Organizational Improvisation & Appreciative Inquiry:
An exploration of symbiotic theory and practice

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Abstract

In this paper I demonstrate how the theory and practice of appreciative inquiry (AI) supports the theory and practice of organizational improvisation (OI) and the dispersal of organizational memory. I describe how the practice of AI can build individual competence in improvisation while constructing an organizational culture where participants are more likely to improvise.

”If you want to understand organizations, study something else.”
(Weick 2002: 167)

There is no shortage of business interest in learning how to do more with less, respond quickly to change, and restore morale in a climate of layoffs and uncertainty. Developments in business strategy and theory offer hope and a means to survive, and perhaps even thrive again, to beleaguered organizations. Two of the most hopeful theories to emerge in this climate are appreciative inquiry (AI) and organizational improvisation (OI).

In this paper, I present the theories of AI and OI drawing from recent literature, scholarship and my own practice. I have chosen AI and OI, not only because they point organizational change in an innovative direction, but because they have a dynamic and, I believe, symbiotic relationship to one another. The theory and practice of AI is congruent with many of the concepts of OI, especially those inspired by improvisational theater. In addition, AI participants must use improvisation skills, while participation in AI, itself, aids in the development of these skills.

AI has an additional organizational benefit—dispersal of organizational memory, linked by Moorman and Miner (1997) to improved success in new product development and organizational improvisation. AI then, supports OI, while OI supports AI.

Organizational Improvisation

Many have offered definitions of improvisation and its manifestation in organizational settings by drawing largely on the jazz metaphor. Kamoche, *et al* (Kamoche, Pina e Cunha et al. 2002: 100-107) provide a thorough compilation of many of these definitions, correlating them both to their original source (such as jazz improvisation), and with their intended application. Of the articles analyzed in their edited book, Organizational improvisation (Pina e Cunha, 2002: 100-107), 36.6 % draw almost exclusively on the jazz metaphor for improvisation, while none draw exclusively on theatrical improvisation. Less than 10% reference theatrical improvisation at all, and always in conjunction with the jazz metaphor.

Missing from Pina e Cunha’s compilation is Frost and Yarrow’s definition from Improvisation in drama (1989):

> Improvisation: the skill of using bodies, space, all human resources, to generate a coherent physical expression of an idea, a situation, a character (even, perhaps a text); to do this spontaneously, in response to the immediate stimuli of one’s environment, and to do it a l’improviste: as though taken by surprise, without preconceptions (Frost and Yarrow 1989).

This definition surfaces a number of the elements later included in the Pina e Cunha definitions of improvisation and organizational improvisation. As did Hatch (2002), Weick’s enactment theory (1969), and Giddens duality of structure in which “the structural properties of social systems are both the *medium* and the outcome of the practices they recursively organize” (1984: 25), Moorman and Miner cite the proximity of the thought and action, or stimulus and response, as a critical determinant of improvisation (1998: 6).

Crossan and Sorrenti acknowledge a less tangible, but essential dimension in their definition of improvisation as "intuition guiding action in a spontaneous way" (1997: 155). Referring to Mintzberg's study (1973: 36) finding that over 90% of CEO's verbal interactions were spontaneous, the authors suggest that one might conclude that improvisation would be a highly studied area in the management literature. That it is not, points to two possible biases: 1) it is difficult to isolate or improve individual competence in spontaneous behavior and 2) "improvisational action is often considered inferior to planned action: one reverts to improvisation only when planning breaks down" (Crossan and Sorrenti 1997: 156). The planning bias not only inhibits organizations from supporting their members in developing improvisation competence, an over-reliance on planning, itself, fosters an environment that stifles new ideas, insights and discoveries (Mintzberg 1994: 12).

A second core concept embedded in improvisational activity is bricolage. Described as "the ability to build solutions from available resources" (Pina e Cunha, Viera da Cunha et al. 2002: 99), bricolage necessarily occurs in time bound situations. If time were not a limitation, the participants would be able to find optimal resources rather than making due with what is at hand. The authors bring us closest to a working definition of improvisation that describes its manifestation in both the arts and organizations. Linking the concepts of time-bounded action and available resources, Pina e Cunha *et al* define improvisation as

> . . . the conception of action as it unfolds, drawing on available material, cognitive, affective and social resources (2002: 99)

And organizational improvisation as

> . . . the conception of action as it unfolds, by an organization and/or its members, drawing on available material, cognitive, affective and social resources. (2002: 99)

Laying the foundation for further empirical study Pina e Cunha et al (2002: 111) cite Miner et al's narrower definition of organizational improvisation that establishes criteria for the instances of true improvisation as a response to the unexpected *and* unplanned (Miner, Moorman et al. 1996). Rationalizing that an event can be unexpected (as when an air craft loses cabin pressure), but not unplanned for (oxygen masks automatically drop from the overhead bin, a procedure for which passengers have been prepared). When the event is both unexpected *and* unplanned for (as they were for passengers on the flights overtaken by terrorists on 9/11), participants must improvise.

It is impossible for anyone to be so well trained, educated and experienced that they are prepared for all unexpected and unplanned for events. Several times each day, individuals are called to improvise. The chances for *individual* success in improvisation can be greatly increased through skill development, while *organizational* success is dependent on additional factors (Pina e Cunha, Viera da Cunha et al. 2002: 115 -123) including:

1) *Experimental culture* grounded in "values and beliefs that promote action and experimentation—as opposed to reflection and planning—as a way of understanding reality."
2) *Minimal structure* or controls imposed on people in organizations.

3) *A low procedural memory*: While Moorman and Miner (1997: 91) find a positive link between memory dispersal and organizational improvisation, they find that a high level of procedural memory inhibits improvisation.
4) *Leadership*: As with organizational memory, leadership can either encourage or stifle improvisation. An improvisation-friendly leader is one whose style supports collaboration, without heavy-handed controls or monitoring.
5) *Member's Characteristics.* Skill in individuals' practice area, skill in improvisation, and heterogeneous group composition all support organizational improvisation.
6) *Information Flow* between the environment and the organization, and within the organization is also considered important for the success of improvisation.
7) *Organizational Configuration* which, along with minimal structures, fosters trusting relationships, and a safe environment for exploration and risk-taking.

When these conditions are present there is a greater chance for both the incidence and success of organizational improvisation. Researchers have looked to the arts not only to help understand and describe improvisation in the organizational setting, but to help shed light on how to create the conditions in which it will thrive.

The jazz metaphor has been quite useful in developing the theory of organizational improvisation. The parallels are intriguing— jazz music begins with some degree of structure (the song) from which musicians improvise. Organizations have various comparable structural elements such as mission, values, knowledge, norms, procedures, and even physical structure and artifacts (Crossan 1998). Jazz musicians must strike a balance between their memory and past experience and their pursuit of new discoveries, as do most organizations. Jazz ensembles are social groups as are organizations and they must work well together and respond quickly to change, as do most organizations today. These are a few of the ways the jazz metaphor has been used to point the way toward organizational improvisation, and improve our understanding of what it may look like when it occurs.

The jazz metaphor, however, does not offer much in the way of providing executives, managers, workers and organizations a way to actually increase their competence in improvisation, partially because the skill and talent for jazz is inaccessible to most (Crossan 1998: 594) and even with a high degree of jazz competence, it remains a metaphor in need of translation for practical application in organizational settings. Part of the bias toward this metaphor may be explained by a pre-existing competence or exposure to jazz improvisation on the part of OI theorists (Kao 1996; Barrett 1998; Hatch 2002). The relatively sparse exploration of alternatives in improvisation may also be explained by a lack of understanding. Many associate theatrical improvisation with sketch comedy and entertainment (e.g. Drew Carey's Whose line is it anyway, or the many comedy sports clubs that use improvisational games). The underlying principles guiding successful improvisation, and the individual competence required are largely overshadowed (or dismissed altogether) by the light-hearted entertainment goals of these forms of improvisation.

In a handful of separate, articles Crossan (1996; 1997; 1998) explores the value of theatrical improvisation in both illuminating our understanding of organizational improvisation (metaphorically) and pointing the way for actual improvisation skill development for individuals and organizations:

> . . . improvisation is more than a metaphor. It is an orientation and a technique to enhance the strategic renewal of an organization. The bridge between theory and practice is made through exercises used to develop the capacity to improvise . . .
> (1998: 593)

Where jazz provides a useful metaphor for theoretical understanding, theatrical improvisation provides both metaphor and the opportunity to develop transferable skills for the practice of organizational improvisation. There are only a few studies that describe the development of such transferable skills through improvisation training. Thomson (2003) observed some of the capacities developed by graduate students who learned collaboration via improvisation games. They included idea flow, freedom from judgment, "true listening and authentic response, surrendering to the unexpected, and the equal authority and creativity of questions and answers" Conversely, Thomson reported, "improvisation demonstrates how quickly conversations can fall apart when the anxiety for knowing interfere with the quest" (Thomson 2003, p. 123-4).

McGinn and Keros (McGinn and Keros 2002) looked at various forms of improvised negotiations and the "logic of exchange" within "socially embedded" transactions. In the context of negotiation the researchers identify three forms of improvisation: opening up, working together and haggling.

McGinn, Thompson, and Brazerman (2002), discovered that negotiators respond "in kind" to both competitive and cooperative tactics, resulting in negotiations in which the actions of the players appear to match one another (Cited in McGinn & Keros, p. 460). These findings have implications for the impact of even one participant using an improvisational mindset within an interaction. A participant using an acceptance/agreement-based framework is likely to positively influence the "logic of exchange."

> Like talented improvisational actors who can begin to engage coherently after only one prompt from the audience, many of our pairs very quickly settled on a logic that guided their entire exchange (McGinn, p. 461).

Through the practice of improvisation, participants also foster a climate conducive to participation and growth. Both organizations and improvisation itself can be said to be socially constructed realities generated from the assumptions, beliefs and behavior of their participants. Trust is necessary for the success of both groups, and is fostered through the practice of collaborative behavior. As in successful organizations, successful theatrical improvisation relies on memory dispersal to provide structure for the participants, without constraining their ability to improvise.

The parallels between successful theatrical improvisation and departments, teams and organizations are direct. Members of the latter groups can benefit from developing their competency in the skills of improvisation. Many of these skills can be taught via games modified from improvisational theatre, understanding the underlying principles of improvisation, and by fostering an environment for collaboration. Just like jazz musicians, theatrical improvisers do not simply cross their fingers and hope that they will be "on" on any given night, they practice a number of principles, learned skills, and trust their fellow players to make them look good.

Crossan highlights the need to attend to the skill development component of improvisation

> . . . so that we do not lose sight of the discipline, practice and experience on which intuition [core to Crossan's definition of improvisation] is based. If we lose sight of the fact that improvisation is an extension of more traditional and fundamental skills, we not only cut ourselves off from understanding an essential facet of improvisation, but we also lose the ability to build on, and extend current theory and practice (1998: 593).

Canadian improvisation teacher and author, Keith Johnstone, puts it another way:

> There are people who prefer to say 'Yes', and there are people who prefer to say 'No'. Those who say 'Yes' are rewarded by the adventures they have, and those who say 'No' are rewarded by the safety they attain. There are far more 'No' sayers than 'Yes' sayers, but you can train one type to behave like the other. (1979, 1981: 92)

If improvisation is, at least in part, a skill (rather than an illusive "talent") the news is good for individuals and organizations wishing to improve their response-ability. Barrett (1998: 606) and Weick (2002: 170) call these the skills of a "disciplined imagination." Weick expands on the theme that "improvisation does not materialize out of thin air" (2002: 58) by citing "the extensive amount of practice necessary to pull off successful improvisation" (2002b: 67). In reflecting on the tragedy of Mann Gulch, where 13 smoke jumpers lost their lives in 1949, Weick wrote

> If improvisation were given more attention in the job description of a crew person, that person's receptiveness to and generation of role improvisations might be enhanced (1993: 636).

While there are a number of core (even biblical, for improvisers) texts on the fundamentals of theatrical improvisation (Spolin 1963, 1983; Johnstone 1979, 1981) (Barker 1977) and a growing number of books and articles for the practitioner looking for guidance in using improvisation for training purposes (Jackson 1995; Gessell 1997; Lowe 2000; Koppett 2001; Moshavi 2001), there has been little study of the impact of improvisation training in organizational settings, though Crossan (1998) makes a strong case for further research.

Others, including Crossan (1996; Fleming 2001), have linked core competencies of improvisation and story development, to strategy development and have further articulated the role of stories in improving and dispersing organizational memory:

> Stories are told everyday at work. By listening, leaders can learn when and how to use those stories to communicate vision, values and meaning. Listening to work stories provides important information about the people in the organization. It gives leaders clues about how to communicate with different types of people. . . . Stories that emerge from the history of the organization become powerful tag-back tools for the present and the future. . . . reviewing past success provides a map for navigating the terrain of the current cycle (Fleming: 36).

Improvisation is the art of creating stories, in real time, and "in response to the immediate stimuli of the environment" (Frost: 1). In theatrical improvisation, these stories become part of the players' memory, particularly in long-form improvisation, such as "The Harold" (Halpern, Close et al. 1994), and become "givens" (non-negotiable boundaries) within which the players continue to make discoveries, expand upon and explore.

> The ability to accept (and remember) the givens is central to improvisational success Improvisation is not just grounded in forms, but memory . . . Forms and memory and practice are all key determinants of success in improvisation that are easy to miss if analysts become preoccupied with spontaneous composition (Weick 2002: 59).

In both improvisational storytelling and unfolding organizational "stories" the content becomes a structure or "given" that is both the result of the existing structure and the foundation for additional structure, similar to the process Giddens describes as "duality of structure" in which "properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize" (1984: 24).

Hatch discusses the role of memory using the jazz metaphor, citing the improvisational value of memories of prior performances of a piece in influencing how the piece is played *this time.* Here, too, memory serves as structure "the future is invited into the present via expectation created by recollection of similar experiences in the past" (2002: 89).

In improvisation, memory of past (distant or immediate) actions, discoveries, characterizations, relationships, and dialogue support the actions, discoveries, characterizations, relationships, and dialogue that follows. In organizations, memory serves a similar purpose for the unfolding organizational "story." Moorman and Miner (1997: 93) describe three basic forms of organizational memory:

1) Organizational beliefs, knowledge, frames of reference, models, values and norms . . . as well as organizational myths, legends and stories.
2) Formal and informal routines, procedures and scripts.
3) Physical artifacts that embody, to varying degrees, the results of prior learning.

In their study of 92 new product development projects Moorman and Miner found a positive correlation between memory dispersal (particularly of the first form) in an organization and the creative and financial success of new products (1997: 115).

Organizational Improvisation and Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry, offers a theory and practice that supports the dispersal of organizational memory, while also providing a medium for its practitioners to develop some of the skills of improvisation cited earlier. Additionally, the practice of AI can have a positive impact by cultivating an environment that supports organizational improvisation.

Appreciative Inquiry

In the mid '70's David Cooperrider, then a graduate student at Case Western University in Cleveland, began experimenting with a radical idea, "What if, instead of viewing organizations

as problems to be solved, we viewed them as mysteries to be embraced?" As he began testing his ideas, Cooperrider discovered an exciting trend; just as plants tend to grow toward the sun, organizations gravitate toward a positive focus.

AI's core concepts are embedded in its name: "appreciation," is to increase in value, while inquiry, is "the act of exploration and discovery" (Cooperrider and Whitney 2000: 4-5).

Most definitions of AI describe, not so much what it is, but what it *does*:

> AI involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential (Cooperrider, Sorensen et al. 2000: 5).

> It focuses on asking the *unconditional positive question* to ignite transformative dialogue and action within human systems. More than a technique, appreciative inquiry is a way of organizational life – an intentional posture of continuous discovery, search and inquiry into conceptions of life, joy, beauty, excellence, innovation and freedom (Ludema, Cooperrider et al.: 191).

The five principles of AI (Cooperrider and Whitney 2000: 17-20) clearly distinguish the theory and practice from classical problem-solution or diagnosis-prescription approaches to organizational issues. Their relationship to improvisational theater, and organizational improvisation will soon become apparent.

The constructionist principle (Cooperrider, Sorensen et al. 2000: 17)**.** An extension of Ken Gergen's work (Gergen 1985; 1994) and also reflective of themes from Giddens (1984) and Weick (1969), constructionist theory "invites us to find ways to increase the generative capacity of knowledge" (Cooperrider and Whitney 2000: 18). AI operationalizes the constructionist view in which individuals co-create their reality through language, beliefs and behavior in real time.

In this sense, improvisational theatre also actively employs the constructionist principle. The reality of each scene is constructed in the moment drawing entirely from the generative capacity of the players, which includes past experiences, memory, interpretations of the present and improvisation skills. Likewise, organizational improvisation, as defined by Pina e Cunha lives comfortably within the constructionist framework

> . . . the conception of action as it unfolds, by an organization and/or its members, drawing on available material, cognitive, affective and social resources (Pina e Cunha, Viera da Cunha et al. 2002: 99).

The principle of simultaneity (Cooperrider, Sorensen et al. 2000: 18). The process of inquiry and change are not separate in AI, but simultaneous. This principle runs counter to traditional management practices in which an inquiry or assessment is made, results analyzed, and a strategy or intervention proposed. In AI, the inquiry itself initiates the change process or intervention. With awareness of the organization's "positive core," behavior and values naturally begin to gravitate toward the "light" of positive change.

Here, the connection to improvisational theatre is less direct. Outright questions are discouraged in live improvisation. They tend to curtail discovery, rather than promote it, because the players are creating an imaginary reality. If one player asks another a question, e.g. Walking

up to another patron in a bar scene and asking, "Do you come here often?" the other player is put in the position, not of discovery, but of "making something up."

Players are encouraged to "give gifts" (Meyer 2000: 65) to each other, building on the discoveries of their fellows. Instead of asking a question, as in the above exchange, the player might walk into the bar, look around, and say, "I can't believe this dump is still here! I haven't been here in thirty years. In fact, I was sittin' right over there at that table when I lost my whole life savings in a card game." By offering this "gift," his fellow players do not have to "make something up," but can build on this new discovery or "given." On a meta-level, an inquiry is unfolding as each new discovery is mined for interesting new gifts and energy to propel the action forward. Though questions are avoided, the outcome is similar—the change, or unfolding reality is happening along with, and dependent *on*, the discovery process.

The poetic principle (Cooperrider, Sorensen et al. 2000: 18). Just as a beautiful poem or timeless literary work is many-layered, apparently changing with each subsequent encounter as the reader brings new understanding, awareness and life experience to engage with the author's words, the poetic principle asks us to embrace the mystery of organizations. We have been socialized to view organizations and many of life's opportunities in a mechanistic way: as problems to be solved, breakdowns to be fixed. With a poetic approach to discovery, new awareness, understandings, and relationships emerge. AI honors the unpredictability of this process, and harnesses the positive energy for forward movement.

Improvisers depend on a similar energy. They know that if they attempt to analyze, understand or pre-plan their discoveries, they will meet their demise. They must be fully present in the moment, aware of their actions, spontaneously drawing on input from their fellow players, and the established givens. The moment they step out of the mystery of the present, they are no longer co-creating, but scripting, their reality.

The anticipatory principle (Cooperrider, Sorensen et al. 2000: 19). While analytical planning is rarely embedded in the positive future of an organization, this principle suggests that the act of inquiry itself unearths themes that are both grounded in the past, and lay a foundation that "anticipates" a positive future.

While improvisers cannot, as stated above, step out of the present moment to analyze the past, they are constantly involved in process of "sensemaking" (Weick 2002: 58) or what Giddens refers to as "reflexive monitoring of action," (1984: 3) a constant process of evaluating action and consequences at the level of "practical consciousness." The awareness of past discoveries helps the players "anticipate" future discoveries without stepping out of the current action.

The positive principle (Cooperrider, Sorensen et al. 2000: 20). This final principle runs throughout all of the previous and is the theoretical foundation for AI. Not based in deficit thinking, rabid searches for "problems" or organizational challenges, AI looks for "that which gives life to the organization." For legions of executives and MBA graduates this is indeed a radical, even heretical concept. Many business people build their credibility and careers on their ability to identify and solve problems. Even I, as I was starting my consulting practice, was counseled to identify "the problem to which I was the answer."

My experience bears out this ingrained "problem focus." Working with clients and students using the AI process, I have noticed how often they are tempted to shift into "problem-solving" mode, or to ask deficit-focused questions once the appreciative inquiry is underway.

Here, additional competence in the practice of principles of improvisation can help AI participants leverage the positive, forward movement of the inquiry.

Improvisation, like AI, is founded on a positive principle—the principle of Say, "Yes, and . . ." (Meyer 2000: 63). Improvisers must accept (or say, "yes") to anything they discover on stage, receive from another player or the audience. They cannot stop at acceptance, however, they must move the action forward by adding their own discoveries (saying, "and . . ."). This positive orientation is the foundation for improvisation success, as it is for all creative collaborations in business and life.

The principles above provide a theoretical context for appreciative inquiry. The practice of AI is most often presented as the 4-D process (Hammond 1998; Cooperrider and Whitney 2000; Watkins and Mohr 2001). AI, not only supports positive organizational change, but helps individuals build some of the skills necessary for successful improvisation in the workplace. The practice of AI also contributes to organizational memory via storytelling and while giving individuals opportunities to cultivate their improvisation competencies and foster a culture where improvisation is more likely to be successful. Additionally, the inquiry process is grounded in the lived experiences of organizational participants. To discover the positive core of these experiences, AI participants must listen closely and without judgment—essential competencies for improvisation.

At the center of the "4-D Process" of AI (described in the next section) is inquiry into personal positive experiences related to the topic. Concert pianist and consultant, Michael Jones writes

> Creativity involves living in the question—Improvising involves a living inquiry into what is. When our conditioned knowledge and theories no longer serve us, we need to inquire more deeply into things as they are. This creates a space for more subtle insights to emerge (1997: 60).

An inquiry of quality and depth, grounded in individual experience also promotes organizational learning as framed by Crossan, Lane and White (1996) as including intuition, as well as interpreting, integrating and institutionalizing new discoveries. Individual learning, within this framework, includes changes in cognition and/or behavior. Integrated learning represents a change in both cognition and behavior. An inquiry that invites participants to share their experiences and make (sometimes new) meaning of them, then, may enhance this integration process while building individual experience and comfort with "living in the question" and improvisation.

The 4-D Process of Appreciative Inquiry

In this section I use brief descriptions of the stages of AI to locate additional opportunities for the development of OI and the dispersal of organizational memory. Though not identified as a discrete stage, the first step in AI is to identify a topic or topics for inquiry. I have added a fifth "D" for this step: *Definition.* Comparable to gaining initial agreement on the "givens" for an improvised performance, topic definition focuses the direction of inquiry. Cooperrider asserts, "Affirmative topics, always homegrown, can be anything the people in the organization feel gives life to the system" (2000: 9).

In my experience working with clients, the topic often emerges initially as something that needs improvement—something that is currently *draining* the life of the system, e.g. low morale, poor communication, lack of leadership, high turnover, inconsistent teamwork. The group must work with the topic in either a value-free way: "our topic is communication" or, appreciatively: "our topic is excellent communication."

Even in this initial stage of AI, participants must employ principles of improvisation. Just as players must agree to accept whatever their fellow player, audience or the improvisation itself offers, AI participants must accept and build on the discoveries they make as they listen to the stories and experiences of those they interview. As on the improv stage, AI participants can succeed only in an environment of agreement, where each player knows that his or her experience, reality and discoveries will be accepted and honored.

When the improvisation begins, the players agree with the first suggestion from the audience. At a recent performance at the Improv Olympics in Chicago, an audience member yelled out "Sandworms!" in response to a request for a title of a new musical. Immediately one of the eight players on the team began improvising riding on the back of a giant worm in a sand storm. Without hesitation, his teammates joined in, adding new discoveries and improvising flowing robes and headdresses, water jugs, and saddle bags as the scene unfolded.

In both improvisation and AI, there is no mandate that each participant have exactly the same understanding and interpretation of the topic. In fact, sameness would destroy the mystery of the process. There is plenty of room for diverse, even contradictory, interpretations. All that is needed is that none of the participants deny the reality of the others and accept the "gift" of another perspective for further exploration. In other words, it is necessary that we agree that our topic is "excellent communication," but it is not important that we agree on its meaning, only that no one's experience of "excellent communication" is denied.

In this way, participants in the AI process are developing their skills in improvisation. They are practicing "Yes, and …" while learning to discover the value to diverse interpretations of their topic or "givens," as they cultivate several of the conditions described earlier as necessary for organizational improvisation.

Discovery. Once the AI topic has been defined, the participants embark on the inquiry in an appreciative way, looking for examples of the topic at its best. The first stage of discovery is to formulate the questions for an appreciative inquiry. Many practitioners report that they spend the lion's share of their time in this stage, crafting just the right question to elicit stories of "peak" experiences.

In my work with organizations interested in the topic of collaboration and teamwork, I have used the following prompt to initiate the inquiry

> Think about a time when you were engaged in a successful collaboration, where you felt you and your collaborators were working extraordinarily well together. Tell me about that time.

Once the questions are developed the interviews begin. One of the most appealing aspects of AI is that there is not an absolute prescription for each step's execution. In fact, there isn't even an exact prescription for the entire process, only guidelines, suggestions, and experiences of others from which to draw. Interviews may be initiated by a small group of people who fan out into the organization to collect stories; they may be done by a large group over a few days or many months. Interviews may last five minutes or several hours; again, there is no recipe for the process. The inquiry may be guided by an external facilitator, or initiated from within the organization.

The entire discovery process draws on many skills also used in improvisation, at the same time offering participants an opportunity to develop these skills. One of the most important principles of improvisation and other forms of collaboration is "Abstain from Judgment" (Meyer 2000: 45). Both the AI interviewer and the improviser must not judge the information they receive, or the source of the information. All that is important is that the information is true for the person relating it. When an improviser jumps ahead, attempts to pre-plan or manipulate the course of the story on stage, she is sure to meet both resistance from her fellow players, and take all of the magic of real-time discovery out of the improvisation. The same holds true for the AI interviewer, who, particularly if he or she knows something of the topic already and has strong feelings about it (*pre*judice), will be challenged to suspend judgment so as not to distort what he or she hears, or inhibit the storyteller from telling the story.

Further reflecting on the tragedy of Mann Gulch, Weick wrote:

> In a fluid world, wise people know that they don't fully understand what is happening right now, because they have never seen precisely this event before (1993: 636).

Those who survived the fire did not assume that they were simply conducting "business as usual." Improvisers know that they must "make continuous discoveries" (Meyer 2000: 145) to keep the scene alive and engaging for the players and audience. As soon as the discovery stops, the scene stops (whether the improvisers are aware of it or not).

Abstaining from judgment has been a challenge to my AI and Organizational Change students. One of the student teams is inquiring into the topic of leadership at their company. They all have strong feelings and perceptions of a lack of leadership in the organization. Even in the development of their questions, they had to draft several questions before they found a truly "appreciative" approach. As they begin their interviews, they are noticing their impulse to focus on the problem, and begin interrogating their subjects about "why we don't see more examples like this in the company." With practice, they are noticing when a negative bias creeps into their questions. It is rewarding to see these practitioners develop skills that not only support the success of their inquiry, but can transfer to their workplace collaborations as well.

Active listening skills are also needed for AI success, and require withholding judgment. The AI interviewer needs to listen both for content points and for the emotional energy of the speaker. When the speaker becomes more engaged in the story, he or she is often on to something he or she feels passionate about. This is an opportunity for further exploration by the

interviewer. Similarly, improvisers must listen to the whole of the communication coming from the audience and their fellow players. They are constantly "listening" for the energy in the scene, and opportunities to move the story into unexpected territory as they heighten and explore the life energy of the scene.

Beginning improvisers and novice AI interviewers sometimes miss these opportunities for further exploration, due to their eagerness for outcomes or the inability to stay in the present moment (they are already on to the next question or idea before the current one has played out).

The AI discovery phase is completed with the interviewers (often along with the interview subjects) sharing the stories with each other and identifying their themes. This also calls for the practice and development of listening skills. A single success story may contain several discrete themes. These emerge in the initial telling of the story, while often more are revealed in the retelling of the story to a larger group.

The heart of the discovery phase is the process of storytelling. People come to life when given the opportunity to talk about a positive experience. In listening to reflections on this stage of the process I have heard a number of participants remark on the power of "being listened to." Apparently, many of us are not used to this luxury, and are startled when we actually have someone's undivided (let alone, appreciative) attention. Other participants remarked on the power of remembering their successes. After spending a day of inquiry with a client group, my colleague and I heard a number of associates say that they are normally so focused on "what's next" that they rarely take the time to notice, reflect on, celebrate or share their successes with one another. This process was energizing on its own—reinforcing the principle of simultaneity mentioned earlier. The change begins as soon as individuals recognize (literally re-cognize) their positive experiences.

Whether formally collected for others to hear (or read) or not, the organizational memory is improved and restored with this remembering (which is also literally an opportunity for organizational re-membering) process. Embedded in each of the stories told are the values, beliefs and norms of an organization at its best. With this energized and expanded "positive core," organizations have much of the needed material for successful organizational improvisation as described by Moorman and Miner (1998: 716).

Dream. The next stage of the AI process also draws on many of the skills of improvisation, and gives participants an opportunity to be both improvisers and bricoleurs by making optimal use of available resources.

Using the themes from the stories, AI participants may write "provocative proposition statements." The statements should be provocative (of action), grounded in the stories, reflect something participants can get excited about, and be stated in the present tense (Hammond 1998: 41). In improvisation terms, these statements serve as givens or boundaries (Meyer 2000: 165) to focus the next stage of collaboration. Once established, either from an audience suggestion or an on-stage action, improvisers simultaneously agree upon their givens and begin playing within them. The givens are non-negotiable. There are no "wrong" givens, just as there are no "wrong" proposition statements, as long as they clearly capture the grounded experience of the stories. Accepting and building on the givens enacts a generative process and propels the exploration in positive directions. There is no such thing as a "mistake" in improvisation as long as participants accept and build upon each discovery.

Design. This stage of the AI process is an invitation to co-create the future of the organization. Using the provocative proposition statements as their touchstone, and, recognizing

that the stories shared may be exceptional examples of the topic, participants (who may include the entire interview group, or a smaller team) can brainstorm ideas about how they can realize their statements as part of their daily reality.

This stage may be formalized and look very much like a facilitated ideation session, or it may evolve over time with groups and individuals sharing their ideas as they reflect on the proposition statements. Cooperrider has noticed over the years that the Design and subsequent Destiny stages are not necessarily the most crucial part of the process. Organizational success is not dependant on concrete ideas emerging from the design stage. Often the process of sharing success stories itself becomes the focal point of change. "What was done instead in several of the most exciting cases, was to focus only on giving AI away to everyone, and then stepping back" (2000: 14). Organizations may choose to create more opportunities for appreciative inquiry, and storytelling as the key "strategy" for continued change.

This approach is congruent with Hatch's cultural dynamics model of change (1993) which highlights the *process* of cultural change in the dynamic exchange between assumptions, values, symbols and artifacts. As individuals continue to share stories, they participate in the creation, interpretation and communication of the culture's values, symbols, assumptions and artifacts.

This ever-present "negotiation of reality" cannot be separated from the inquiry process, according to Cooperrider

> . . . our knowledge of a social system is different. It can be used by the system to change itself, thus invalidating or disconfirming the findings immediately or at some later time. Thus the human group differs from objects in an important way: Human beings have the capacity for symbolic interaction and, through language, they have the ability to collaborate in the investigation of their own world. Because of our human capacity for symbolic interaction, the introduction of new knowledge concerning aspects of our world carries with it the strong likelihood of changing that world itself (Cooperrider, Sorensen et al. 2000: 74).

Meaning-making in organizations is a dynamic, relational process. Barrett, Thomas and Hocevar further point to the "central role of discourse" in organizational change:

> For it is through patterns of discourse that we form relational bonds with one another; that we create, transform, and maintain structure; and that we reinforce or challenge our beliefs (Barrett, Thomas et al. 1995: 353).

Those who do formalize the design stage have another opportunity to practice and develop their improvisational skills. As with the interview process, it is important that participants feel free to share their ideas free from judgment. Encouraging participants to build on each other's ideas (Say, "Yes, and . . .) also supports the success of this stage. When individuals evaluate ideas while they are being generated, creativity and exploration is quickly stifled.

Destiny. Alternately called the "Delivery" stage (Watkins and Mohr 2001: 45), this is the organization's opportunity to either formally implement ideas from the design stage, or, more broadly, commit to sustaining the change that has already begun.

In an Appreciative Inquiry workshop led by James D. Ludema, Ph.D., for the Organizational Development Network in Chicago on April 19 – 20, 2002, participants were invited to own an idea about which they felt passionate. Idea owners then wrote a shorthand version of the idea on a piece of flip chart paper and walked the idea around the room, campaigning for additional "owners" with whom to convene a conversation. These smaller groups then met to discuss how they would implement the idea. By the time the session was over, individuals throughout the organization had made specific commitments to a broad range of implementation strategies. One participant, who was not a member of the organization at the beginning of the AI process, was so enthused about the idea she owned, she decided to join in order to follow it through and "to see what happens next!"

Discussion

AI offers a participatory approach to organizational change that is energizing to individual participants, and the organizational system. Participants are called to improvise as they practice AI, and as they practice, they also improve their improvisation skills. Individuals who are comfortable collaborating and sharing stories as they co-create their organization's future, are also more apt to use these skills in responding to the unexpected and unplanned conditions that call for improvisation. In a the dynamic climate fostered by AI, they may also see new ways to approach old challenges, thus positively changing their relationship to procedural memory. By dispersing organizational memory of values, beliefs, norms and cultural myths, AI gently supports the emergence of cultural norms embedded in experiences of the organization at its best.

Not only does AI support OI, it is, in many ways, an organizational improvisation itself, by the terms of the earlier cited definition:

> . . . the conception of action as it unfolds, by an organization and/or its members, drawing on available material, cognitive, affective and social resources (Pina e Cunha, Viera da Cunha et al. 2002: 99).

The relationship between these two theoretical and practical approaches to organizational change is particularly compelling in the current climate of uncertainty. The appreciative practice of OI and AI clearly support the development of individual competence and comfort with improvisation while constructing a culture within which people are likely to make optimal use of available resources and positively respond to the unexpected and unplanned. Future research practice-based is needed to further explore the link between appreciative inquiry and increased competence in individual and organizational improvisation.

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