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Possibilitizing and Heroism



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Synonyms

[Potential creating](#); [Solution seeking](#)

Definition

Possibilitizing refers to ideating multiple possibilities with the purpose of creating a solution or an opportunity by intentionally getting curious and seeking out the potential within people, objects, and situations, including recognizing previously unobserved or disregarded assets.

The quest to create is perhaps as old as human-kind itself. From seeing the possibility of paper within plant pulp, to seeing the possibility of silicon circuits within the sands on our shores, humans have long been heroic creators who forge new objects and processes from existing resources to meet their wants and needs. While there has been much theorizing and research on the concept of creativity, which typically refers to an individual's ability to generate something (including ideas) that are both novel and useful (Smith et al. 1989; Unsworth 2001), much of the conversation around creativity rests on the

tangible product of the creative effort. There is an entire universe of possibility that exists, however, between an identified need and an articulated creative solution. Just as the possibility of a thousand stars exists within the dust and gasses of a nebulae, so too does a multitude of options exist in any situation if individuals intentionally and consistently ask themselves, “*What might be possible here?*”

Fueled in part by the creative process of divergent thinking (Guilford 1950), or the ability to generate diverse and novel approaches to a situation (Scratchley and Hakstain 2001), the concept of possibilitizing expands conversations on creativity by adding a generative, asset-seeking intentionality to the process. This entry situates the concept of possibilitizing as an overarching unique concept within the realm of creative decision-making. After tracing its conceptual underpinnings within the social sciences, implications for heroic leadership and organization development in the perpetually disrupted modern world are posited.

Conceptual Roots

Although a nascent term in the literature, the concept of possibilitizing has roots in a variety of social science fields and practices. Specifically, possibilitizing builds on the stream of strength-based social sciences that has been emerging over the past three decades. As Cooperrider and

Godwin (2011) trace, there is currently an evolution of thought emerging in many of the conventions of leadership and organization development based on work emerging from the “strengths revolution” in management (Buckingham and Clifton 2001) and the mounting new database of human science research in fields of positive organizational scholarship (POS) (Cameron et al. 2003). Whereas historically these fields – from psychology to organization development – had been built upon a “problematizing” trajectory (Bushe and Marshak 2009), their focus had become a medical-like clinical practice of diagnosing what is wrong and focused on correcting ills and deficits. The legacy of these diagnostic approaches has created an implicit (and often explicit) deficit-based guiding question for leadership and change efforts: “*What is wrong here and how can we fix it?*” Implied assumptions in this approach are that the only thing of value to focus on is what is wrong, and strengths and assets are not worthy of the same consideration as problems.

Maslow’s famous reiteration of the law of the instrument (Kaplan 1964) “I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail” (Maslow 1966, p. 15), summarizes the cognitive bias that occurs when we begin looking at people and organizations as problems to be solved. Individuals find what they look for. Thus, managers, leaders, and organizational change consultants have become very creative at finding, analyzing, and solving organizational problems, armed with tools such as “gap analysis,” “organizational diagnosis,” “root causes of failure,” “needs analysis,” and “threat analysis” (Cooperrider and Godwin 2011).

The rise of positive psychology and positive organization scholarship (e.g., Cameron et al. 2003; Seligman et al. 2005) has challenged the traditional deficit-based approaches in the social sciences and instead inviting “an emphasis on identifying individual and collective strengths (attributes and processes) and discovering how such strengths enable human flourishing (goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience)” (Roberts 2006, p. 292). As summarized by Sekerka et al. (2014), “scholars across various

organizational disciplines have begun to pose questions aimed explicitly at describing, explaining, and predicting what forms of thinking, feeling, and behavior are associated with the best of humankind [. . .] Work in these areas has sought to leverage and enhance effectiveness in a way that goes beyond promoting basic organizational survival, seeking instead to uncover what contributes to personal and collective thriving in the workplace” (pp. 435–436).

The shift toward strength-based approaches in the social sciences has added tools beyond the deficit-based “hammer” that had been so prevalent to date. Specifically, this work has introduced a new guiding question into the ether of leadership and change: “*What is possible and what do we want to create?*” This implicit question creates a tectonic shift in approaches to creative “problem-solving,” bending the arc of change practices and interventions toward “solution-seeking.” More than a semantical nuance, this evolution represents a paradigmatic shift in stance for a leader or change agent and is at the heart of possibilitizing.

Three manifestations of these strength-based, possibility-seeking approaches can be seen in the rise of Solution-Focused Therapy (at the interpersonal, psychological therapy level), Appreciative Inquiry (at the organizational and system level), and Asset-based and Community Development (at the community level). Each of these approaches, detailed briefly below, epitomizes a manifestation of possibilitizing at various levels of practice.

Solution-Focused Therapy

Defined as “a strengths-based approach, emphasizing the resources people invariably possess and how these can be applied to the change process” (Corcoran and Pillai 2009), Solution-Focused Therapy (SFT) traces its roots to the work of Insoo Kim Berg, Steve de Shazer, and their colleagues in the late 1970s. An alternative to the traditional approach to therapy at the time that focused on analyzing a patient’s past to understand the “why” of their behaviors, SFT instead

invites patients to focus on “how” they might develop new behaviors to create new results or solutions to challenges in their life. As such, SFT presents a future-oriented, goal-directed approach to behavioral interventions, which differs from the historical deficit-based diagnostic approach to mental health.

While there are a wide variety of techniques used today in SFT approaches, Ackerman (2017) highlights three essential techniques that are common in practice today: intentional solution-focused question asking; doing one thing different; and presupposing change. A cornerstone of SFT techniques is the leveraging of intentionally phrased questions to elicit goal-setting and problem-solving cognitions in the patient. For example, a classic SFT question is the “miracle” question that is typically some variant of: *“Imagine that a miracle has occurred. This problem you are struggling with is suddenly absent from your life. What does your life look like without this problem?”*

Appreciative Inquiry

As SFT was creating ripples in the field of therapy, so too were conversations about organizational change approaches beginning to transform in the early 1980s with the advent of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). Tracing its origins to collaborative work led by Cooperrider, Srivastva, and colleagues with the Cleveland Clinic, AI came from flipping the conventional diagnostic organizational analysis search for “What is wrong within this organization?” into an intentional inquiry focused on discovering the life-giving factors that support an organization when it is at its best (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987). Defined in many ways over the years as both a philosophical approach as well as a methodology for approaching organizational change, a commonly cited inclusive definition is from Cooperrider et al. (2008, p. 3), who state:

AI is the cooperative co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves the discovery of what gives life to a living system when it is most

effective, alive, and constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves the art and practice of asking unconditional positive questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten its potential.

Traditionally, AI approaches follow a framework of four guiding questions (Stavros et al. 2015):

1. Discovery: What is giving life to this system when it is at its best; what is here to be appreciated?
2. Dream: What might we envision for the future?
3. Design: How might we co-create our ideal?
4. Delivery: How do we improve and sustain our progress? (Stavros et al. 2015).

While AI continues to be predominantly used as an approach to organizational change, over the past 30 years it has been applied across organizational sectors and levels including AI-inspired approaches to personal development, coaching, team development, evaluation, strategic planning, community development, and whole-system change (Godwin 2016).

Asset-Based Community Development

Somewhat parallel to the alternative approach that SFT provided to the practice of individual therapy, and AI provided for organizational change, Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) created an alternative to the historically deficit needs-based approaches to community development. Rooted in the work of Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) at the Institute for Policy Research (IPR) at Northwestern University, ABCD was proposed as a strength-based way to counteract the negative consequences that were being observed as a result of the traditional approach to community development that “inadvertently presented a one-sided negative view, which often compromised, rather than contributed to, community capacity building” (Mathie and Cunningham 2003). For example, Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) highlighted that an unintentionally, yet very real consequence of the classic development approach was that

communities begin to see themselves as deficient and incapable of creating solutions to their challenges, but instead as consumers of services from external providers.

Flipping the script on the traditional needs-based community development that emphasizes the search for deficits and looks to outside resources as solutions, ABCD instead is built on the “premise that communities can drive the development process themselves by identifying and mobilizing existing (but often unrecognized) assets, and thereby responding to and creating local economic opportunity” for themselves (Mathie and Cunningham 2003, p. 5). Specific tools in ABCD include creating capacity inventories of communities (including asking AI-based questions to uplift what is working in a community), asset mapping (including the assets of individuals, associations, institutions, physical assets, and connections), and time banks for citizens to reconceptualize the exchange of goods and services with each other.

Appreciative Intelligence and the Practices of Possibilitizing

As the approaches of SBT, AI, and ABCD illustrate, possibilitizing can be practiced at any level of application, from interpersonal to communal. Individuals seeking to enhance their possibilitizing skills do so through intentional practice and cultivation of specific competencies, especially Appreciative Intelligence[®]. Defined as the ability to perceive positive inherent generative potential in a situation, Thatchenkery and Metzker (2006) proposed that individuals who have this ability can act purposefully to transform challenging situations into successful outcomes; a critical ability for possibilitizing. Based on their conceptualization, Whitaker et al. (2020) validated Appreciative Intelligence[®] as being a higher-order latent variable comprised of six discrete dimensions: positive affectivity, creativity, tolerance for uncertainty, self-efficacy, situational awareness, and resilience. Each of these dimensions can be practiced and strengthened in a variety of ways resulting in an expanded ability for possibilitizing.

In addition to developing one’s Appreciative Intelligence[®], there are four core practices that an individual can exercise to strengthen their ability for possibilitizing. These practices echo across the SBT, AI, and ABCD approaches detailed above and can be enacted individually or collectively. They include:

1. Intentionally Inquiring – *Asking purposely generative questions*

As detailed by the Simultaneity Principle of Appreciative Inquiry, change begins simultaneously when someone poses a question in a human system, not after an answer is found (Stavros et al. 2015). The questions individuals ask become fateful for what they find. And just as Heisenberg’s (1949) principle holds true for the physical world, so it is true for social systems; new realities are created during the process of inquiry. Possibilitizing invites the asking of possibility-filled, strength-based questions such as, “*What is possible here that we have never considered before?*” and “*How might we . . . ?*”

2. Future Focusing – *Cultivating images of a preferred future.*

As detailed by the Anticipatory Principle of Appreciative Inquiry, human beings act based on their “anticipation” of future events, and this anticipation affects themselves, the people, and systems in the organization (Stavros et al. 2015). This implies the importance of leaders and even entire organization systems to ask questions that help generate a collective understanding of preferred future. Possibilitizing invites individuals to ask prospective (vs. retrospective) questions such as, “*What will success look like in the future?*”

3. Solution Seeking – *Discovering what is working to scale successes.*

As detailed by the Poetic Principle of Appreciative Inquiry, individuals can study any topic related to human experience in any human system (Stavros et al. 2015). There is choice in the focus of any inquiry, for example, a leader can choose to inquire into stress or into moments of connection in their organizational system. Possibilitizing invites individuals to intentionally focus on learning from successes

(vs. only studying failures) and ask possibility-creating (vs. problem-solving) questions such as, “*What is working that we can learn from and scale?*”

4. **Asset Appreciating** – *Recognizing the potential (both observable and unobserved) in people and situations.*

Further inspired by the Poetic Principle of Appreciative Inquiry and the notion that individuals have choice in where they focus their attention and inquiry, possibilitizing invites the intentional focusing of attention toward assets, especially those that have previously gone unnoticed. Furthermore, possibilitizing invites the asking questions such as, “*What are the unique talents and capacities here that we have not fully utilized before?*”

Conclusion and Implications for Heroic Leadership in a Perpetually Disrupted World

Organizational life today faces ongoing disruptions in a world experiencing “perpetually unprecedented” challenges including escalating climate events, global health pandemics, and geopolitical turmoil. As organizations evolve to stay relevant and survive in these disrupted times, the very concept of leadership is also shifting. Successful workplaces of tomorrow will not be solely reliant on the classic conception of the individual “heroic” leader who applies known strategies from the past, but rather collective leadership, where everyone brings their best thinking to the challenges at hand and co-creates solutions together in the moment (Zhu et al. 2018). Traditional hierarchies with decision-making concentrated within specific roles will give way to distributed leadership structures with increased autonomy given to individuals and teams to make decisions on the “front lines” in response to continually shifting contexts. Organizations of tomorrow will not be led by one heroic leader, but rather filled with a collective of heroes who rise to the challenge before them, creating real-time solutions with fellow heroes across the organization.

With more individuals acting as heroic leaders-in-the-moment, the ability to possibilitize will

increasingly be a critical skill differentiating those who are able to respond to challenges from those who are not. Ideating multiple possibilities, seeing the potential in every person and situation, and recognizing previously unobserved or disregarded assets are the leadership competencies needed for creating solutions and opportunities in any situation.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Prosocial Interventions](#)
- ▶ [Radical Empathy](#)
- ▶ [Thriving](#)

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