

AI Practitioner

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Strength-Based Organizations: The Challenge for Appreciative Inquiry 2.0?

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In 1987 David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva published *Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life*, the first time that the term Appreciative Inquiry appeared in a professional publication. Now, just slightly more than a generation later and in the context of unprecedented economic, social and ecological complexity, we ask ourselves, 'What's next?': what is the new frontier of Appreciative Inquiry?

Yes, AI summits, SOAR-based strategic planning, appreciative team building and coaching, appreciative process redesign have all delivered compelling outcomes. But does what Marcus Buckingham has coined 'the strengths revolution' have implications for the very essence, design and core work of our institutions?

How is 'strength-based' expressed in the objective elements of organizing (e.g. structure, systems, policies, procedures and 'bottom line' measures), as well as in the subjective elements of relationships, power dynamics, trust and morale? What do strength-based organizations really look like and precisely how are they designed? When and how do they create new and better value?

Does it make a difference if an organization's core work (not just how it innovates or changes) is itself strength-based? And, paradoxically, what if becoming a strength-based organization is not a transformation but rather an emergence, while at the same time requiring great innovation?

This issue of *AI Practitioner* is a convergence of conversations around these questions – conversations that have emerged in the global community of those passionate about the power of Appreciative Inquiry to transform organizations, conversations with and among leaders of other strength-based fields of study, and the lively exchange of stories about the very best of organizational life in action. Our conversations circle around a familiar question: 'What might be?'

What Might be Possible?

What might be possible if we were to weave together knowledge about strength-based management and leadership, appreciative innovation, positive organization design and positive psychology to see emerging in that tapestry an image of a new future for ‘whole’ organizations?

Given what we understand about the importance of ‘systemic’ or ‘integral’ approaches to change and conscious organization design (such as those that take into account not only the individuals’ values, sense of purpose, competencies and performance but also the organization’s work, its strategy, structures, technologies, policies and results), we believe that the construct of a ‘strength-based organization’ (SBO) may be useful in bringing that image of the future into focus.

What Do We Mean by a Strength-Based Organization?

The image we are beginning to discern is that strength-based organizations:

- Systematically identify and leverage both individual and organizational strengths in their strategic pursuit of superior and sustainable mission performance – be it in the public, corporate or not-for-profit sectors
- Are consciously designed with a focus on strengths that is evident both in what they do (service delivery/product creation) as well as how they build, sustain, adapt and innovate (strategic planning, continuous improvement, process reengineering, technology implementation, restructuring)
- Affirm, nurture and sustain life at the individual member level and in their interactions with customers and stakeholders
- Articulate a vision of workplaces fueled by generative conversation, evolving vision, emergent, more democratic structures, and cultures rich in meaning and relationship

A Definition

David Cooperrider offers us this definition:

Strength-based organizations are *organizations, including groups, families and communities, explicitly designed and managed for the elevation of strengths, the combination and magnification of strengths, and ultimately, the amplified refraction of our highest human strengths outward into the world.*

This definition, combined with lessons from our own organizational work, brings an invitation for great innovation in our practice. If we believe an SBO results from much more than a shift in one or two aspects of the organization’s adopting a positive lens, then how much more is needed to create a tipping point? In what aspects of organizational life might strength-based innovation make all the difference? How might we measure on the basis of strength? How might we define, sense and measure an organization’s degree of life?

Our hope for this issue is that stories and cases of emergent strength-based organizations will invigorate and further refine the definitions and propositions presented here. As more and more practitioners join the conversation, we anticipate the threads coming together in unexpected and wonderful ways. We are confident they will challenge our thinking and offer exciting new answers to the question ‘what might be?’

Recognizing that our readers have different interests, we have organized this issue into two parts for ease of access:

Part One – Emerging Theory and Methodology for Creating and Sustaining Strength-Based Organizations

In this section we offer:

- Appreciative Inquiry: A Process for Designing Life-affirming Organizations – Diana Whitney's thinking on three questions essential to anyone contemplating work at the scale of a strength-based organization:
 - i) What is organization design?
 - ii) What is life-affirming organization design?
 - iii) How do Appreciative Inquiry processes enhance the life-affirming qualities of organization design(ing)?

Contrasting traditional (i.e. modern) design assumptions with those of the post-modern paradigm, Diana reiterates 'social architecture' as the necessary focus for designing a strength-based organization.

- Theoretical Characteristics and Behaviors of SBOs – Next, Cheri Torres shares a summary of her Ph.D. dissertation research with its implications for SBOs. Having worked with a collaborative learning team of AI practitioners for eight months on conscious design of organizations, she outlines essential themes and characteristics of SBOs.
- Performance Amplification: Building a Strength-Based Organization – Tom Pitman and Gervase Bushe's article highlights the method of Performance Amplification (the deliberate act of tracking and fanning that which an organization wishes to see grow and flourish) as an approach to building Strength-Based Organizations.

Part Two – Stories from the Strength-Based Organization Frontier

This section of *AIP* makes available first hand reports of organizations in manufacturing, healthcare, education, community service and the media as (or their journey towards) strength-based organizations.

- CertainTeed's Moundsville Plant Start-up...: a Strengths-Based Journey to becoming a High Commitment/High Engagement Manufacturing Organization – Bob Laliberte, Bernard Mohr and Bob Belanger describe what was conceived to be a 'High Commitment, High Engagement' organization, utilizing the strengths of all members to operate a World Class Manufacturing environment. Structured as a self-directed work force, employees function in a strength-based team environment in all aspects of the operation. This is the story of their organizational journey, beginning in 2007, which has already produced significant business results.
- Organic Evolution: A Large Acute Care Hospital's Journey To Become a Strength-Based Organization – Canadian consultant Danny Nashman tells the story of a large Ontario hospital that is evolving to become a strength-based, possibility-oriented organization through an organic infusion of AI principles in structure, process and everyday leadership. The article offers six principles for building an SBO.
- Peering Through the Kaleidoscope: Emergent Design, Emerging Strengths at the Nova Scotia Community College – Joan McArthur-Blair (President) Janet Byrne (Director

Employee Services) and Claudine Lowry (Dean Organizational Learning) describe their own high points and focus on the journey of creating a strength-based community college. Their article is full of specific examples of systems, structures and processes which they have chosen as leverage points to bring into being a culture and philosophy that helps to identify and build upon not only the strengths of their students but also those of their staff and their host community

- In Conversation with Jenifer Fox – In excerpts from an interview by Ada Jo Mann, Jenifer Fox, author of *Your Child's Strengths*, whose work is prominently referenced in Marcus Buckingham's DVD *GO Put Your Strengths To Work*, describes her path to a strength-based school as president of that school. She shares her own definitions of a 'strength-based organization' and how it gets expressed in everyday practices.
- From 'child abuse prevention' to 'helping families put together what's best for their children' – Elizabeth Kinley and Tau Huirama, Joint Chief Executives of Jigsaw Family Services, New Zealand trace the emergence of Jigsaw, a New Zealand community organization, from the foundations of its predecessor, Child Abuse Prevention Services. Taking an Appreciative Inquiry approach, Jigsaw has sparked, grown and is now living its dream of becoming a successful, vibrant and influential strength-based organization.
- Neighborhood Centers, Inc. – Journey of an Extraordinary Strength-Based Organization – Consultants Jen Hetzel Silbert and Tony Silbert tell the story of Neighborhood Centers Inc., a non-profit human services agency serving the greater Houston, Texas area. Neighborhood Centers Inc has seen many changes in the past century, both in the communities it serves and in how it serves them. This article examines Neighborhood Centers Inc's journey to becoming an SBO – how it began and where it's headed, the role of leadership, and the philosophies and approaches that continue to seed its extraordinary growth.
- How Do You Become a Strength-Based Organization? – Executive Director, Lothar Liehmann describes the ongoing journey at Craigwood Youth Services toward becoming a Strength-Based Organization. Already having embraced a strength-based model of service delivery, this organization continues to build systems and align structures to achieve their vision.
- News Agency Muddles its Way to Strengths-based Journalism – In this article Michelle Strutzenberger and Peter Pula (both members of the original Axiom News team) describe how Axiom News stumbled upon the practice of 'generative journalism' – the deliberate practice of reporting and uplifting success stories within organizations. Through their exploration of practicing this new form of journalism and witnessing the resulting impact for their clients, Axiom News has also discovered the power of aligning around strengths within their own organization.

We hope you enjoy reading this issue as much as we have enjoyed putting it together for you. We welcome your questions, comments and observations.

Bernard Mohr, Catherine McKenna, Sallie Lee and Joanne Daykin
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