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4 **WITH OUR QUESTIONS WE MAKE**
5
6 **THE WORLD**
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11 David L. Cooperrider
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14 **ABSTRACT**
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16 *Appreciative inquiry is built upon recognition of the profound power of*
17 *questions in shaping our worlds; a power invoked by the phrase, “questions*
18 *are fateful.” The goal of this chapter is to provide conceptual and practical*
19 *answers to this question. We seek to enrich and contribute to the field of*
20 *appreciative inquiry through expanded ways of thinking about inquiry and*
21 *the generation of questions. We begin by considering how questions influence*
22 *how we think, behave, and relate. How do questions affect outcomes?*
23 *We examine the nature of thinking as intrinsically a question and answer*
24 *process and highlight the vital role of “QuestionThinking” for creating new*
25 *possibilities. We present the Learner-Judger Mindset Model, which provides*
26 *distinctions for strengthening the spirit of inquiry in constructing questions.*
27 *Then we examine how appreciative inquiry practitioners can take advantage*
28 *of the distinctions and practices of QuestionThinking using the Mindset*
29 *Model. Finally, we provide practical question-centered practices that can lead*
30 *to positive new futures for ourselves and the individuals and organizations*
31 *we serve.*
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INTRODUCTION

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3 Appreciative inquiry is built upon recognition of the profound power of questions
4 in shaping our worlds; a power invoked by the phrase, “questions are fateful.” In
5 alignment with this realization, appreciative inquiry grows out of a deep-rooted
6 commitment to using the forging power of questions to transform individuals,
7 organizations, and the world. That commitment grows out of the realization that
8 “. . . inquiry and change are a simultaneous moment” (Cooperrider, 2000). So
9 we wonder, “*What kinds of questions can optimize our inquiry and contribute to*
10 *catalyzing transformational change?*”

11 The goal of this chapter is to provide conceptual and practical answers to this
12 question. We seek to enrich and contribute to the field of appreciative inquiry
13 through expanded ways of thinking about inquiry and the generation of questions.
14 We begin by considering how questions influence how we think, behave, and
15 relate. How do questions affect outcomes? We examine the nature of thinking
16 as intrinsically a question and answer process and highlight the vital role of
17 “QuestionThinking” for creating new possibilities. We present the Learner-Judger
18 Mindset Model, which provides distinctions for strengthening the spirit of inquiry
19 in constructing questions. Then we examine how appreciative inquiry practitioners
20 can take advantage of the distinctions and practices of QuestionThinking using the
21 Mindset Model. Finally, we provide practical question-centered practices that can
22 lead to positive new futures for ourselves and the individuals and organizations
23 we serve.

24 This chapter grew out of the authors’ recognition that the presuppositions,
25 practices, and visions of Appreciative Inquiry and Question Thinking were highly
26 complementary. Coming from the distinct fields of organizational development
27 and clinical psychology, we discovered a shared love for the world-shaping role
28 of language and questions. We see appreciative questions as potent vehicles for
29 world benefit. Therefore, we set out to explore how integrating our experiences,
30 insights, and commitments might make a meaningful contribution to constructive
31 discourse for building the kind of world we want to inhabit and leave as a legacy
32 to our children.

33 To fulfill the twin goals of expanding our understanding about inquiry and
34 providing question construction practices, we first offer a brief review of some
35 challenges inherent in these two tasks. Questions are explicit and ephemeral,
36 ordinary and mysterious. Questions offer tools to work with and simultaneously
37 the material from which new construction occurs. Questions are intrinsically
38 co-created since they require both asker and listener to construct meaning. Some
39 questions are provocative and initiate introspection; these questions may push us
40 into new territories.

1 For a variety of reasons, most people, to one degree or another, resist asking
2 or answering questions. This resistance is further exacerbated by the fact that
3 questioning skills are rarely taught and we assume we should already know
4 how to be expert questioners. The end result is that most people develop few
5 explicit questioning skills. Even so, it is important to note that there are numerous
6 practices and mindsets available for developing such skills.

8 9 **LANGUAGE, REALITY, AND THE** 10 **POWER OF QUESTIONS**

11
12 The subject of question asking is primary and universal; it is fundamental to any
13 consideration about the ways we human beings perceive, think, feel, and make
14 meaning. Questions are also at the core of how we listen, behave, and relate
15 – as individuals and in organizations. Virtually everything we think and do
16 is generated by questions. In this sense, questions exert a gravitational pull,
17 compelling engagement, in a manner quite similar to the impulse of wanting
18 to close a gestalt. We crave completion. To extract meaning from our lives, we
19 continuously ask ourselves questions such as: “*What happened?*” “*Why is it*
20 *happening?*” and “*What is going to happen?*”

21 Because questions are fundamentally related to action and reflection, they
22 spark and direct attention, energy, and effort. They are at the heart of the evolving
23 forms our lives assume. Author Neil Postman instructs us that, “. . . all the answers
24 we ever get are responses to questions. The questions may not be evident to us,
25 especially in everyday affairs, but they are there nonetheless, doing their work.
26 *Their work, of course, is to design the form that our knowledge will take and*
27 *therefore to determine the direction of our actions*” (Postman, 1976, p. 144; italics
28 added). We might say then, that the shape of our lives at any moment represents
29 the cumulative answers to all the foreground and background questions we’ve ever
30 asked ourselves and others.

31 Philosopher Martin Heidegger noted that “Language [is] the house of
32 Being . . .” In this context, we consider questions as the primary means from which
33 doing, accomplishing, and creating change are catalyzed to action. Moreover, if
34 language informs the structures of reality, then questions inform the structure of
35 language. Therefore, we think of questions as the fundamental linguistic tools with
36 which we construct our worlds. Answers to questions such as, “*What’s wrong?*”
37 or “*Who’s to blame?*” lead to a world quite distinct from that which emerges from
38 questions such as, “*What’s right?*” and “*How can we build on these strengths?*”

39 Questions arise from our relationships with ourselves, others, and the world
40 around us. In fact, interpersonal questions are world-shaping precisely because

1 they are, in essence, co-constructed. Externalized questions presuppose both a
2 question *asker* and *receiver* (the listener). It is through listening and receiving
3 that the interrogative sentence actually becomes a question. Professor Chris
4 Argyris has defined communication as “a double loop of shared understanding.”
5 He highlights the role of the sender (asker) and receiver (listener) in all forms of
6 meaning making.

7 Furthermore, we listen to ourselves, others, and the world around us through
8 internal questions that are usually implicit. Depending on whether I listen to you
9 through the question “*What is valuable about what she’s saying?*” or “*Why is*
10 *she wasting my time?*” I will hear very different messages. This perception about
11 listening underscores the sense that questions are always co-constructed. Both the
12 questions the listener forms in her mind, and the questions the speaker asks, are
13 fateful. This imbedded, dynamic relationship can be likened to a linguistic dance
14 in which we build our worlds together.

15 Recognizing the structure and components of this dance is fundamental to our
16 ability to choreograph it. Just as no dance is separate from the dancer, there is
17 no question separate from the asker or the mindset from which the question has
18 emerged. The recognition that we might be listening, either to ourselves or others,
19 through limiting questions, gives us the distinctions and the impetus to search for
20 new and hopefully more effective questions to guide our listening. We would then
21 design these new questions with underlying assumptions that are more life giving,
22 generous, and expansive. Our goal would be to create an expanded repertoire of
23 possible interactions and outcomes.

24 Every new product, process, service, and relationship was catalyzed by a new
25 question. The theory of relativity stemmed from a question Albert Einstein asked
26 himself as an adolescent when he wondered, “*What would the universe look like if*
27 *I were riding on the end of a beam of light at the speed of light?*” An unanticipated
28 future can only occur in response to new, unexpected questions. That future begins
29 in our thinking, represented by the questions we ask ourselves. In asking himself
30 a genuinely novel question, and being willing to receive surprising answers,
31 Einstein expanded humanity’s understanding of the universe, which allowed us
32 to think in completely new ways.

33 Since we build our worlds through the questions we ask, opening new worlds
34 requires asking new questions. We mean questions that are qualitatively and
35 profoundly different, ones that leap over old boundaries of thinking and land us
36 in new paradigms. Paradigm shifts are catalyzed *when questions asked inside*
37 *the current paradigm can only be answered from outside of it* (Goldberg, 1998).
38 A truly expansive, transformational, paradigm-altering question is one to which
39 the answer is not yet known. The poet, Rumi, pointed to the possibility of
40

1 landing in a new paradigm outside of polarized, oppositional right/wrong thinking
2 when he wrote:

3

4 Out beyond ideas of wrong doing and right doing, there is a field.
5 I'll meet you there.

6

7

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QUESTIONTHINKING: THINKING AS A QUESTION AND ANSWER PROCESS

9

10

11 It is natural to assume that question asking refers only to interpersonal questions,
12 that is, the ones we ask each other. However, we assert this assumption masks the
13 origin of interpersonal questions found in our internal queries, the ones we ask
14 ourselves. Looking deeper, we find that our thoughts can take the form of *both*
15 statements *and* questions. In this sense, we believe that while most people assume
16 that thoughts are internal statements, those statements are, in actuality, answers to
17 preceding implicit or explicit questions. This assumption is embedded in some of
18 the seminal work of cognitive psychology ([Beck, 1979](#)).

19 By acknowledging the operation and ensuing results of internal questions and
20 their relationship to internal statements, we discover important openings for new
21 thinking, new action, and fundamentally new possibilities. We label this under-
22 standing of thinking as a question and answer process, "QuestionThinking," thus
23 distinguishing it from the usual presumption that thoughts are only statements
24 ([Adams, 2003](#)). We might view Question Thinking as reframing Descartes'
25 famous saying, "I think, therefore I am" into, "I question, therefore I am."

26 An assumption of QuestionThinking is that questions operate at the interface
27 of thinking and behavior. In other words, we answer our internal questions with
28 behavior as well as in language. Of the four speech acts ([Flores, 1997](#)), (requests,
29 declarations, assertions, and promises), it is requests (or questions) that are
30 constant catalysts for action. In this sense, external behaviors, as well as internal
31 statements, can be understood as representing answers to background questions,
32 i.e. those prior queries that are usually assumptive, implicit, and silent.

33 Here is an ordinary example demonstrating how behavior responds to internal
34 questions. In making the everyday decision about getting dressed, we ask
35 ourselves a series of questions such as: "*Where am I going today? What's the*
36 *weather? What's appropriate?*" and even "*What's clean?*" Our answers represent
37 our choices, they are *behavioral answers*. Someone got dressed. We might even
38 say they are wearing their answers. If we ask so many questions about something
39 as simple as getting dressed, imagine how many more questions we ask ourselves

40

1 about major life events such as what career to pursue, where to live, or whom
2 to marry!

3 Organizational culture and norms also represent behavioral answers to the tacit
4 questions that shaped them. The same assertions we've made about the impact
5 of questions in guiding individual behavior, we also believe to be descriptive of
6 the ways that implicit and explicit questions lead to organizational behavior and
7 outcomes. By articulating organizational behavior as driven by guiding questions
8 (usually unconsciously), we gain a useful lens for seeing the norms that guide
9 behavior. For example, asking, "How can we optimize our railroad business?" in
10 contrast to, "How can we optimize our transportation business?" would yield quite
11 different responses. In a larger frame, we might recognize that when nomadic
12 societies roamed the earth, their behavior could be understood as answering the
13 question, "*How can we get ourselves to water?*" Both their behavior and history
14 shifted in response to a new implicit question, "*How can we get the water to*
15 *come to us?*"

16 We conclude, therefore, that we first make the world we inhabit in the questions
17 we ask ourselves, that is, in our QuestionThinking. This means that strategic think-
18 ing, problem solving, and decision-making can all be seen as internal question and
19 answer processes. We consider these internal queries as being, by far, the most
20 creative, generative, and world-altering aspect of both internal and interpersonal
21 language. Because the operations and outcomes of questions and statements are
22 profoundly distinct, this never-ending dance of questions and answers provides a
23 widening lens on mental processes and on our perceptions of what is possible. It
24 also deepens our appreciation for the Buddha who, in his boundless wisdom, is
25 reputed to have said, "With our thoughts we make the world."
26
27

28 **THE LEARNER-JUDGER MINDSET MODEL**

29
30 Our mindsets frame the way we perceive, experience, and interact with the
31 world. These frames of mind simultaneously "program" what we believe to be
32 our personal limitations as well as possibilities. They define the parameters of
33 our actions and interactions. As a consequence, our mindsets implicitly and
34 explicitly affect what happens in our lives. Hundreds of studies on the placebo and
35 Pygmalion effects demonstrate the impact of belief and attribution on self-image,
36 behavior, and outcomes.

37 A practical way to think about mindsets is to imagine them as defined by
38 particular kinds of internal questions. The questions we ask ourselves instruct
39 us about where to put our attention, what to expect, how to behave, and how to
40 relate. Our internal questions and the mindsets from which they are asked are

1 intermingled. In this sense, the questions we ask ourselves and others are *literally*
2 fateful; they lead to the texture and form of our experiences, possibilities, and
3 results in life.

4 The distinctions elaborated by the Learner-Judger Mindset Model and Learner-
5 Judger questions provide a practical way to observe, categorize, and understand
6 thinking, feeling, and ensuing behavior. The model illustrates that each of us
7 continuously operates from these distinct mindsets. At any given moment one
8 of these mindsets is activated in the foreground while the other waits in the
9

J U D G E R
M I N D S E T

- Human nature
- Reactive and automatic
- Know-it-already
- Judgmental and intolerant
- Inflexible and rigid
- Righteous; criticizes
- Fears differences
- Own point of view only
- Relationships are win-lose
- Feedback seen as rejection
- Debate
- Own construction
- Seeks to attack or defend
- Possibilities limited
- *Primary mood: protective*

JUDGER QUESTIONS

- What's wrong?
- Who's to blame?
- How can I be in control?
- How could I lose?
- How could I get hurt?
- Why bother?

L E A R N E R
M I N D S E T

- Human spirit
- Responsive and reflective
- Appreciates not-knowing
- Accepting and supportive
- Flexible and adaptive
- Inquiring; critiques
- Values differences
- Multiple perspectives
- Relationships are win-win
- Feedback seen as helpful
- Dialogue
- Co-construction
- Seeks to resolve and create
- Possibilities unlimited
- *Primary mood: curious*

LEARNER QUESTIONS

- What's right?
- What am I responsible for?
- What are my choices?
- What's useful about this?
- What can I learn?
- What's the other person thinking, feeling, needing?
- What's possible?

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Fig. 1. Learner-Judger Mindset Model.

1 background. In this respect, we are each a dynamic, interactive, and complex
2 combination of two distinct ways of being that lead to very different ways of
3 thinking, acting, and relating (Fig. 1).

4 We consider each of these mindsets as an archetype within which particular
5 characteristics, ways of being, and verbal and non-verbal expressions are clustered.
6 The characteristics of each column are (loosely) internally consistent and
7 self-referring. The utility of the model requires that we recognize that these are
8 just *mindsets*, not fixed roles or permanent attributions. Nobody is purely Judger
9 or Learner.

10 The Mindset Model, with its focus on internal questions as the starting place
11 for our behaviors, interactions, and outcomes holds vital implications for our
12 life orientation, attitudes, skill sets, and behavior. Consciously choosing our frame
13 of mind is a powerful act, as Albert Einstein implied when he said, “There are
14 only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other
15 is as though everything is a miracle.” In this sense, we can think of questions as
16 leading to answers that are contracting, expanding, or neutral. Inherently limiting
17 internal questions lead to a limited repertoire of possible answers. Expansionist
18 affirmative questions open the door of potential.

19 The Learner-Judger Mindset Model is intended to help build our ability to
20 observe our own thinking and behavior. The power of intentional observation lies
21 in stimulating higher-level cognitive capacities, and strengthening our “emotional
22 intelligence.” We use this awareness and skill to continuously help bring about
23 transformative shifts from the “Judger” position into the “Learner” one where
24 new ways of being, thinking, behaving, and relating become possible. With
25 observation and intention we are empowered to choose which mindset to inhabit
26 and live from – in every moment.

27 28 29 **EXPLORING LEARNER-JUDGER MINDSETS**

30
31 The deeper our understanding of these two mindsets, the more empowered
32 we become to observe ourselves, question our questions (both the internal and
33 interpersonal ones), and make life-affirming question-based choices. When we
34 operate from our Learner mindset our mood is one of acceptance of self and
35 others. We value “not knowing” and come from a place of genuine curiosity that
36 opens us to be flexible and responsive to life’s circumstances. We are positioned
37 to think strategically, seeking opportunities and possibilities. Our Learner
38 mindset allows us to be empathic. We can see the world from others’ points of
39 view. Our Learner mindset allows us to live at the core of our most elevated
40 human spirit.

1 Learner relationships are win-win. From this place we focus on connecting,
2 learning, resolving, and creating. Learner mindset questions are typically life
3 giving, appreciative, and energizing. These questions are grounded in optimism,
4 and presuppose new possibilities, sufficient resources, and a future shaped by
5 hope. The title of Martin Buber's classic book, *I and Thou*, points to the empathy,
6 oneness, and sense of connection exemplified in our Learner being.

7 While Learner mindset fosters connection and expansion, Judger mindset
8 promotes separation and contraction. Judger mindset questions are reactive,
9 automatic, and judgmental. They are based on certainty about "knowing" and
10 being right about one's own opinions. They are generated from assumptions
11 of limited options, scarcity, and potential failure. They focus primarily on past
12 problems rather than on new options. When we allow our Judger mindsets
13 to push to the foreground, we simultaneously and unintentionally impede the
14 creativity and freedom required to move us towards fresh possibilities. Judger
15 thinking cannot lead to genuinely positive new futures because its source lies in
16 adherence to old consciousness. The future available from Judger presumptions
17 and questions is limited to a recycled version of past questions and answers.

18 Central to understanding the effect of Judger mindset is the recognition that
19 our judgmental attitudes can be focused either internally or externally. If we
20 focus judgment on *ourselves*, the effects include pessimism, loss of energy,
21 low self-confidence, and feelings of depression. That same judgmental attitude,
22 focused on *others*, leads to blame, anger, hostility, and conflict. That's why Judger
23 questions usually result in win-lose, or lose-lose outcomes, unleashing the fight
24 or flight response. We get relegated to operating from an "attack or defend"
25 paradigm since every utterance is framed as either an attack or a defense. Whether
26 the cognitive, operational focus is on ourselves or others, the Judger orientation,
27 to one degree or another, constrains learning, collaborating, resolving conflict,
28 and creating new possibilities.

29 That said, it is important to hold the Judger mindset as being neither good nor
30 bad, neither positive nor negative. It just is. What we've labeled as "Judger"¹ is
31 simply human nature – for *all* of us. The reason is that the underlying moods of
32 Judger rest in being fearful, protective, and oriented toward survival. It is far too
33 simple to think of Judger mindset as "bad" and Learner mindset as "good." Such
34 dichotomous thinking presupposes an either/or stance while our higher nature as
35 human beings is both/and. We consider our Learner mindset to be the place from
36 which we can construct the most generative, appreciative, life-giving questions.

37 In addition, it is essential to recognize that without awareness, understanding,
38 and *acceptance* of the Judger aspects of ourselves and others, we lose the freedom
39 to continuously choose to return to Learner thinking, being, relating, and behaving.
40 Embracing the shadow allows us to come to wholeness. By recommending that we

1 “embrace our core of rot,” author and consultant Charles Seashore is suggesting
2 that we make friends with our shadow self. When Joseph Campbell enjoins us
3 to recognize that “Where you stumble, there your treasure is” he also implores
4 us to view the consequences of our difficult experiences as potential doorways to
5 learning and liberation. Our Judger self is necessary and valuable because it can
6 become the doorway leading to acceptance of ourselves and empathy for others,
7 thus providing us access to the full range of our humanity.
8
9

10 **A MATTER OF CHOICE**

11
12 The Choice Map is a learning tool that shows the divergent worlds that ensue from
13 of asking either Learner or Judger questions. It illustrates the assertion that we
14 create and then inhabit different worlds depending on the kind of questions we
15 ask. Employing the distinctions of the Learner-Judger Model empowers personal
16 choice and therefore personal power. We make these choices individually as well as
17 collectively. Teams, families and organizations may also be characterized as either
18 primarily Learner or Judger, depending on their attitudes, norms, and behaviors
19 (Fig. 2).

20 There are three aspects of the Choice Map that make it a useful tool for learning
21 and making transformational cognitive and behavioral choices. First, the Choice
22 Map demonstrates that we *always* have choice, moment to moment, even when
23 this is not immediately apparent; with our choices based on the questions we
24 ask ourselves. This empowering recognition reinforces hopefulness. If there is a
25 way to move beyond negative emotions and defeat, then there is always a way
26 to a new, more preferable future. Our job is to move forward by utilizing Learner
27 questions and fueled by Learner intentions. Appreciative inquiry is a continuously
28 available vehicle.

29 Second, the map shows the consequences of traveling the divergent paths
30 of Learner mindset and Judger mindset; they take us to different worlds of
31 relatedness and possibility. Third, the Switching Lane is the practical location of
32 new choices. It is where we find hope, action, and change. In this sense, hope is
33 always alive, always an available possibility because we can ask a “turnaround”
34 question to rescue us from tumbling down the Judger path and landing in the
35 Judger Pit.

36 Choosing to switch from Judger to Learner is a life-affirming decision.
37 Switching questions help us reverse direction and move up to Learner territory.
38 Such questions simultaneously shift moods, allowing us to see solutions and
39 possibilities that would otherwise be invisible. Examples of questions that allow
40 us to step onto the Switching Lane include: “*Am I in Judger? Do I want to go in*

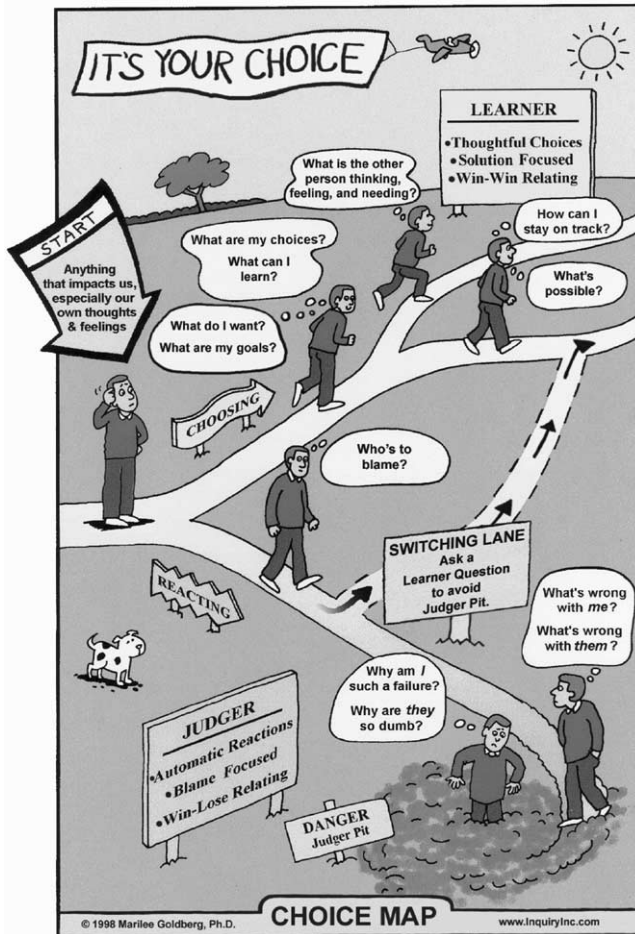


Fig. 2. The Choice Map.

33 *this direction? Will it make the difference I/we want? Where would I rather be?"*
34 *and "What positive possibilities are present?"*

37 APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AND LEARNER MINDSET

39 The intentional Learner mindset is at the heart of appreciative inquiry just as
40 the practices and values of appreciative inquiry rest securely and energetically

1 within this way of being. With appreciative inquiry we choose the strategy of
2 operating from appreciative curiosity. In striving to embody this stance, we begin
3 with intentionally shifting from seeing the problems inherent in situations to
4 recognizing expansive opportunities and challenges. The very words “problem”
5 and “solution” convey built in limitations that the words “challenge” and “puzzle”
6 do not. Problems call for solutions. Solutions suggest a permanent, fixed state.
7 Challenges, on the other hand, invite us to meet them, replicating the dance
8 of co-construction. The vehicle for this attitudinal and perceptual choice is a
9 Learner question, i.e. a question that is unconditionally positive and filled with
10 possibility.

11 In choosing appreciative ways of thinking, feeling, being, and behaving, we
12 must also honor the Judger aspects of ourselves and others, simply because this
13 is our shared human nature. At the same time, we choose a deep commitment to
14 the possibilities inherent only from the Learner position. To resolve this seeming
15 paradox, we advocate *accepting Judger while continuously practicing Learner*.

16 In the quest for transformational questions, the first focus should be on our
17 mindset and intentions as question *askers*, rather than on the question itself.
18 This is where the real action and traction first occur. This is the place from
19 which expansive, paradigm-altering questions are born. This is also consistent
20 with Gandhi’s dictum that, “We must be the change we seek in the world.”
21 So as we get ourselves ready to ask a question, “. . . we should begin with the
22 ‘in’ of inquiry” (Schiller, 1998). In the act of seeking these new appreciative,
23 life-giving questions, the more we maintain, nourish, and operate from our Learner
24 mindsets, the more successful we can be in guiding change, both organizationally
25 and personally.

26 27 28 **APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY, A** 29 **LIFE-CENTRIC PRACTICE** 30

31 Every question has the potential to contract or expand life-centric possibilities.
32 Every question has the potential to damage or enhance a relationship. Our challenge
33 is to couple the wonder and mystery of question asking with the skill and mastery
34 of question construction. The wedding of appreciative inquiry theory and practice
35 to the idea and implementation of Learner mindset and methods become apparent
36 in the life-centric questions that guide each of the 4 D phases. “What gives life?”
37 guides Discovery. “What might be?” and “What is the world calling for?” lead
38 us to Dream. “What can we innovate to create our preferred future?” allows us to
39 Design. “How will we sustain ourselves and others in this transformative cycle?”
40 guide us in the direction of Destiny.

1 Research in appreciative inquiry is intrinsically life-centric. Research is always
2 about questions. “The Questions we ask, the things that we choose to focus
3 on . . . determine what we find. What we find becomes the data and the story out
4 of which we dialogue about and envision the future. And so, the seeds of change
5 are implicit in the very first question we ask.”
6
7

8 **POSITIVE IMAGE; POSITIVE ACTION**

9

10 The theory and practice of appreciative inquiry is relatively new is continuously
11 exploring and investigating, which constantly provides us with new questions
12 and new directions. Qualitative and quantitative research in organizations and
13 at universities is opening new avenues for exploration. We know only a small
14 percentage of what we will discover as practitioners experiment, document, and
15 share their findings. Therefore we operate out of a Learner questioning mode.
16 As we gain skill and learn to “live” as appreciative inquirers, our skill revolves
17 around reframing almost all questions into Learner questions. And our roots
18 in social constructionism invite us to take an open, “not knowing,” and critical
19 stance towards any taken for granted conclusion.

20 Great questions are often ones that invite us to tell a story. Appreciative inquiry
21 is based in the stories we tell about ourselves and others, stories that spark the
22 imagination and give us the essence of who we are and what our purpose is
23 in the world. Appreciative questions call forth appreciative stories of wonder,
24 transformation, and guidance. At best they are Learner stories. It is this spirit that
25 Antoine de Saint-Exubery refers to when he said, “If you want to build a ship
26 then don’t drum up men to gather wood, give orders, and divide the work. Rather
27 teach them to yearn for the far and endless sea.”

28 In the quest for organizational transformation, we might first look to the ques-
29 tions the organization is already answering in its implicit and explicit behavior.
30 Oftentimes, these questions can be discovered in the stories that abound in the
31 organization. Consider what kind of organization might result from a guiding
32 question such as, “*How can we produce long-term profitability while adhering*
33 *to our positive core values?*” in contrast to one that answers this question, “*What*
34 *must we do in order to make our predictions for the next quarter?*” What kind of
35 organization might result from primary guiding questions such as, “*How can we*
36 *best serve our customers?*” in contrast to one that primarily focuses on a question
37 such as, “*How can we please stockholders?*”

38 Transformation in organizations will most predictably and efficiently follow a
39 transformation in the questions that animate it. The field of appreciative inquiry is
40 replete with such stories of “before and after” questions. Here are several eloquent

1 examples of such success stories, each of which resulted in remarkable, positive
2 change. In each of these situations, one can clearly see how the guiding question
3 would direct thinking, behavior, and results, as well as the story the organization
4 and others would tell about it.

5 Lead consultant Diana Whitney helped British Airways address a major
6 concern by shifting their question from “How can we have less lost baggage?” to
7 “How can we create an exceptional arrival experience?” Lead consultant Marjorie
8 Schiller served Avon Mexico in ameliorating a diversity issue by switching their
9 question from “How can we correct the current situation of too few woman
10 corporate officers?” to “What will it take to have men and women involved at every
11 level of organizational decision-making?” She also helped the West Springfield
12 Public Schools in Massachusetts alter their question from “How can we have
13 fewer students failing state mandated tests?” to “How can we be the school where
14 everyone smiles?”

17 THE ART OF THE TRANSFORMATIONAL QUESTION

18
19 A question calls forth that which does not yet exist (Goldberg, 1998). Creating
20 world-opening new queries is the central mandate for practitioners of appreciative
21 inquiry. In our quest for discovering paradigm-shifting questions, a partnership
22 of our creative and logical selves catalyzes the most imaginative and positive
23 possibilities. Mozart is said to have asked, “*What would music sound like if the*
24 *notes loved each other?*” This is not a question that one can construct in a logical,
25 linear manner! You just can’t get there from here. Such questions arrive in a flash
26 and require that we be open to receiving them.

27 Constructing questions, on the other hand, requires a logical, conscious process.
28 It is much like building a structure by following a blueprint that prescribes the
29 steps along the way. It calls for linear thinking. But transformation does not
30 occur from following a set of logical plans. Rather, it is evident in the inspiration
31 and imagination that *preceded* the blueprint. Using an architectural metaphor, a
32 transformed way of conceptualizing and configuring space would appear *first as*
33 *an answer to a paradigm-shifting question of the architect*. Perhaps Frank Lloyd
34 Wright asked himself a breakthrough question like, “*What’s a unique way to*
35 *conceptualize and configure a ‘container’ of light and space for human beings*
36 *to inhabit?*”

37 We believe that the spirit of inquiry, along with specific guiding inquiry
38 practices, generates the most positive, world-creating questions. Since the spirit
39 of inquiry animates our creative selves, this is where we first turn attention in
40 this section. Next we provide question construction practices that can be used,

1 both individually and collaboratively. Finally, we propose an inquiry format for
 2 “questioning our questions” to help assess the transformational potential inherent
 3 in new queries.

4 5 6 *Cultivating the Spirit of Inquiry* 7

8 Everything that serves to infuse what OD has referred to as the “spirit of inquiry”
 9 emanates from experiences of awe, curiosity, veneration, surprise, delight,
 10 amazement, and child-like wonder. We believe that OD practitioners need to
 11 reclaim and aspire to openness, availability, epistemological humility, the ability
 12 to admire, to be surprised, to be inspired, and to inquire into our valued and
 13 possible worlds. We are naturally more effective when we maintain the spirit of
 14 inquiry of the everlasting beginner (*Cooperrider, child as agent of inquiry*).
 15 “Beginners mind” lives in a stance of innocent “not knowing.” The President and
 16 CEO of the Fetzer Institute, Dr. Tom Inui has a reputation for his “delight in the
 17 unknown” and the way he models “not knowing” as the leader of this national
 18 philanthropic organization (*Appreciative Leaders: In the Eye of the Beholder*
 19 Schiller, 2001). The more we intentionally place ourselves in that position of open
 20 wondering, the more appreciative and spacious our questions can naturally be.

21 While we can’t force this spirit, we can invite it. We can be an opening, a
 22 clearing, where such questions can presence themselves. Such world-altering
 23 questions rarely arrive in the rushing demands of everyday life. They may occur
 24 when we’re in the shower, or on a walk, or meditating. When we “call for”
 25 transformational questions, we must be patient and still, allowing time for perco-
 26 lating, mulling, gestating, and reflecting. Here are some sample self-queries for
 27 inviting such queries.

- 28
- 29 • How can I cultivate curiosity, stillness, and spaciousness?
- 30 • Who must I be to attract beautiful new questions?
- 31 • What practices can I use to create a receptive space in myself?

32 Learner mindset is firmly anchored in valuing the openness of not knowing, in
 33 being a clearing for possibility. Centering ourselves in Learner mindset helps
 34 us operate with the curiosity, flexibility, acceptance, and openness required for
 35 truly novel questions to show up. The following list of self-questions is meant to
 36 encourage the activity of Learner mindset. The list is not inclusive and we suggest
 37 you add others that inspire you.

- 38
- 39 • Am I in a calm, centered, open Learner place?
- 40 • Is there any Judger mischief going on that could inhibit curiosity or possibility?

- 1 • What assumptions might I be making?
- 2 • Am I being honest? Am I missing or avoiding anything?
- 3 • Can I move beyond self-interest to see the larger picture and serve others?
- 4 • Am I calling for questions with an open heart, an open mind, and positive
- 5 commitment?

7 8 *Practices for Constructing Questions*

9
10 All communication begins with intention, regardless of whether the individual is
11 aware of his or her goals. The three practices described below share a background
12 question, “What do I want my question to accomplish?” This question is easy to
13 overlook either because it appears obvious or because it feels like too much trouble.
14 Perhaps it seems too time-consuming to articulate the answers. Here is our caution:
15 to take question generation seriously, we must approach it as a *discipline*. This
16 means taking the time to consider and examine each question, especially the ones
17 we might want to avoid, either because they make us uncomfortable or because
18 we might not welcome the answer.

19 The questions in each of these three practices are phrased in the first person
20 singular (I/me). However, in the spirit of co-construction, we encourage you to
21 also ask them in the plural (we/our). So, for example, we get, “What do *we* want
22 *our* question(s) to accomplish?” We suggest you add queries that are particularly
23 relevant to your particular goals. The answers to each of these questions will
24 suggest follow-up questions and further responses to ponder and act upon.

- 25 (1) *Reframing*. In order to reframe something, one must first understand and
26 articulate the original frame, including the presuppositions that hold it in
27 place. In other words, when searching for powerful, positive, life-giving
28 questions, we must first make explicit any implicit frame we wish to transcend.
29 The process can go like this:
- 30 (a) First, make explicit the original question, “frame,” or limitation one
31 wishes to transcend.
 - 32 (b) Next, make your goals for the new question explicit. What do you want
33 the new question to accomplish? What new possibilities do you intend
34 for the reframed question to open or point to?
 - 35 (c) Then, write down new questions as they occur to you (perhaps using
36 Q-storming, which is described below).
 - 37 (d) Finally, assess each new question (see below for some criteria questions).
- 38 (2) *Strawman Questions*. To illustrate question writing in workshops, we provide
39 a good “strawman” question, one that we have already authored. Then we ask
40 participants to work together in teams to make the question even better. The

1 original questions are always enhanced by the workshop participants' ability
2 to more powerfully rewrite them. Just as fine old wood needs to be buffed
3 and shined, so do questions need to be cared for and nurtured. Moreover,
4 each time we alter the questions, we also alter the consciousness that allows
5 us to see, design, and unleash even deeper and more transformative possible
6 new ones. Appreciative Learner question development requires continual
7 reconsideration (Schiller, 1997).

- 8 (3) *Q-Storming*. Q-storming is a collaborative QuestionThinking exercise. It is
9 like brainstorming, but with an important difference. It seeks new questions,
10 *not* answers, suggestions, or ideas. Because this is a QuestionThinking
11 exercise, the questions sought must be stated in the first person singular; these
12 are questions for the individual to ask him or herself, *not* to ask others.

13 The premise is that “a question not asked is a door not opened” (Goldberg, 1998).
14 New possibilities lie behind those doors, which can best be unlocked with the
15 key of a new question. The goal, therefore, is to generate and collect as many
16 novel questions as possible. The more new questions, the more new doors may
17 be opened, with the promise of more imaginative and potentially transformative
18 new possibilities laying in wait.

19 The exercise begins when an individual requests some collaborative Question-
20 Thinking to help with a situation in which he or she feels stuck or frustrated.
21 The facilitator asks for the volunteer to describe the situation along with his or
22 her goals. Then the Q-Storming begins. Scribes capture each new question and
23 give them to so the volunteer at the end of the exercise. In a fifteen-minute period
24 we often generate fifty or more questions, any one of which could be the key to
25 open new possibilities. The exercise ends when the volunteer reports having been
26 gifted with questions that open new possibilities. We know we've struck gold
27 when he or she exclaims with wonder, “I've never thought of that before.”

28 With this harvest of questions in hand, the individual is encouraged to later
29 cluster, prioritize, and sequence the question list. Reworking and reconfiguring
30 promotes the discipline of considering each question seriously. Q-Storming can
31 be done with a group, with another individual, and even alone by “calling for”
32 new questions and writing down what “arrives.”
33

34 *Questioning Our Questions*

35
36
37 Regardless of how we generated our new questions, we still must assess which
38 ones are more likely to lead to the direction and futures we seek to create. Some
39 of the new questions will be obviously transformative – one experiences an “aha”
40 merely upon hearing them. Other questions may be helpful, even though the “earth

1 didn't move under our feet" in response to them. In either case, it is important to
2 engage in a discipline of assessing the possibilities suggested by the questions.

3 What we thought was a wonderful question might seem unclear or repetitive
4 for dialogue partners. The goal of question generating is not simply to write a
5 *beautiful* question. Rather, it is to *write a great question that calls something new*
6 *into existence*. It is as simple as that. Since questions are always contextual, one
7 that may seem inadequate today may become the perfect opening tomorrow, or
8 with a different group, or at a different stage in a group's development. Here are
9 some criteria questions with which to consider the new question crop:

- 10 • Is this question expansive and bold?
- 11 • Does the question access the heart, the head, and the hands?
- 12 • Am I uplifted, energized, inspired by this question?
- 13 • Is this question life affirming?
- 14 • Could this question lead to unforeseen answers?
- 15 • Am I surprised by this question? Does it provoke an "ah ha?"
- 16 • Does this question succeed in reaching a transcending view?

19 **CONCLUSION: THE SPIRIT OF INQUIRY**

21 The solution, like all solutions to apparent contradictions, lies in moving away from the opposi-
22 tion and changing the nature of the question, to embrace a broader context. Maturana and Varela

23
24 The spirit of inquiry is animated by awe, wonder, and curiosity. When infused with
25 its grace, we live "in the zone" or the "flow state" of creativity for its own sake
26 (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In those moments, discovery and learning are all that
27 exist. In the joy of exploration, we succeed in temporarily suspending attachments
28 to old answers, particular outcomes, or thinking that we already know. This is the
29 fertile void from which transformation becomes a vibrant possibility. It is from an
30 Appreciative Learner stance that the most startling, innovative, and life-affirming
31 new questions and possibilities can arise. This is the heart of appreciative inquiry.

32 Through our questions we can create the world we desire but this can happen
33 only when we cultivate the spirit of inquiry and use it to enliven specific question
34 construction practices. In this way, we become strategically and continuously
35 more skillful in spontaneously generating Appreciative Learner questions. By
36 becoming exemplars for the richness of not-knowing we embody the courage
37 to transcend question reluctance in ourselves and others. Through questions we
38 access our own innate wonder and creativity. We believe that this wonder-full
39 Appreciative Learner mode of inquiry provides the context and skills for inspiring,
40 mobilizing, and sustaining transformative human system change.

SIDEBAR: A TOOL FOR LEARNING

Experiencing Learner and Judger Mindsets

Look at the Mindset Model and slowly read all the questions in the Judger column. Notice how these questions affect your physical and emotional reactions. Now take a deep breath, release those feelings, and slowly read the questions from the Learner column. Notice whether you are affected differently after experiencing the Learner questions. Which set of questions makes you feel uplifted or depressed, energized or deflated, optimistic or pessimistic?

When this structured experience is introduced in workshops, we always begin with Judger mindset and nearly everyone reports some feeling of discomfort. Some people even unconsciously hold their breath when Judger questions are read. Participants report that Judger questions evoke feelings of depression and depletion. Some of their comments include feeling out of control, lost, pessimistic, fearful, despairing, helpless, and hopeless. In contrast, Learner questions usually access for them feelings of energy, optimism, hopefulness, openness, enthusiasm, control, and proactively looking for solutions and possibilities. One individual noted, “When I’m looking with Learner eyes, I can be hopeful about the future.”

Workshop participants recognize that, in just a few moments, asking either Learner or Judger questions has the effect of putting them in distinctly different moods. Since questions can be asked from either stance, they realize that it was not the actual “question sentence” that impacted them so strongly. Rather, it was the presuppositions encoded in the questions. In other words, “coming from” either Learner or Judger has a programming effect on the world of experience and possibility made available.

NOTE

1. The term “Judger,” as we use it here, is not related to how it is used in the Myers Briggs Type Indicator. There, the term points to a preference for closure; here the term references judgmental attitudes and behaviors.

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