

the best possible

BY CHRISTOPHER JOHNSTON

Why has appreciative inquiry, a management approach pioneered at CWRU, been called radical? Because it shifts attention from what doesn't work—to what does.



WORLD

On a quiet Saturday morning in 1995, David Cooperrider awoke without knowing he was about to help change the world for the better.

Of course, it wouldn't be the first time. Nor the last. An associate professor in the Weatherhead School of Management's Department of Organizational Behavior, Prof. Cooperrider has been called on frequently to apply his innovative method of organizational change that he and several of his colleagues at the school pioneered in the mid '80s. Known as appreciative inquiry (AI), this radical approach to change focuses on fostering the positive elements that energize an organization's performance, rather than trying to counter individual problems that threaten it.

Still, this day in '95 offered a different challenge. One that represented a potential culmination of the first ten years of work on AI. Yet one that was at once so daring and exhilarating that Prof. Cooperrider himself couldn't believe it. In fact, when he first perused the short blurb in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* about an Episcopalian bishop in San Francisco who was proposing the creation of an organization, the United Religions Initiative (URI), that would mirror the United Nations, Prof. Cooperrider threw it out.

Then the idea began to sink in: A forum for the world's religions to commit to an enduring dialogue about global interdependencies for the sake of our shared future, and a potential means to mitigate religious violence. Later that afternoon, Prof. Cooperrider retrieved the article.

"My job was to search for innovative organizational forms, but I must have believed that this initiative wasn't possible," he recalls today, incredulous. "When I looked at it again, I said to my wife, Nancy, 'If something like this could happen, it could change human relationships at a world level more than any initiative I can think of.'"

Sensing a chance to study the URI endeavor from its first days through appreciative inquiry, Prof. Cooperrider (GRS '86, organizational behavior) assembled a package explaining the research opportunity, and sent it off to the Right Reverend

William Swing, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of California. Three days later, he found himself in San Francisco, sharing with Bishop Swing how the appreciative methodologies worked and their benefits for large organizations.

Over the next five years, Prof. Cooperrider and doctoral students donated their time to design and lead meetings at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco, in the same room where the United Nations charter had been hammered out five decades earlier. They helped structure a similar document for URI. At the professor's suggestion, Bishop Swing invited a range of organizational experts, including some from global corporations, to assist in shaping the new organization. Among them was VISA founder Dee Hock. Unlike the UN, United Religions Initiative would not have a traditional top-down hierarchy with a central headquarters. Instead, a decentralized form was selected to allow the organization to found individual centers all over the world.

Currently, URI operates about 160 centers and continues to enjoy an annual growth rate of 100 percent, which, Prof. Cooperrider estimates, will bring them to about 1,000 centers in the next five to eight years. He also predicts that URI might garner a Nobel Peace Prize before its first decade is complete.

Today, URI furnishes a global, interfaith forum with the primary goal of using open communications among all religions—many of which have not spoken to each other for years or, in some cases, a millennium—to rid the world of the ultimate oxymoron: religious violence.

Prof. Cooperrider designed and helped lead five of the annual global summits initially held at Stanford University as the charter was being created, and since then in several other countries. In June 2000, he was present for the signing of the URI charter at Carnegie Hall.

With its ability to foster open dialogue, build consensus, and act as a facilitation agent for large group meetings, AI has been at the heart of the organization's success. Still, Bishop Swing admits, he was initially frustrated by the time commitment necessary to allow all participants to voice their insights into

what makes an organization its most vibrant and productive. He gradually realized, however, that AI was critical to creating URI, as he saw person after person adopting profound respect for other people in the room, occurrences that would provide the foundation of cooperation upon which to build his UN for religions. “David and AI saved us early on from dividing into ego-driven, competing voices,” Bishop Swing says. “Instead, he steered us in the direction of creating a community that is a preview of coming attractions of what the world could be.”

Bishop Swing recalls how Prof. Cooperrider’s unwavering professional demeanor throughout the protracted and sometimes heated process conveyed confidence to the people around him. “David’s not intimidated by the world and its possibilities,” he says. “It’s all seamless to him, so he’s one of those enormously visionary people who can see beyond the immediate hostilities to say some positive things can happen.”

The Reverend Paul Chaffee, a member of URI’s interim global council, says that the modest, mustachioed professor’s soft-spoken personality can be deceiving: “He projects almost no leadership persona, except as a fully engaged inquirer, so I underestimated him big time for the first year or two, before I could see what he was accomplishing with AI.”

Seeds of Change

For David Cooperrider, the seeds of an appreciative outlook on life were planted early. Growing up in the affluent Chicago suburb of Oak Park, he learned from his father, who was a Lutheran minister in the throes of trying to integrate his predominantly white congregation against the wishes of his congregants. One night, from the top of his stairs, he heard his father arguing with members of the church council to pursue diversity. It took the minister nearly two decades, but he did it.

Although that lesson about tolerance and fighting the good fight remained with young Cooperrider, by the time he was in college, he had fallen into a young adult’s rebellious questioning of the world. That all changed his junior year at Augustana College in Illinois, when the psychology major spent a summer semester in Japan, where he developed a curiosity about cultural diversity in human societies.

The turning point for Prof. Cooperrider came, he says, while on a visit to Hiroshima. The trip to the site of the world’s first nuclear holocaust felt, he says, like “an atomic bomb of awareness” detonating within him.

“I experienced an instant consciousness about the miracle of life on this planet and our interrelated responsibility for shaping the worlds in which we live,” he remembers. The trip inspired him to formulate a question: Is there something in how we organize human relationships that is as powerful in a positive sense as the atomic bomb was destructive?

He never again received less than an A throughout his bachelor’s degree in psychology, his master’s in organizational development from George Williams University, or his PhD at CWRU. After graduating from George Williams in 1983, he was hired by the American Hospital Association to work with hospitals throughout Chicago to bring people together across departments to improve their organizations. Shortly afterward, Prof. Cooperrider decided to pursue a doctoral degree at CWRU.

He grew increasingly troubled by the prevailing inquiry model in the field of organizational change. Essentially, the underlying metaphor defined organizations not as miracles of human interaction, but as mechanical systems with problems that needed to be fixed, so the task of inquiry primarily was to identify what was broken and how it could be repaired.

The timing was right to explore a new, more human-based approach, according to Suresh Srivastva, a CWRU professor of organizational behavior who was chair of the department in 1983. His colleagues and graduate students like Prof. Cooperrider had begun studying the effects of asking positive questions when serving as consultants for organizations.

“We discovered if we asked questions about problems, people would add on three more problems, then internalize the negative feelings, and nothing would happen,” Prof. Srivastva recalls. But, he says, asking questions to draw out what was most effective about an organization caused people to take action. “We realized that how we asked the questions became the actual intervention.”

In 1998, Prof. Cooperrider was asked to write five such questions for a workshop he led for the Dalai Lama in Washington, DC. The exiled Tibetan Buddhist bellwether brought together leaders from more than twenty different religious orders to discuss the contentions between sects. Among the questions were these:

One could say a key task in life is to discover and define our life purpose, and then accomplish it to the best of our ability. Can you share a story of a moment or a period of time where clarity about life purpose emerged for you—for example, a time where you heard your calling, where there was an important awakening or teaching, where you felt the touch of the sacred, or where you received some guidance?

Now, beyond this story, what do you sense you are supposed to do before your life, this life, is over?

Prof. Cooperrider explains that appreciative inquiry allows people to use dialogue—not problem-solving—as the main tool to help each other accomplish tasks. Through positive questions (“searching for the true, the good, the better, and the possible,” says the professor), AI also helps people seek common ground, rather than have conflict management or negotiation as the frame of reference, because it enables them to honor their differences rather than have to reconcile them.

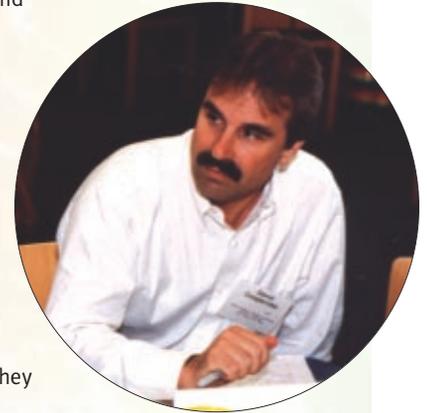
The AI Method

Appreciative inquiry employs the following “4-D” cycle to accelerate change within an organization:

- **Discovery:** This is the appreciating stage, in which the inquiry focuses on asking “What gives life?” and “What creates the best of what is?” within the organization;
- **Dream:** This stage focuses on envisioning results in the organization and asking, “What might be?” and “What is the world calling for?”
- **Design:** In the co-constructing stage, the inquiry deals with “What should be?” and “What is the ideal?” for the organization’s future;
- **Destiny:** This is the sustaining stage, during which questions pertain to “How should the organization empower, learn, and adjust/improvise?”

Intended to be used with large groups in the hundreds or even thousands, the AI process capitalizes on what David Cooperrider (pictured) calls “organized chaos” during the intense group exploration of positive questions. Actually, he explains, trained facilitators control chaos through four principles:

- 1.) People function best when they experience the wholeness of a system; the worst comes out when they are confronted by closed, bureaucratic systems that cut people out of decision-making;
- 2.) Open discussion, not dictation, allows people to discover together the future they have in common, rather than simply meeting to rubber-stamp a preconceived template;
- 3.) Focusing on specific task-oriented topics—such as “How do we regain fifty percent of our lost market share?” rather than a general topic such as “team building”—keeps discussions on track;
- 4.) Adult human beings will self-manage and figure out who is leading their group, who is the spokesperson, who will take notes, and so on.



C. J.

Prof. Cooperrider first immersed himself in the fomenting social science revolution when Prof. Srivastva invited him to assist another doctoral student with his dissertation research at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation. The student was analyzing the birth of a radical new approach to governing a medical organization as a group practice run by the physicians. Thrilled by the social invention he witnessed there, Prof. Cooperrider asked Prof. Srivastva if he could do his own dissertation on what most fueled the positive efforts to reorganize the facility.

What had doctoral candidate Cooperrider learned from his experience at the clinic? “My job was not to be a mechanic and open up the engine of the car and try to fix it,” he says. “My job was to search for everything that brought life to that system when it was most alive, most effective, most engaged, then study those micro-moments and begin to shape a theory of organizational possibility around them.”

Prof. Srivastva urged him to go with what excited him the most. Out of that effort grew Prof. Cooperrider’s dissertation, the title of which would open the door to an entire career for him: “Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life: Towards a Methodology for Social Innovation.”

By Design

David Cooperrider became the organizational behavior department’s first doctoral student hired as a full-time faculty member after graduating. His new position enabled him to initiate the next major piece of his work with AI: transforming it from theory to practice.

With faculty colleague Ron Fry and others, he designed the Social Innovations in Global Management (SIGMA) research and education program at the Weatherhead School. The goal: develop new theories of organizations and the potential achievements for human relationships by studying some of the most complex organizational situations possible. In his research, Prof. Cooperrider had noticed that some of the most inventive organizations that had emerged since World War II were those that were truly global and focusing on global issues, such as the Nobel Peace Prize-winning International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War.

Today, appreciative inquiry continues to evolve into a panoply of applications in diverse organizations. Prof. Cooperrider and colleagues discovered that potential fairly quickly, when, in 1990, they received the first of two \$3.5-million grants from the

US Agency for International Development (USAID) to work with nongovernmental organizations in seventy countries. While Prof. Cooperrider traveled to many of these locations, including South Africa to convene organizations to address the end of apartheid, he also used the grant to extend educational opportunities all over the world for CWRU graduate students.

“By getting the USAID grants, he really became the Johnny Appleseed of AI, seeding it all over the world,” says URI’s Rev. Mr. Chaffee.

In 1991, Prof. Cooperrider also co-founded the Taos Institute in New Mexico with Diana Whitney to provide a training center for applying AI in organizations. Moreover, that facility has spurred a number of special projects for Prof. Cooperrider, including one of his favorites, his work with Rodrigo Loures, CEO of Nutritional Foods, one of Brazil’s last indigenous food companies.

Mr. Loures faced difficult economic conditions at home. A new democratic government had replaced the military government, and the resulting privatization of contracts, along with increasing competition from multinational food companies, had cost him eighty percent of his business. Mr. Loures sought to bring his employees together in dialogue that would improve relationships between departments and shape a vision of the company’s future.

Facilitated by Prof. Cooperrider and one of his graduate students, the 1997 conference convened more than 1,000 people as equals, including all 750 employees of the factory, along with customers and people from the community. Prof. Cooperrider took them through the “four Ds” of AI: discovery, dream, design, and destiny. (See “The AI Method.”) Many groups prepared skits that demonstrated their visions of the company’s future. In four days, a new company strategy was created.

“It worked better than I expected,” says Mr. Loures, “because it not only helped us improve the process of organizational learning, but it is a powerful tool for planning, leadership training, and preparing people to work in an environment that was open to changes as necessary. Since then, we’ve used AI for all of our management processes, and it’s worked very well.” Indeed, Nutritional’s profits are up more than 600 percent, and its absentee rate is down nearly 300 percent.

This April, Prof. Cooperrider helped facilitate a meeting in New York with approximately 600 business leaders to discuss the role of business in society. “Much of the tension in the world today is related to the two words on the [former Twin] Towers, ‘world’ and ‘trade,’” Prof. Cooperrider observes. “So it’s time for a new dialogue to give birth to a new vision of the relationship between business and society that we can begin to agree upon across cultures and civilizations.”

The Long Haul

The videotape captures it all: the energy, the positive attitude, the enthusiasm of AI in action as Roadway Express, a Fortune 500 trucking company based in Akron, Ohio, holds a summit meeting facilitated by David Cooperrider. Nearly 300 workers from one of its 300 bulk distribution centers gather with management in a hotel conference room to discuss Roadway’s vision of becoming the top company in a fiercely competitive industry. The mix included dock workers, CEO, customers, drivers, and sales reps.

Last year, Roadway began using AI summits throughout its North American operations, realizing that to thrive in an industry in which net profit margins are less than five percent in a profitable year, each of its 28,000 employees must assume leadership responsibility.

Jim Staley (pictured), Roadway’s president, says he’s seen tremendous employee involvement in task teams at terminals that have held summits, and each team has produced bottom-line results.

“The appreciative inquiry approach unleashes tremendous power, tremendous enthusiasm, and gets people fully engaged in the right way in what we’re trying to accomplish,” Mr. Staley says.

“It’s not that we don’t deal with the negative anymore,” he explains. “But the value of AI is that, in anything we do, there’s a positive foundation to build on in addressing those problems.”

Prof. Cooperrider notes, “Roadway’s stock has moved from a low of \$14 per share to \$40 per share, in a little over a year—not only during their AI work, but also during the economic downturn affecting their whole industry.”

C. J.



Uniform Vision

In March 2000, a graduate of the Taos Institute, US Navy Lieutenant Commander David Nystrom (pictured), asked Prof. Cooperrider to facilitate a summit that would take him into one of the few as yet uncharted territories for AI: a military organization. After a year's worth of preparation, including meetings with Admiral Vernon Clark, the summit took place in December 2001, bringing together 260 people to envision the navy's future.

"Thanks to David, I was able to translate that same energy that he brings to AI into this huge event to influence, engage, and hopefully transform a large portion of what we do in the navy in the direction of some positive change," says Lt. Comdr. Nystrom, who works at the Center for Executive Education in Monterey, California. Currently, as a result of this summit, the navy has engaged in 34 pilot AI projects throughout the world to determine how the AI process might change policies for the 600,000-person organization.

In the end, Prof. Cooperrider came away impressed by the unexpected similarities with his other clients.

"Their sense of purpose was every bit as deep and sincere as that of the religious leaders of the world," he says. "In an odd way, there wasn't much difference, because at a human level, they were working on the same agenda of peace, freedom, and healthy relationships throughout the world."

C. J.



In 2000, two years after Prof. Cooperrider worked with the Dalai Lama in the first gathering of world religious leaders, another meeting of the leaders took place, in Jerusalem. There the leaders also publicly demonstrated their solidarity by jointly visiting divergent religious shrines such as Christ's tomb and the Wailing Wall, where they prayed and meditated together.

"I felt feelings about our capacity as human beings that I have never felt before," Prof. Cooperrider says.

You Say You Want a Revolution

David Cooperrider's contribution to the AI field includes seven books and more than forty articles and book chapters. His AI mission continues in full force. In addition to teaching a complete course load at CWRU, Prof. Cooperrider and colleagues recently signed three AI book contracts for three different series. He also continues to grow the AI website (appreciativeinquiry.cwruc.edu); lectures at the University of Chicago and elsewhere; and is working to develop, with Profs. Fry and Srivastva and others, a Center for Advanced Appreciative Inquiry at CWRU. His most recent project, launched in April, is with the Cleveland Municipal Schools.

"I've never worked with anyone like David," says Judy Rodgers, who, as proprietor of Communication Architecture Group in Boston, has assisted prominent business writers, from Tom Peters to Ken Blanchard. Prof. Cooperrider's work, she says, was some of the "most radical material I had found," when she first encountered it in 1996.

In his 2000 book *Change the World*, Robert Quinn, an organizational behavior professor at the University of Michigan,

wrote, "Appreciative Inquiry is revolutionizing the field of organizational development." Now more than 300 articles have the words "appreciative inquiry" in their titles. Still, based on the creative outpouring of work, Prof. Cooperrider believes, "We are only five percent into this whole thing."

CWRU benefits from the global exposure that AI projects bring the University. "Being an expert in this area, actually taking the craft and putting it into practice, helps us tremendously," says Mohsen Anvari (GRS '76 and '77, operations research), dean of the Weatherhead School. "It gives us the kind of exposure we need to influence organizations directly."

On the greater good scale, in light of the September 11 tragedy and tumultuous world events, many people are turning their hopes to AI to create increased opportunities for peaceful relationships. Ultimately, does Prof. Cooperrider think we are entering an era when AI could make the world a better place? Yes. In fact, he's positive.

"In terms of realizing a new capacity to live our interdependence with one another as human beings and with the planet," concludes the scholar, "the next twenty-five years are going to be some of the most creative in human history."

Christopher Johnston is a Cleveland-area writer who writes often about business.

"THE MANY FACES OF AI" CIRCULAR GRAPHIC ON THE COVER AND PAGE 14 CONSISTS OF IMAGES OF PEOPLE INVOLVED IN APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY WORK LED BY DAVID COOPERRIDER AND HIS COLLEAGUES. MOST OF THE PEOPLE ARE SHOWN AT AI EVENTS IN THE UNITED STATES AND ABROAD, SUCH AS THE UNITED RELIGIONS INITIATIVE (URI) GATHERINGS, THE US NAVY'S LEADERSHIP SUMMIT, THE ROADWAY EXPRESS SESSION, AND THE MEETING OF WORLD RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN JERUSALEM. THOSE PHOTOGRAPHS, AND OTHERS IN THIS STORY, ARE USED COURTESY OF BARBARA HARTFORD OF URI (PHOTOS BY MS. HARTFORD AND JOEL HOWE), THE CENTER FOR EXECUTIVE EDUCATION OF THE NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL, ROADWAY EXPRESS, THE UNITED STATES NAVY, RODRIGO LOURES, THE CLEVELAND MUNICIPAL SCHOOLS, AND PROF. COOPERRIDER.