

Chapter One

ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

Learning How to Learn

Leaders used to think of organizational change as a temporary condition, after which life would return to normal. However, as Bernard J. Mohr (2001), international consultant and writer, noted several years ago, ". . . we are increasingly confronted with a world in which change does not occur during a separate time period, after which we get back to business as usual. Rather, change is now the very water in which we swim" (p. 4). In other words, deep, rapid, and often turbulent change is the *new normal* world in which we live and work.

In the new normal, how will community colleges best organize to get things done - the very purpose of an organization? In the industrial age, when life was more predictable and stable, command-and-control structures like bureaucracies, and mechanistic ways of thinking, worked well for getting things done. Those community colleges that learned how to periodically scan the environment for opportunities and threats and *adapted* to them were more or less successful. However, in the new normal, adaptive learning likely won't be enough.

Adaptive learning focuses on responding to and coping with environmental demands in an effort to make incremental improvements to existing services, products, and markets. It is similar to what Chris Argyris calls, "single loop learning," which focuses on solving current problems without questioning the framework that generated those problems . . . Successful organizations are ones that innovate rather than merely adapt; they "learn how to learn." Innovation, however, requires *generative learning*, which emphasizes continuous experimentation, systemic rather than fragmented thinking, and a willingness to think outside the accepted limitations of a problem. It goes beyond the framework that created current conditions that adaptive learning takes for granted (Barrett, 1995, pp. 36-37).

If community colleges are to remain healthy and vital institutions, they - like other postmodern organizations - must learn how to continuously learn. Furthermore, they must learn how to learn in a generative, not just adaptive, way. They must become more creative and innovative on an on-going, daily basis. How can community colleges develop their capacity to learn how to learn in a generative way?

Learning How to Learn through Organization Development

Since the mid-1900s, Organization Development (OD) is one way that organizations have learned how to learn. What is OD? According to the late Richard Beckhard (1969), a pioneer in the field, it is an effort that is "(1) planned, (2) organization wide, and (3) managed from the top, to (4) increase organization effectiveness and health through (5) planned interventions in the organization's processes, using behavioral-science knowledge" (p. 9). Traditional OD is an "action research" model, one that helps the organization - often with the help of an external OD consultant - conduct research into what is working and what is not working in the organization, and then take action based on the results. OD consultants typically interview or survey members of the organization to surface people's perceptions of what's going on in the organization, then summarize the data and feed it back to the decision makers who decide what to do to "fix" what's wrong or to "close the gap." The next step, often, is to do a force field analysis: to identify the

forces that will support the proposed actions and those forces that will be barriers to those actions. Then, the decision makers come up with ways to eliminate or reduce the barriers to the desired change. Traditional OD, then, is a deficit model for change: what's missing, where's the gap, what needs fixing. For 30 years, it was the predominant model for organizational change and development.

In the 1980s, a new approach to OD was developed and began to be practiced. Called Appreciative Inquiry, it also is an "action research" model; however, rather than focus on what is not working and fixing it, it intentionally focuses on what's working and creating more of it. It focuses on possibilities rather than problems.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a powerful, strengths-based, and collaborative approach to facilitating organizational change and growth that is rapid, sustainable, and transformative . . . AI ignites this positive change because all humans . . . possess a 'rich reservoir' of cooperative potential, waiting to be unleashed. The essence of building cooperative capacity in human systems is to put the spotlight and questions on the good work, the best outcomes, and the most attractive aspects in that system. People engaged in this inquiry will naturally and quickly connect with their most positive beliefs about human groups and their potential to work, grow, dream, and celebrate together. They will naturally seek ways to move in directions that allow for more and more of that potential to be realized. The systems' capacity to cooperate around multiple initiatives will expand (Barrett & Fry, 2005, p. 101).

When it is at its best, AI uses a whole-system approach that involves all the stakeholders, or a cross section of the stakeholders, in generating the data about what's working exceptionally well and why, and then helps them learn how to create or generate more of it. AI also is based on grounded theory, that is, that the people in the system (i.e., the stakeholders) are the knowledge experts about their own system, rather than outside consultants (Cooperrider, et al, 2003, p. 39).

Bushe (November, 2007) offered a way of thinking about AI within the context of its being an action research model.

. . . it invites members of a system to shift their mental maps and the prevailing discourse(s) in their system through a kind of inquiry that has no interest in validity, reliability, and generalizability – the kinds of things science values. Instead, in an effective AI the inquiry results in statements (provocative propositions) that are only generative in the system in which they are constructed, and their generative potential has as much or more to do with the level of engagement by all system members, and the quality of dialogue evoked, as with the actual 'findings' and provocative propositions themselves.

Classic and Emerging Organization Development Models

Most community college leaders are unschooled in the discipline of OD as a way of bringing about organizational or institutional change; usually, the closest brush they've had with it is some form of strategic planning, classically an adaptive learning and gap-based model. Now, just as some community college leaders are beginning to discover OD, the field itself is undergoing change. Seasoned OD practitioner, Robert Marshak (2005), summarized some of these changes.

According to Marshak, the old approaches to OD, i.e., classical OD, were based on an old paradigm or worldview, akin to deficit or gap-based strategic planning. In this worldview, the practice of OD was influenced by classical or Newtonian thought and philosophy, one in which organizations were viewed

as machines. Social reality was viewed as an objective fact, there was a single reality, truth was transcendent and discoverable, and reality could be discovered using rational and analytic processes. OD practitioners collected and applied valid data using objective problem-solving methods that led to change. Change could be created, planned and managed, it was episodic and linear, and the emphasis was on changing behavior and what one does.

Marshak proposed that the new approaches to OD are based on a very different worldview, one in which organizational change is influenced by the new sciences and postmodern thought and philosophy. In this worldview, organizations are viewed as human or living systems, i.e., organisms. This worldview sees social reality as subjective and socially constructed through conversation and dialogue. Therefore, there are multiple realities, truth is immanent, i.e., it emerges from the situation; reality is negotiated and may involve power and political processes. Change is created through new social agreements that are arrived at by explicit or implicit negotiation (e.g., facilitated dialogue), is inherent, can be self-organizing, and is continuous and/or cyclical, with the emphasis on changing mindsets and how one thinks (p. 3).

Contributions to the new OD have come from a variety of disciplines, including psychology and neuroscience. Alan Deutschman (2005) described some of the new insights that help explain the power of language and mental models - both of which are key to understanding the power of AI. Deutschman makes three key points that are in alignment with the new approaches to OD and AI:

Real change isn't motivated by either crisis or fear. The best inspiration comes from leaders who can create compelling and positive visions of the future. Small, gradual changes rarely lead to transformation. Radical, sweeping changes are riskier but often more effective, because they quickly yield benefits visible to anyone. Narratives, not facts, guide our thinking. Data on declining market share or quality problems won't get employees to change what they do. Rather, appeals rooted in emotion are what best inspire people to alter course (p. 53).

Appreciative Inquiry: An Emerging Organization Development Model

Since the mid-1980s, AI has become both an increasingly popular approach to OD and an individual mindset or philosophy—a way of being, seeing, and thinking; as previously stated, it is a shift from focusing on problems to focusing on possibilities. Here's how David Cooperrider, a professor of organizational behavior in the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University and the chief architect of AI, defines AI:

Ap-pre'ci-ate, v., 1. Valuing; the act of recognizing the best in people or the world around us; affirming past and present strengths, successes, and potentials; to perceive those things that give life (health, vitality, excellence) to living systems. 2. To increase in value; e.g., the economy has appreciated in value. Synonyms: value, prize, esteem, and honor. In-quire', v., 1. The act of exploration and discovery. 2. To ask questions; to be open to seeing new potentials and possibilities. Synonyms: discover, search, systematically explore, and study (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 7).

“This approach is a powerful, strengths-based and collaborative approach to facilitating organizational change and growth that is rapid, sustainable, and transformative.”

The assumption underlying AI is simple: every human (i.e., living or social) system has a core of strengths that is often hidden and/or underutilized - what is known as its *positive core*. AI helps people in the system search for and find the positive core. When the positive core is revealed and tapped into, it provides a sustainable source of positive energy that nourishes both personal and organizational change and, potentially, transformation.

AI is the ongoing, continuous study of what gives life to a human system when it is functioning at its best. A basic premise of AI is that, whatever people focus their attention on (i.e., study, inquire into), they will create more of it. Like using Google or other search engines on the Internet, what people look for determines what they find. So, instead of searching for problems or gaps and inadvertently creating more of them, people search for what is working well in the system (e.g., their own best practices), and then study them in order to learn how to create more successes.

AI proceeds with a study of an organization that is guided by three basic questions: What is X (the positive topic of inquiry), and when and where has X been at its best in this organization? What makes X possible? What are the possibilities that enhance or maximize the potential for X? The tangible result of an inquiry is a series of statements that describe where the organization wants to be, based on the high moments of where it has been. Because the statements are grounded in people's real experiences and history, people know how to repeat their successes.

AI also leads to *generative learning*, i.e., it “seeks to expand the organization's true potential” and to “challenge the status quo of the organization” (Cooperrider, et al, 2003, p. 112). Since the early to mid-1980s, AI has been used to facilitate extraordinary - sometimes transformational - changes in thousands of groups, organizations and communities in more than 100 countries around the world. Applications include organizational change, social issues, team building, individual development, and global and international applications (Sorensen, Yaeger & Bengtsson, 2003, p. 18). Many of these stories of success are posted at the international Appreciative Inquiry Commons website at <<http://appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu>>, with more stories being added all the time. In a 20-year review of AI that was conducted in 2003, the reviewers concluded, “There is little doubt that Appreciative Inquiry has had a profound effect on the way OD is practiced” (p. 20).

In an interview with Cooperrider, the late management guru Peter Drucker said, “The task of organizational leadership is to create an alignment of strengths in ways that make a system's weaknesses irrelevant” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 2). AI is a way of creating an alignment of organizational strengths.

Learning How to Learn through Appreciative Inquiry

When first learning about AI, many people confuse it with positive thinking or focusing only on the positive aspects of organizational life. However, as Bushe (2007) eloquently explains, AI is not just about the positive; it is, more importantly, about the *generative*.

Generativity occurs when people collectively discover or create new things that they can use to positively alter their collective future. AI is generative in a number of ways. It is the quest for new ideas, images, theories and models that liberate our collective aspirations, alter the social construction of reality and, in the process, make available decisions and actions that weren't available or didn't occur to us before. When successful, AI generates spontaneous, unsupervised, individual, group and organizational action toward a better future (p. 1).

Note the words "spontaneous, unsupervised, individual, group and organizational action." The outcome of a successful inquiry is not an "action plan" in the common use of that term, with actions planned and assigned to people according to their job descriptions or their boxes on an organization chart. At its best, AI will result in inspired and improvised actions. At its best, AI will result in a change, or transformation, about how people think and, therefore, behave in the organization.

AI can be thought of as an appreciative approach to any organizational process, e.g., strategic planning, teambuilding, planning, teaching and learning, human resource development, self study for accreditation – virtually any process. For example, an appreciative approach to employee or student evaluation, or valuation as some AI practitioners call it, would focus on a person's past and current successes, helping the person uncover and build on strengths. It would not focus on the employee or student's weaknesses and try to "fix" them. In other words, the supervisor or teacher would be trying to help people, as Drucker suggested, to create an alignment of strengths, thereby making their weaknesses irrelevant.

Five Generic Processes of AI

In organizations or communities, AI initially can be thought of as an ongoing cycle of five generic processes, which some practitioners call the 4 or 5-Ds (Mohr & Watkins, 2002, p. 5). However, as veteran AI consultant Jane Magruder Watkins has often pointed out, at AI conferences and on an international AI listserv <aillist@lists.business.utah.edu>, "AI is NOT the Model. Rather, it is a theory and philosophy that is far broader and richer than the steps that have evolved as a way of introducing AI into the planning processes of organizations and communities" (Watkins, 2007).

The five generic processes usually include: 1. Choosing the positive as the focus of inquiry (**D**efinition); 2. Inquiring into exceptionally positive moments (**D**iscovery); 3. Sharing the stories and identifying life-giving forces (**D**iscovery, continued); 4. Creating shared images of a preferred future (**D**ream); and 5. Innovating and improvising ways to create that future (**D**esign; and **D**estiny or **D**elivery).

Choose the Positive as the Focus of Inquiry

In the first generic process, ideally a cross-section of the organization or community's stakeholders - sometimes called a Core Group - comes together and defines the overall focus of the Inquiry, i.e., what the organization wants to study in order to create excellence specific to the topic. Ideally, the focus of the Inquiry is a strategic issue or issues. Because of a traditional problem-solving habit of mind, the Core Group sometimes finds it easier to identify an important or strategic gap, issue or problem - what the organization wants less of - and then reframe it into what the organization wants to study and create more of. The assumption is that whatever the organization focuses its attention on, it will create more of it. Therefore, topic choice is said to be *fateful*. The Core Group needs to mindfully and intentionally focus its attention on what it wants the larger system to study and learn from.

However, an appreciative approach to change can also start by identifying a process, structure, program, or service that is working exceptionally well and inquiring into the conditions that support its excellence or success. It can then transfer that learning to a new situation. In community development, this approach is called positive deviance.

Positive deviance. Community developers have learned that in every community there are certain individuals, known as *positive deviants*, whose special practices, strategies or behaviors enable them to find better solutions to prevalent community problems than their neighbors who have access to the same resources. Positive deviance is a culturally appropriate development approach that is tailored to the specific community in which it is used. One organization, Save the Children, used the concept in its community development work in Vietnam. The community developers, who had studied AI at Case Western, went into villages where children were undernourished. They looked for the healthiest child or children in the village and when they found the mother, they asked her what she did to help the child or children be healthy, i.e., conducted a mini-Inquiry. In one village, for instance, they discovered that the mother of the healthiest children fed them shellfish and greens from nearby rice paddies and also fed them three to four times daily, rather than the usual twice a day. The community developers then spread that story throughout the village so the other parents could learn from one family's story of success and help their children become better nourished (Berggren & Tuan, 1995). Within two years, 80 percent of the children participating in the project were no longer malnourished (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 86).

Inquire into Exceptionally Positive Moments

In the second generic process, the focus is on inquiring into exceptionally positive moments of real and personal experiences of high-point moments in the system under study. This involves creating positive questions to explore the topic or topics of Inquiry and then using the questions to conduct interviews. The questions, as well as the positive topic, are also said to be *fateful*, i.e., the language of the questions will determine the direction the Inquiry takes (negative or positive), and the results of the Inquiry (negative or positive). Just asking the questions begins to bring about change in the human system, so the questions are deliberately *unconditionally* positive questions.

Participants are encouraged to pair up with someone they don't know well, or normally don't work with because a new relationship will result in creating or generating new knowledge. The interviews, ideally face to face, may end with each individual completing a Summary Sheet for the interview he or she just conducted. The Summary Sheet then can assist the person remember the highlights of the story or stories that will be shared and studied in the next phase of the Inquiry.

Share the Stories and Identify Life-Giving Forces

After the face-to-face interviews, the pairs then usually form small groups, perhaps six to eight people. Again, people are encouraged to sit with people they do not know very well or don't normally work with. Group members take turns sharing the highlights of the stories their partners told them, everyone deeply listening to all of the stories. They then collaboratively identify the themes that were common and/or most exciting in the stories. These themes are often called the *life-giving forces*, i.e., conditions, factors and forces in the system that supported or nourished the exceptionally positive moments. Thematic analysis is "one of the most widely used qualitative research methods in the social sciences. It is employed to find commonalities, patterns, or trends in a group of subjects for the purpose of answering questions or forming theories about the group as a whole" (Thatchenkery & Metzker, 2006, p. 138). The small groups then "mine" the highlights of the stories and quotes to discover the positive core of the topic they are inquiring into.

Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) described the positive core:

The positive core of organizational life is one of the greatest and largely unrecognized resources in the field of change management today. We are clearly in our infancy when it comes to tools for working with the positive core, talking about it, and designing our systems in synergistic alignment with it. But one thing is evident and clear as we reflect on the most important things we have learned with AI: Human systems grow in the direction of what they persistently ask questions about, and this propensity is strongest and most sustainable when the means and ends of inquiry are positively correlated. The single most important action a group can take to liberate the human spirit and consciously construct a better future is to make the positive core the common and explicit property of all (p. 8-9).

Mapping the positive core

At this stage of an Inquiry, the small groups can brainstorm themes from the stories and create a list of the high-energy themes, threads and quotable quotes that were present in the stories. From the list, group members discuss and agree on perhaps three to five themes or threads that the stories or quotes of exceptionally positive moments had in common, and that also were the most promising and inspiring themes or threads on the topic of the inquiry. "Common" doesn't necessarily mean the same words; it does mean common in spirit. Contrary to some other change processes, the groups are encouraged not to vote for the best themes; instead they are encouraged to continue their generative dialogue until everyone agrees on and is energized by several themes, or generates new themes that emerge from the dialogue.

Each small group then can write its themes or threads on a clean sheet of flip chart paper (low tech) and post it on the wall. They then create a scatter-gram, a visual map of the positive core, in a variety of ways. One way is to give each individual several sticky dots and invite each person to place the dots, one dot per theme, on those two or three themes on the topic that are essential to them, that they personally most want to create more of. Then, as a large group, they can be invited to reflect upon the scatter-gram, to notice any emerging patterns. Again, they can be reminded that the dots are not votes but simply a way to display the energy of the group.

In the same (or different) small groups, they can discuss and agree, i.e., participate in a generative dialogue, on the positive core (i.e., life-giving forces, factors, and conditions) that supports X at its best - one theme or thread, together with supporting ideas, that the group believes most gives life to X (i.e., most nourishes it). Participants are encouraged to: seek divergence, rather than convergence; synergy, rather than consensus; and higher ground, rather than common ground.

AI can be thought of as helping people uncover or discover the success stories of the *positive deviants* in the organization, those people who - regardless of the sometimes very challenging circumstances in which they find themselves - have experienced or created exceptionally positive moments of success around a particular topic. By sharing the stories, they discover the system's own best-practice stories and, by sharing them, infuse the system with stories that lead to more successes.

Create Shared Images of a Preferred Future

In this generic process, small groups focus on creating shared images of a preferred future. According to Capra (2002), the ability to express a vision in a metaphor or image is an essential quality of leadership (p. 122). Creating shared images usually is a two-phase process: the groups may first create a visual image that best expresses the theme or themes they selected from the stories, then a word image. The phases also may be reversed - first words, then visual.

Visual image. With everyone participating, each small group can create a visual image - a drawing, song, skit, collage, dance, or anything else that expresses the theme and sub-themes the group experiences as the essence or positive core of the Inquiry topic. They can be invited to use whatever resources they can find, including creative materials sometimes provided at the session such as balloons, stickers, pipe cleaners, etc. Each group then can share its visual image with the large group and everyone can be invited to give appreciative feedback, telling the "performers" what they liked most about their visual image.

Word image. Then, in the same small groups, each group is invited to translate its visual image into a word image, called a Provocative Proposition (or Possibility Statement, Shared Vision or Dream Statement). After the group has developed a visual image, it is often quite easy for them to "morph" it into a word image of several sentences. If it is a large-group Inquiry over several days, e.g., an AI Summit (Ludema, et al), these statements may be several paragraphs long.

Provocative Proposition

The purpose of the Provocative Proposition is to bridge the best of "what is" with the group's own speculation or intuition of "what might be." It is provocative to the extent that it stretches the realm of the status quo, challenges common assumptions or routines, and helps suggest real possibilities that represent desired possibilities for the group. Criteria for a good Provocative Proposition include: Is it provocative? That is, does it stretch, challenge, or interrupt "habits"? Is it grounded? That is, are there examples, i.e., stories of success, in the system that illustrate the ideal as real possibility? Is it desired? That is, if it could be fully actualized, would the group want it? Do they want it as a preferred future? And, is it affirmative? That is, is it stated in bold and affirmative terms "as if" it were happening now, i.e., written in present tense language? (Ludema, Whitney, Mohr & Griffin, 2003, p. 183).

Here's an example of a Provocative Proposition that was drafted by a community college in California during a one-day AI Summit for strategic planning: "San Joaquin Delta College is a dynamic community of diverse individuals committed to student success. We embrace open communication, trust and respect in a collaborative learning environment." For details of this story, see Chapter Three.

The verbs are written in present tense, known as "as if" language, i.e., as if the vision were already happening because, in fact, it is - in those exceptionally positive moments that were discovered, or uncovered, during the paired interviews and ensuing dialogue. During the process of drafting the Provocative Proposition, groups are encouraged to think about what X would look like if it were happening *all* or *more* of the time, not just in exceptional moments. In other words, they are invited to imagine a future that is provocative, grounded, desired, and affirmative - specific to the topic or topics of inquiry.

The small groups can report out their Provocative Proposition to the larger Inquiry group. Listeners can be encouraged to give one-word “popcorn” responses to the words or phrases that give them energy. This can help everyone appreciate the power of language.

Innovate and Improvise Ways to Create that Future

Each small group can then focus on innovating and improvising ways to create the future they desire. Together, through dialogue, they can answer the question, “How are we going to make this happen?” They can be encouraged to be bold, creative and innovative and, as Mohr proposes, make it *inevitable* that the dream will be realized. This often requires redesigning organizational structures and processes so that the Provocative Proposition can be realized.

First, each small group can be asked to create a number of Bold Ideas (or Strategic Intentions, Strategic Initiatives, or Pilot Projects) that the *group* is inspired to make happen and record them on flip chart paper or other technology. They can be invited to report out their Bold Ideas to the whole group. If desired, each individual can be given red, yellow and green index cards that they can hold up, as each of the Bold Ideas is reported out, to quickly indicate their opinion. As with a traffic light, red would indicate “stop,” yellow would indicate “caution” and green would indicate “go.” A quick conversation can take place among the individuals holding up yellow or green cards and the small group originating those Bold Ideas.

Then, the individuals in each small group can be asked to make a statement of a commitment or action that they, as an *individual*, are inspired to take in service of the Provocative Proposition. They also can make offers or requests of others that will ensure realization of the Dream Statement or Provocative Proposition. These can be captured on signed Post It notes, posted to the appropriate Provocative Proposition or Propositions.

Destiny

For novices, the Destiny phase seems to be the most challenging process in the AI cycle to understand. At the closing plenary session of the 2004 international conference on Appreciative Inquiry in Miami, Florida, Barrett focused on the topic of Destiny and wisely defined it as *ongoing and simultaneous* Discovery, Dream and Design - a learning/discovery paradigm.

Every human system already is an appreciative system, or it couldn't live as a system. There are places in every human system that are already spontaneously acting and reacting, and inventing as they go (i.e., improvising). Spontaneity, innovation and improvisation require an appreciative way of knowing. Every human system is already doing that or else, in some way, it will be in entropy or die, become a statue and freeze. Our task is to notice where appreciation already exists in organizations, groups and communities, and amplify it. That's Destiny! (Barrett, 2004).

Notice the word “notice.” Appreciation is a mindset or perceptual lens. When an organization begins to incorporate an appreciative approach into the fabric of its culture, it becomes an Appreciative Learning Culture (Barrett, 1995), one in which people continue to learn, on an ongoing basis, from their successes and strengths. It becomes a culture in which employees and other stakeholders continuously improvise, creating and innovating new programs and services that grow out of the positive core of the organization.

Transition

Chapter One gave an overview of organizational learning, organization development, and a new approach to organization development called Appreciative Inquiry (AI). As Barrett & Fry attest, "This approach is a powerful, strengths-based and collaborative approach to facilitating organizational change and growth that is rapid, sustainable, and transformative." Chapter Two will further discuss this appreciative approach to organizational learning, and some of the research and theory that fuels the power of AI.

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