

## Why Appreciative Inquiry Works

**Used with permission. DO NOT REPRODUCE.**

**This article is excerpted from Chapter 11: “Why Appreciative Inquiry Works,”**  
*The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change,*  
D. Whitney and A. Trosten-Bloom, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2003.

For nearly two decades, we have watched as organizations and communities around the globe have witnessed extraordinary transformations using Appreciative Inquiry for organizational and social change. Several years ago, having tracked this consistent success, we asked ourselves: Why do people get so excited and want to participate with Appreciative Inquiry? Why does participation so readily lead to innovation, productivity, employee satisfaction and profitability? What creates these possibilities for personal transformation, and for people to discover and be their best at work? What are the conditions that foster cooperation throughout a whole system of highly diverse groups of people?

In keeping with the spirit of Appreciative Inquiry, we decided to seek answers to these questions by conducting an inquiry. We created a set of questions, held focus groups, and conducted formal and informal interviews in several of our client organizations – most notably Hunter Douglas Window Fashions Division in Broomfield, CO.<sup>1</sup> We sought to discover *why Appreciative Inquiry works*.

Our key finding is that Appreciative Inquiry works by generating six essential conditions that together liberate or unleash personal and organizational power. Having once experienced this liberation of power and the effect it has on their lives and the world around them, people are permanently transformed.

We have named these six conditions through which AI liberates power. We call them the Six Freedoms. Following is a description of each of these Six Freedoms, together quotes from a variety of Hunter Douglas Window Fashions Division employees. These are the voices of the organizationally liberated, describing the conditions that bring out their best.

### ***Freedom to be Known in Relationship***

Human identity forms and evolves in relationship; yet all too often in work settings, people are known instead in role. Appreciative Inquiry interrupts the cycle of depersonalization that masks people’s sense of being and belonging. It offers us the chance to truly know one another – both as unique individuals, and as a part of the web of relationships through which “I” exist.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Hunter Douglas Window Fashions Division case is featured prominently in the book *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes in this article are excerpted from interviews with Hunter Douglas employees.

**This document may be reproduced only with written permission from both the publisher and the authors.**

The appreciative interview is powerfully rooted in the personal and relational. It explores people's personal peaks . . . times when they have been most engaged, alive, and proud. It asks them to recall those moments in vivid detail, and to share their experiences with people whom they've heretofore known only in role, or not at all. The process affirms people in relation to others, enables new relationships to be formed, and enhances respect among people working together on a day-to-day basis. It gives people the freedom to get to know themselves and others as fundamental to high performance.

Appreciative Inquiry doesn't *just* build relationships. It also levels the playing field and builds bridges across boundaries of power and authority. As Mark Maier, a Machinist, says, "Appreciative Inquiry blew the communication gap wide open."

Similarly, John Cade, a Printer, comments on the ways in which Appreciative Inquiry in general – and the interviews in particular – help to make other people and their ideas more accessible: "Appreciative Inquiry gave us opportunities to be known across the boundaries. As our inquiry got fully under way, other people became excited, just like me. I didn't feel alone. For the first time, it was 'me with the world.'"

### ***Freedom to be Heard***

Listening, as we know it, is a trait or skill of an individual; a person can listen without truly hearing or knowing the other. Being heard, on the other hand, is relational. To be heard requires someone to be listening with sincere curiosity, empathy and compassion, and openness to know and understand another person's story.

Appreciative interviews encourage this kind of relational hearing. They ask speaker and listener alike to reach beyond the mundane and the theoretical, into personal experience and values. They invite an act of hearing that draws out the best of another – that encourages a cooperative creation of meaning and identity that is powerful, fulfilling and energizing.

One-on-one appreciative interviews unleash a wealth of stories that spread and multiply throughout an organization or community. People who might otherwise feel ignored and without voice are invited to come forward with information, ideas, and innovations that are subsequently put into action throughout the organization.

Mark Maier supervised a group that performed technical maintenance on the Company's production machinery. He and his staff felt undervalued, not heard, and often ignored – even when it came to their particular area of expertise. Mark decided to put Appreciative Inquiry to the test. He initiated an inquiry among all of the team's internal customers: engineers, technical support staff, etc. He and his staff collected stories of exceptional support that people had experienced both here and at other companies. He invited people to dream about the service that they'd always wanted, and to describe it in detail. What

**This document may be reproduced only with written permission from both the publisher and the authors.**

was the result, when all was said and done? People felt recognized. They built relationships across functions, in particular between engineering and technical support. Being heard brought the group to life.

### ***Freedom to Dream in Community***

In today's complex world, neither leadership vision nor shared vision alone is enough. We need organizations to be safe places where large, diverse groups of people dream and share dreams, in dialogue with one another. We need the Freedom to Dream in Community.

The Appreciative Inquiry dreaming process puts attention on the visionaries, rather than the squeaky wheels – on the path ahead, rather than the problems of the past. It opens people's individual dreams up to the whole in ways that are both transformational and compelling.

In American Baptist International Ministries, for example, several months of interviews with over 1200 stakeholders worldwide yielded a vision of an entirely new model of service: from *sending people out* to do good, to *linking people and organizations of similar intent* around the globe. This vision was so compelling – and its momentum so great – that by the first anniversary of the summit, close to 30 new initiatives were launched using this “sister organization” model as a template. Then, in the two years that followed that, close to 200 new initiatives unfolded. Consultant Jim Ludema described the power of the community's dream as “unleashing energy that was already there. It was a positive explosion waiting to happen.”

### ***Freedom to Choose to Contribute***

Work can separate us from what matters most to us; or it can provide a forum for enacting and realizing our deepest calling. And when organizations offer people the freedom choose the nature and extent of their contributions, they significantly enhance people's capacities to contribute and learn.

In an Appreciative Inquiry process, people can and do join only when they become curious, stimulated, or inspired by a task, activity, or dream. Many people choose only to participate in the interviews – and yet even that minimal level of engagement has a liberating effect on those who are involved. Others, like Kathy Mayfield, get on board later in the process. Initially, she refused even to be interviewed. But eight months into the process, someone recruited her into an Action Group that piqued her curiosity and interest. Soon she had become one of the strongest supporters of Appreciative Inquiry in the entire organization.

Freedom to Choose to Contribute liberates power; but it also leads to commitment and a hunger for learning. When people choose to do a project and commit to others to do it,

**This document may be reproduced only with written permission from both the publisher and the authors.**

they get very creative and determined about it. They will do whatever it takes and learn whatever is needed to get the job done. For example, a front line employee who had volunteered to lead an innovation team went to her personal department and asked for coaching. She declared that she needed to learn to facilitate meetings and help her team make decisions in order for them to succeed. Her determination paid off for the team, the organization and herself. The team's project was finished in record time and led to significant process improvements in the company. She was promoted to a supervisory position and her new team is thriving with her leadership.

### ***Freedom to Act with Support***

To act with support is the quintessential act of positive interdependence. When people know that large numbers of people know and care about their work and are anxious to cooperate, they feel safe to experiment, innovate, and learn. In other words, whole-system support stimulates people to take on challenges, and draws people into acts of cooperation that bring forth their best.

In an Appreciative Inquiry, people are invited to act on behalf of the things that passionately inspire them . . . the things that they know will make a difference in their organization and in the world. They are called to act in the service of the organization, with support from others at all levels of the organization.

To break through years' worth of apathy and distrust, John Deere Harvester Works initiated a five-day summit – the last two days of which were focused exclusively on what they called “tactical implementation.” Participants selected 10 projects that they believed were most critically important. Then, to their surprise, they began working with one another right there in the Summit to plan, line up resources, and initiate the projects. As consultant Jim Ludema says, “This immediate, concrete support reversed over 20 years of history by showing that management was serious about involving the whole system in the changes. In response, employees invested huge amounts of knowledge and creativity into finding innovative solutions.” As a result, the plant reduced its new product cycle time from 5 to 3 years and gained millions in new market share.

When people are truly free to act with support, their contributions are profound and their learnings sometimes surprising. Tina LaGrange at Hunter Douglas shows us that this freedom liberates individual and organizational power – even when the intended actions fail to reach fruition:

My co-workers and I worked hard to make the case for and create a cross-training program. It was up and running and ready for implementation, and then . . . *nobody signed up!!!*

I was deeply disappointed – but ultimately OK. In the end, the only thing I really accomplished was getting an answer: people simply weren't that

**This document may be reproduced only with written permission from both the publisher and the authors.**

interested. But an answer was a big thing. It meant that I had the power to get an answer.

### ***Freedom to be Positive***

In organizations today, it is simply not the norm to have fun, be happy, or be positive. Despite the pain it causes, time and again people allow themselves to be swept away in collective currents of negativity. A long-term employee of an organization mired in deficit discourse shared with dismay: “I have ulcers because of this negative thinking and talking. Every day I come to work and hear nothing but complaints and criticism and blaming. I hate coming to work.”

In contrast, Appreciative Inquiry is a bold invitation to be positive. To be positive is more than a freedom. It is a prescription implicit in the process of Appreciative Inquiry. You simply can’t participate in an appreciative inquiry without focusing on what is positive, what gives life, and what constitutes the positive core.

Over and over again, people tell us that Appreciative Inquiry works, in part, because it gives people the Freedom to be Positive. In the words of someone who first learned about the practice, “The power of Appreciative Inquiry comes, in part, from the permission it gives employees to feel positive and be proud of their working experiences.”

People whose dispositions are basically upbeat are the first to celebrate the Freedom to be Positive. But the effect of Appreciative Inquiry is so strong and powerful that it can even transform deficit discourse and negative thinking. In the words of one employee:

I am a very positive thinker, so this suits me very well. But I believe this process is powerful enough to influence all of the staff – not just those of us who are already this way.

This Freedom to be Positive impacts people’s the home life, as well as their time at work. One employee described what happened when she felt free to be positive shared Appreciative Inquiry with her children, “It worked at home with my kids. It helped me get them thinking positive, thinking things through for themselves, and getting what they want.” And Rinda Becker, an Executive Secretary, told us that her use of Appreciative Inquiry on the occasion of her 30<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary led to “one of the most insightful and meaningful conversations my husband and I have ever had.”

How odd to think that people need permission to be positive. And yet so it is today, in organization after organization. In its fully affirmative stance, Appreciative Inquiry is a radical departure: a true revolution in positive change.

### **In Conclusion: The Six Freedoms and the Liberation of Power**

**This document may be reproduced only with written permission from both the publisher and the authors.**

Throughout this paper, we've described how the Six Freedoms create fertile ground for the liberation of individual and organizational power. Many of these Six Freedoms are familiar conditions, known by a variety of names. Many are woven into the fabric of our most valued approaches to organizational change.

Given the profound effect that these conditions have on people's perceptions of their power in an organizational context, we ask ourselves a question. Do those initiatives that offer people *multiple freedoms* have a more profound and sustained effect? Does it take a *combination* of freedoms, experienced over time, to liberate the power in an entire organization or community?

We believe that Appreciative Inquiry works, in part, because it unleashes *all of the Six Freedoms*, over the course of just one complete 4-D Cycle. It creates a surge of power and energy that, once liberated, won't be re-contained. A supervisor at Hunter Douglas says, "As people tried and got results, they gained confidence. That led to five times as much input, and the desire to get more involved." In short, the liberation of power, through an Appreciative Inquiry process, creates a self-perpetuating momentum for positive change.

**This document may be reproduced only with written permission from both the publisher and the authors.**