

Executive Briefing:

What is the Appreciative Inquiry Summit?

Overview for Organizations, Economic Regions, Industries, Countries and World Summits

by

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We are entering the collaborative age. Organizations, cities, economic regions, states and provinces, whole industries, nations, and even UN World Summits are searching for methods that bring people and institutions together across specializations, sectors, and silos in positive ways to discover common ground for action. Planning methods of the past are slow, cumbersome and falling short in our complex, multi-stakeholder environments. But fortunately, a number of management innovations are making breakthroughs and the new 21st century approaches are coming of age—especially those that embrace whole systems engagement from a strengths-based and design-interaction perspective. The very concept of strategy itself is undergoing transformation. Gone is the static blueprint model. Our complex world is calling for dynamic processes, high engagement methods that forge commitment and common ground along the way, and methods that move beyond both top down and bottom up. Today the coupling of strategy-and-change has to be designed in from the start because the real test of strategy is not just execution in parts and fragments. Leaders everywhere know that in dynamic, complex systems the question is not simply about change: the real question every leader is asking today is about “change at the scale of the whole”—how do we move forward, together?

An *Appreciative Inquiry Summit* is a science-backed and game-changing large group strategic planning, designing or implementation meeting that brings a whole system of 300 to 2,000 or more internal and external stakeholders into the room in a concentrated way to work on a task of strategic, and especially whole system, value. Moreover, it is a powerful task-focused 2 ½-3-day planning and design process where everyone is engaged as co-designers, across all relevant and resource-rich boundaries, to share leadership and take ownership for making the future of some big league (systemic) opportunity successful. After the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan brought Appreciative Inquiry into the largest world summit of CEOs from business and society, a *United Nations Leaders Report* singled out the collaborative power of Appreciative Inquiry and called it “the best large group method in the world today.”¹

The meeting appears bold at first, but is based on a simple notion: when it comes to system-wide innovation and integration, there is nothing that builds trust and brings out the best in human systems—faster, more consistently and more effectively—than the power of “the whole.” Flowing from the tradition of strengths-based management (Cooperrider 2012) and theories of complex adaptive coalitions, the “AI Summit” says that in a multi-stakeholder world it is not about (isolated) strengths per se, but about configurations, combinations and interfaces. We live in a world where change is the new normal but as noted earlier the question is not just how do we change for the better. The real question has shifted: it’s how do we change at the scale of the

¹ The Global Compact Leaders’ Summit Report (UN 2004) documents the impact of Appreciative Inquiry at the United Nations world summit between Kofi Annan and CEOs from 500 corporations including Hewlett-Packard, Starbucks, Tata, Royal Dutch Shell, Novartis, Microsoft, IBM, and Coca Cola. For the full report go to: http://www.unglobalcompact.org/docs/news_events/8.1/summit_rep_fin.pdf. In the report CEO Rodrigo Loures concludes “Appreciative Inquiry is the best large group method in the world today.”

whole? “How do we move together as a whole 67,000-person telephone company; or a whole 1.5 million-person city; or as a whole industry; or as a whole 5-million person economic and ecological region; or as a whole country united around some grand strategic opportunity? The idea of grand strategy must become dynamic, design-inspired, silo-breaking. It needs to elevate the best, not the worst, and it needs to build collective willpower and waypower while linking together expertise and emergence—two things that are seemingly impossible to fuse.

While at first it seems incomprehensible that large groups of hundreds of people in the room can be effective in unleashing system-wide strategies, making organizational decisions and designing rapid prototypes for collective action, this is exactly what is happening in organizations around the world. Appreciative Inquiry was introduced into the business world in 1987 by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva and soon thereafter University of Michigan’s Bob Quinn said in his book *Change the World: How Ordinary People Can Achieve Extraordinary Results* “Appreciative Inquiry is revolutionizing the field of organization development and change.” One of the principles of AI is that a person, or an organization or system, will excel only by amplifying strengths, never by fixing weaknesses—and so AI provides the tools and methods for elevating system-wide strengths, for creating new combinations and concentration effects of strengths, and ultimately spreading and deploying those strengths in the service of a more positive and valued future. It’s based on a principle proposed by the great Peter Drucker, the father of management thought, when he said that the task of leadership is ageless in its essence:

“The task of leadership” said Peter Drucker, “is to create an alignment of strengths in ways that make a system’s weaknesses *irrelevant*.”

That’s what the word appreciation means. It means valuing those things of value. It also means to increase in value. And that’s how innovation happens, through the elevation, magnification and cross-multiplication of strengths and solutions and discovering together what works, what’s better, and what’s possible. Today AI’s approach to strengths-inspired, instead of problematizing change, is supplanting many of the traditional change management models in the business and society. Appreciative inquiry is being practiced everywhere: the corporate world, the world of public service, of economics, of education, of faith, of philanthropy—it is affecting them all.

How do you do it? In actuality it is very simple—think of three phases—the pre-summit phase, the summit, and the post summit. Once a trusted and capable convener or convening alliance is assembled, a design team goes through a 1 or 2-day design session where everything big picture for the summit is designed—the Stakeholder mix; the articulation of the summit Task; plans for Pre-Summit momentum and research; Guiding Values for the effort; plans for Post Summit follow-up and momentum; and the Agenda flow and 4-D framework—and then it happens. From the completion or date of the first 1-2 day design meeting, the typical summit usually takes place in 6-8 months.

Among the benefits of planning together in large groups that serve to build trust is that it is also fast, efficient (bypassing hundreds of small group committee meetings) and ultimately powerful, productive, and inspiring. Leaders—from the CNO of the United States Navy to the Secretary General of the United Nations, as well as big city Mayors and CEOs of some the largest corporations in the world such as Apple, Keurig Green Mountain, National Grid, Yellow Roadway Corporation, and Wal Mart—are consistently moved by how quickly the best and most positive in their system comes out. They applaud the speed, substantive deliberation, inspiration, unification, trust, and the acceleration that can happen. And they frequently ask:

“We have assembled such great people here—what was all the fuss about—and why didn’t we mobilize with this even earlier?”

Yes, the AI Summit is new for some. But we are predicting that someday—because it so naturally brings out the best in people and groups—all of us will feel just as comfortable and at home in these kinds of inclusive, strengths-based, and large-group planning modalities as we do in small groups of 8-10 people that, too often, work behind the scenes. What we are learning is that people do not resist change; they resist being changed. And today we have the methods—whole system, effective, and fast—to aim higher—in ways that build trust, leverage the universe of strengths available, and create lasting legacies that *people together* are proud of and own.²

References

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² For more resources on Appreciative Inquiry—articles, case studies, dissertations, training programs, ppt slide decks, bibliographies; etc.—please see *The Appreciative Inquiry Commons* at the David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry at Champlain College: <https://appreciativeinquiry.champlain.edu/>. Also see Case Western Reserve University <https://weatherhead.case.edu/faculty/david-cooperrider>

Biographical Sketch:

David L. Cooperrider, PhD, is Distinguished University Professor at Case Western Reserve University and holds two chaired professorships: Char and Chuck Fowler Professor of Business as an Agent of World Benefit and the Fairmount Santrol - David L. Cooperrider Professorship in Appreciative Inquiry, both at the Weatherhead School of Management. David is the faculty Founder and Director of the Fowler Center for Business as an Agent of World Benefit and is also the Honorary Chairman of Champlain College's David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry at the Robert P. Stiller School of Business. Last year, David received "The Lifetime Achievement Award"--the highest honor in his field of Organization Development—for his work on the discovery and design of positive institutions and his advancement of our understanding of "the organization dimensions of global change."

David is best known for his original theoretical articulation of "AI" or Appreciative Inquiry with his mentor Suresh Srivastva. Today AI's approach to strengths-inspired, instead of problematizing change, is being practiced everywhere: the corporate world, the world of public service, of economics, of education, of faith, of philanthropy, and social science scholarship—it is affecting them all. Jane Nelson, at Harvard's Kennedy School of Leadership recently wrote, "David Cooperrider is one of the outstanding scholar-practitioners of our generation."

David has served as advisor to prominent leaders in business and society, including projects with five Presidents and/or Nobel Laureates such as William Jefferson Clinton, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Kofi Annan, and Jimmy Carter. David advises a wide variety of corporations including Apple, Johnson & Johnson, Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, Verizon, Hunter Douglas, Cleveland Clinic, National Grid, Smuckers, Clarke, Fairmount Minerals, McKinsey, Parker, Dealer Tire, Webasto, and Wal-Mart as well as the Navy, Red Cross, United Way of America, USAID, United Nations, the Global Compact, and hundreds of international private voluntary organizations (the GEM project.) David is also a founding Board Member of the International Association of Positive Psychology, the Taos Institute, and a Fellow of the World Business Academy. Early in the growth of the UN Global Compact David was called upon by Secretary General Kofi Annan to facilitate (using Appreciative Inquiry) the largest summit in history between business CEOs and leaders of government and civil society. It was one of the high point moments in David's career with reverberations that continue around the world.

David has published 25 books and authored over 100 articles and book chapters. He has served as editor of both the Journal of Corporate Citizenship with Ron Fry and the current academic research 4-volume series on Advances for Appreciative Inquiry, with Michel Avital. In 2010 David was honored with the Peter F. Drucker Distinguished Fellow award. David's books include Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change (with Diana Whitney); The Organization Dimensions of Global Change (with Jane Dutton); Handbook of Transformative Cooperation (Stanford Press) Organizational Courage and Executive Wisdom (with Suresh Srivastva); and The Strengths-based Leadership Handbook (with Brun & Ejsing.) David's work has received numerous awards including Distinguished Contribution to Workplace Learning by ASTD; the Porter Award for Best writing in the field of Organization Development and the Aspen Institute Faculty Pioneer Award in the domain of Sustainable Development. In 2016 David was named as one of the nation's top thought leaders by Trust Across America, and honored as one of "AACSB's Most Influential Leaders in the Field of Management."

In perhaps the highest recognition, Champlain College's Stiller School of Business honored David's impact with an academic center in his name. Opened in 2014 it is called the David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry, and David serves as its Honorary Chair. For the

center's dedication Professor Marty Seligman, the father of the positive psychology movement wrote: "David Cooperrider is a giant: a giant of discovery, a giant of dissemination, and a giant of generosity." Likewise, Jane Dutton, University of Michigan thought leader and former President of the Academy of Management said:

"David Cooperrider is changing the world with his ideas and who he is as a person. There are few who combine such insight, inspiration and energy."

David is the founder the Global Forum for Business as an Agent of World Benefit—it was launched in partnership with the UN Global Compact and with the Academy of Management. Its mission: a world where business can excel, all people can flourish, and nature can thrive. David's most recent research study focuses on "The History of Business and Human Wellbeing."

Key websites:

<https://www.champlain.edu/appreciativeinquiry>

<https://weatherhead.case.edu/faculty/david-cooperrider>

<https://weatherhead.case.edu/centers/fowler/>

<https://www.scoop.it/t/business-as-an-agent-of-world-benefit>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Cooperrider

<https://appreciativeinquiry.champlain.edu/>

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