by reports of actions taken by people who learned Appreciative Inquiry and decided to use it to make their workplace better. The surprise and the learning comes when we realize how much has been done and how little has been programmatically planned or prescribed by senior leadership - or anyone else for that matter. Stories abound in the organization about people who, on their own initiative, created interview protocols and interviewed customers, brought Appreciative Inquiry to their team meetings, convinced their managers to conduct inquiries within their department or area, and solicited positive stories and sent recognition letters.

Appreciative Inquiry is a change process that liberates the energy, enthusiasm and commitment of people at all levels in an organization. It liberates people from the fear that they are wrong, at fault or to blame - or that they might make a mistake if they tried something different. It liberates them from the learned cynicism that makes creative, positive possibilities seem foolish. And it liberates them from the role of critic – a persona that creates distance between people, departments and customers. It provides them with an approach toward work and work relationships that is fun, satisfying and practical.

Holding a positive image of people, and asking them to tell stories about when they are at their best, enhances their willingness to participate and their sense of capacity to impact their work environment in a positive direction. When people are treated as if they do make a difference, they go out and make a difference. When people are treated as if they are the keys to successful customer relations and business development, they act as liaisons to customers and they care for the company's investments. When people are recognized as positive change agents and invited to use their capabilities to change the organization for the better, they do.

## 2. The Power of the Positive Question

Over and over again, we experienced the power of positive questions to create strength based organizing and to render contentious stories irrelevant. When given opportunities to explore the organization's positive core - those factors that give life to the organization at its best - people drop the rhetoric of "ain't it awful" and enthusiastically engage in dialogue about possibilities for a better future. Deficit discourse is a learned habit of communication. Appreciative Inquiry provides an alternative "habit of discourse." Appreciative Inquiry as a form of organizational communication is more productive organizationally and healthier personally.

Moving an organization in a positive direction - toward greater levels of customer service, on time performance or teamwork - requires mastery of the art of the positive question. Embedded in every organization are situations of success, concealed by routine conversational habits of problem analysis and problem solving. Appreciative Inquiry brings the organization's success to the foreground, creates a self-fulfilling learning environment and inspires action. The unconditionally positive question may be leadership's best defense against low morale and high turnover. The power of the positive question brings people, learning and the organization to life.

Organization change requires people to let go of their "givens" - what they consider to be real, true and certain. It requires a dislodgment of certainty, a journey into the unknown and an

openness to learn. Most change methodologies prompt resistance as they engage people in discussions of what doesn't work and why. Appreciative Inquiry, on the other hand, helps organizations transcend contention and adversarial positioning through the power of the positive.

Through the appreciative dislodgment of certainty, people become curious rather than contentious . . . listeners rather than insisters . . . co-creators rather than nay-sayers.

### 3. The Power of Discourse Centered Change

As was described earlier, we worked from a narrative approach to change. In doing this we took the focus off of people and put it on stories and discourse. We put a spotlight on the narrative processes of the organization. The ways people relate and talk with one another became more prominent than the personality traits of people involved. The stories told about the organization became a central focus for inquiry and change.

Among the significant benefits of a discourse centered approach to change is the capacity to transform cynical discourse into possibility discourse and to build positive morale among front line employees. At GTE, Appreciative Inquiry was introduced to front line facilitators as a method of facilitation to transform cynical discourse among front line employees. We introduced the notion of discourse-centered facilitation as opposed to the more traditional person centered discourse. We helped the facilitators focus on the discourse in the room – the stories participants were telling - and not on the personality traits or behaviors of their class participants.

Through this focus on discourse, participants learned the power of their communication to influence one another, customers and the company as a whole. And they were given tools and information – Appreciative Inquiry, business strategies and product knowledge – to positively contribute to the company. For the most part, they recognized the power of cynical stories to deplete the energy of a successful workforce; and the power of Appreciative Inquiry to build positive possibilities for themselves and for the organization.

Among the most powerful benefits of a narrative approach to change is the creation of a knowledge rich work environment. It was an exciting adventure as we participated in the unfolding of the organization's learning capacity. As people learned about Appreciative Inquiry and began doing interviews, they became alive with new knowledge and insight. The organization's common knowledge increased significantly. Comments from participants in the process include,

- *"I now know so many people I didn't know before, and I understand what they do. I learned so much about other jobs in the company."*
- *"I didn't really understand what went on in a call center until I interviewed my partner who works in a call center."*
- *"I now know who to call at headquarters when I have a question."*

The comments pointed out the many ways in which Appreciative Inquiry proves a knowledge boost to the people and organization involved.

#### 4. The Power of Focus on the Organization

A lesson we continue to learn as we engage hundreds and thousands of people in Appreciative Inquiry is one we first noted in our work with GTE. When people are asked to participate in a change effort targeted at changing behaviors – specifically their behaviors – they are ambivalent at best. When people are asked to bring their best forward for the benefit of the organization they do so with enthusiasm and pride.

Organizations are not the sum total of human behavior. They are concepts, images, ideals and beliefs contained in the stories people tell about themselves and each other. Asking people to change behavior more often than not prompts resistance. Involving people in co-creating the future of their organization – their future – tends to evoke a spirit of cooperation and contribution. People want opportunities to use their gifts and talents, their creativity and their ideas in

acts of cooperative co-creation. Appreciative Inquiry provides a fertile forum for all stakeholders of an organization to actively engage in discovering, dreaming and designing their own future. As one participant said of Appreciative Inquiry, "When I was interviewed I was asked to describe my wildest dream, and I described a workplace where everyone could be involved in designing the organization's future. And then, a few days later when I thought about the Appreciative Inquiry process, I realized I was living my wildest dream."

---

<sup>1</sup> Hillman, J. (1996) *The Soul's Code*.

<sup>2</sup> Cooperrider, D. L., "Positive Image, Positive Action" in Srivastva, S. and Cooperrider, D.L., Eds. *Appreciative Management and Leadership: Revised Edition*, 1999, 91-125.

<sup>3</sup> Gottman, J. (1994) *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*

<sup>4</sup> Deal, T. E. and Kennedy, A. A.. *Corporate Cultures*. 1985