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Facilitating organizations to dance with the complex "logic of life": spinning with paradoxes in regenerative appreciative inquiry summits

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Abstract

Purpose – Organizations will be key to realizing the "transformative change for humanity" now being called for. However, the complexity calls for new ways of facilitating change and organizational learning; it also calls for moving beyond sustainability to develop practices that restore and regenerate the world in which we live. Above all, it calls for the development of new frameworks, practices, mindset and capabilities to hold space for and facilitate such transformation, to dance with the "Logic of Life." The purpose of this study is to contribute to advancing the current leading frameworks and practices of facilitating learning and development towards the enabling of regenerative transformative change in organizations and society.

Design/methodology/approach – This study is based on an exploratory qualitative analysis of a facilitation prototype that expands the current framework and practice of Appreciative Inquiry Summits toward regeneration.

Findings – This study presents four paradoxes of regenerative facilitation to guide the dance for life in complex ecosystems. It also identifies that the dance needs to be widened, towards inviting more frequently the ends of the four paradoxes noted as regenerative, negative emotions, inner and more-than-human.

Originality/value – This study explores the intersection of practices and frameworks for facilitating complexity with principles from regenerative leadership and complexity theory, potentially making an

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important contribution to the urgent and widespread need to facilitate a regenerative transformative change for humanity, society and our organizations.

Keywords Sustainable development, Regenerative development, Facilitation, Regenerative leadership, Appreciative inquiry, Dialogic organization development, Complexity, Learning organizations

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In a recent article in the journal *BioScience* (Ripple et al., 2021), 14,000 scientists said, "We are asking for a transformative change for humanity." Our planet and youth are asking us the same. At their current pace, efforts to achieve environmental sustainability will not succeed. Even with net zero emissions, climate change effects will be disastrous (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023). The real challenge, then, is to move beyond sustainability to develop practices that restore and regenerate the world in which we live. In doing so, a leap into what Kegan & Lahey (2016) call "Deliberately Developmental Organizations" (DDOs), and practices such as regenerative circles (Lilja, Snyder, & Sten, 2022), will be decisive. This requires an evolution toward a society and organizations that do not only learn to reduce harm but are in a life-affirming regenerative dance with the complex logic of life. In relation to the field of organization development (OD), Cooperrider & Godwin (2022, p. 7) recently stated that "Ending the climate emergency and crossing the threshold to planetary-scale regeneration – and doing so within two decades – involves mobilizing change capacity at scales we have never seen."

What appears to be at the core of mobilizing such a capacity for change is the development of practices and frameworks that are fitted to the inherent complexity of the challenges and contexts that lie ahead (see, e.g. Pradhan, Costa, Rybski, Lucht, & Kropp, 2017). Peter Senge (quoted in Reese, 2020) recently stated this in the following terms: "For any real change to occur, it will require unprecedented levels of collaboration, collaboration commensurate with the complexity of the system itself" (p. 15).

The term "complexity" then refers to the rich interconnectivity seen all over the living world, meaning that when things interact they change one another in unexpected and irreversible ways (Cilliers, 1998; Snyder, Acker-Hocevar, & Snyder, 2008). The underlying shift of facilitation then becomes a shift away from prediction and control to appropriate participation. It can be described as a shift into a "responsive dance with change" (Wahl, 2016, p. 138) or, as Meadows (2001) put it, "dancing with systems." How to successfully facilitate such a regenerative dance with complex ecosystems is still an underexplored area of research, emerging within several research areas that potentially could intersect. An intersection that this article aims to contribute to.

Recent ideas and practices connected to OD claim that organizations need to be managed as complex adaptive systems rather than as intricate controlled machines (Edmondson, 2012; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). Some also claim that, in complex contexts, leadership needs to create space for emergence in which all stakeholders in the system are engaged to come up with multiple ideas and collectively put them into action by experiment–learn–amplify processes (Snowden & Boone, 2007). The type of leadership best fit for complex contexts is also been elaborated in frameworks concerning "generative leadership" (Bushe, 2019; Bushe & Marshak, 2015). Such leadership includes shifting the mindset into dialogic OD,

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where issues or challenges are reframed into compelling purposes that capture stakeholder attention and motivate them to self-organize and initiate innovative actions. Part of facilitation then becomes to closely sense and track what takes place, establish feedback loops, support promising initiatives, remove barriers and spread what is being learned (Bushe & Marshak, 2015). As part of dialogic OD, the frameworks and practices of Appreciative Inquiry, with their focus on what gives life, are now also increasingly moving toward trying to place all of life at the center of inquiry (Cooperrider & Selian, 2021; Kabalt, 2023).

Much in parallel, there is currently a growing stream of research and frameworks around regenerative cultures and regenerative leadership (Hutchins & Storm, 2019; Wahl, 2016). Contributions that highlight a wide spectrum of practices and a fundamental shift into a new paradigm of leadership are now seen in, for example, "nature's wisdom," as elaborated by Hutchins (2022), and the "Logic of Life," together with associated principles put forth by Hutchins & Storm (2019).

Given this rich multitude of emerging practices and frameworks with the potential to strengthen the facilitation of the urgent complex and transformative changes that lie ahead, it is critical to explore how these might be combined, integrated and ultimately be put into practice. How might we, for example, continue to advance current leading practice, in terms of Appreciative Inquiry, into even more of a powerful generative practice of relevance to the regenerative transformative change ahead?

The purpose of this article is to contribute to advancing our current leading frameworks and practices of facilitating learning and development towards the enabling of regenerative transformative change in organizations and society. Thus, this article focuses on the following research question:

RQ1. How might the traditional Appreciative Inquiry Summit design be refined to better facilitate a regenerative transformative change in organizations?

Dancing with the complex logic of life

When looking deeper into various frameworks and practices for regenerative and sustainable facilitation, it is striking that *dancing* frequently occurs as a key term. Donella Meadows (2001, pp. 58-59) perhaps expressed it most clearly:

> We can't impose our will upon a system. We can listen to what the system tells us, and discover how its properties and our values can work together to bring forth something much better than could ever be produced by our will alone. We can't control systems or figure them out. But we can dance with them!

Similarly, we see facilitation being referred to as an art and science in regard to "dancing [with] the facilitator's energetic exchange" (Mackewn, 2008). Mackewn (2008, p. 619) also contribute with a framework of "polarities and paradox" that could be understood to span the room in which this facilitation dance occur.

In relation to regenerative cultures, regenerative facilitation is referred to as a "responsive dance with change" (Wahl, 2016, p. 138). "Dance" also occurs as the sixth DNA strand of "living systems being" within the framework of regenerative leadership, with the objective of the dance being "tapping into the rhythm of life – its playfulness, change, seasonality, depth and emergence" (Hutchins & Storm, 2019, p. 230). An attempt to capture the underlying dynamics of such a regenerative dance can be seen in the aspects of nature's wisdom as elaborated on by Hutchins (2022) and the "Logic of Life" with associated

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principles as presented in relation to regenerative leadership by Hutchins & Storm (2019; see Table 1).

Facilitating organizations to learn and dance with the complex Logic of Life is therefore an ideal that focuses on aligning facilitation with the complexity of life itself. In doing so, it is important to note that regenerative facilitation or leadership does not shy away from death, despair or pain. On the contrary, those feelings and conditions are seen as vital to hold space for, alongside with for example gratitude and joy. From an ecological or ecosystemic perspective, this becomes a given because, in nature, death is critical for enabling new life to emerge through a cyclic process and regenerative tension. Joanna Macy, a core inspiration and scholar within deep ecology, systems thinking and the regenerative field, manifests this in the well-known spiral of "the work that reconnects" (Macy & Johnstone, 2022). This spiral is an empowerment process to spark regenerative initiatives going through a movement of "coming from gratitude, honoring our pain for the world, seeing with new eyes, and going forth" (Macy & Johnstone, 2022, p. 37). Such a position is also stressed in a quote frequently attributed to the Vietnamese poet and Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, who once was asked, "What do we most need to do to save our world?" (see, e.g. Macy, 2021). As a response, Thich Nhat Hanh simply said, "What we most need to do is to hear within us the sound of the Earth crying" (p. 43).

Dialogic organization development and appreciative inquiry

A framework, mindset and set of practices that has come to reshape how many OD practitioners lead and facilitate organizational change in conditions of complexity is dialogic OD. As Bushe & Marshak (2015) highlighted, dialogic OD rests on two important intellectual movements:

Principle	Short description
Life-affirming	This is the over-arching principle. Life creates conditions conducive to life. The regenerative leader seeks only life-affirming activities and outcomes, being watchful for anything that could be toxic, life-denying and degenerative
Ever-changing and responsive	Change is an inevitable aspect of life we can embrace for the opportunity and leverage it offers us for learning, adaption, resilience and evolution
Relational and collaborative	Everything in life consists of interrelating, interconnected systems nested within each other. Understanding these interconnections frees our perception from seeing and thinking in silos and instead into systems
Synergetic and diverse	Vital to life is the presence of diversity and the working through of tensions into synergy
Cyclical and rhythmical	The emergent nature of life contains the rhythms of cycles and seasons that ebb and flow
Flows of energy and matter	There are innate ecosystem processes that life depends upon, and as such everything flows in a cyclic interconnected way
Living-systems field	As we step-change into regenerative leadership consciousness, we sense the interconnectedness of all life and recognize this field of interconnection

Table 1.
Seven principles of the complex "Logic of Life" with adapted short description

Source: Table courtesy of Hutchins & Storm (2019, p. 100)

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(1) the science of complexity; and
(2) interpretivist social science.

Dialogic OD methods include a wide spectrum, such as Open Space, Art of Hosting, Visual Explorer and World Café (see Bushe, 2013). Among the eight key premises of dialogic OD, Bushe & Marshak (2015, p. 18) highlighted that:

> Transformational change cannot be planned and implemented towards some rationally predetermined outcome. Attempts to plan and control are more obstacles to transformational change than resources. People must be engaged in uncovering collective intentions and shared motivations.

One of the most intensively researched and applied practices associated with dialogic OD is *Appreciative Inquiry*. The "whole system in the room" practices of Appreciative Inquiry design summits have now been refined and practiced for several decades (see, e.g. McQuaid & Cooperrider, 2018). Appreciative Inquiry has also shown to be a strong match for mobilizing and engaging in systemic action and collaboration on the agenda of a sustainable and flourishing future (see, e.g. Cooperrider & Godwin, 2022; Cooperrider & Selian, 2021; Cooperrider & McQuaid, 2012). Cooperrider & Fry (2012, p. 4), who have helped lead more than 100 sustainability initiatives via the Appreciative Inquiry large-group summit methodology, said that the No. 1 observation from the real world that was most striking to them was that:

> There is nothing that brings out the best in human enterprise faster, more consistently or more powerfully than calling the whole organization to design sustainability solutions to humanity's greatest challenges.

Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros (2008, p. 4) described Appreciative Inquiry in its most practical construction as "a form of organizational study that selectively seeks to locate, highlight, and illuminate what are referred to as the life-giving forces of the organization's existence, its positive core" (p. 4). Appreciative Inquiry is recognized as a generative process of collective learning and:

> [. . .] a way to explore, discover, and appreciate everything that gives "life" to organizations when they are most vibrant, effective, successful, and healthy in relation to their whole system of stakeholders. (Ludema & Fry, 2008, p. 280)

In relation to the phenomena of learning organizations, Appreciative Inquiry:

> [. . .] is a robust process of inquiry and anticipatory learning that enables participants in social systems to shape the world they most want by building new knowledge, spurring inventiveness, creating energy, and enhancing cooperative capacity. (Ludema & Fry, 2008, p. 280)

It is hence a good match with the first regenerative principle, "Life-Affirming," in the Logic of Life, seen in Table 1.

As commonly applied during summits, Appreciative Inquiry asks organization members to participate in an iterative development process called the *5-D model* or *cycle*, including the phases of Definition, Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny. It starts by *Defining* an affirmative topic for the process to focus on. The affirmative topic choice is then followed by *Discovery,* a collective inquiry led by generative questions such as what gives life, and why, in relation to the topic, in the past and in the present. Then the participants *Dream* and envision what it might be like if "the best of what is" occurred more frequently or in a new shape. On the basis of the images that unfold,

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participants are then asked to self-organize around their dreams and to *Design* things and processes that manifest the dreams. The final phase, *Destiny*, is then about realizing their desired designs and changes in this world. For further details about Appreciative Inquiry and its practical application, see, for example, Cooperrider et al. (2008) and McQuaid & Cooperrider (2018).

The very foundation of Appreciative Inquiry has also been expressed in terms of the five classic or core principles as seen in Table 2 (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; Cooperrider et al., 2008).

As seen in the table, Appreciative Inquiry puts a strong emphasis on facilitation by asking questions, stressing that the questions one asks are fateful. However, in relation to regeneration, Appreciative Inquiry is clearly challenged by the regenerative paradox that death enables life. This becomes clear when comparing traditional Appreciative Inquiry summits with the regenerative movement's stress on honoring the pain, holding space for grief or the critical need to feel mother earth crying (Macy, 2021; Macy & Johnstone, 2022). Kabalt (2023, p. 7) noted this in terms of "Appreciative Inquiry's focus on life and possibility is so deeply rooted in its very fabric that creating space for despair, grief and death in not always self-evident."

Furthermore, the roots of Appreciative Inquiry are within organizational life – inquiring into what gives life to organizations, to human or social systems – raising a need to explore what Appreciative Inquiry might look like if we made even more space for non-human voices, for the more-than-human world, for all of life, as asked by Kabalt (2023). Consequently, there is clearly potential for exploring and pushing the frameworks and practices of facilitating Appreciative Inquiry Summits to successfully facilitate the regenerative transformative changes and the potential future regenerative Appreciative Inquiry Summits, that the world desperately calls for right now.

Table 2.
Five classic or core principles of Appreciative Inquiry

Principle	Summary	Details
Constructionist principle	Words create worlds	Reality, as we know it, is a subjective vs objective state and is socially created through language and conversations
Simultaneity principle	Inquiry creates change	The moment we ask a question, we begin to create a change. "The questions we ask are fateful."
Poetic principle	We can choose what we study	Teams and organizations, like open books, are endless sources of study and learning. What we choose to study makes a difference. It describes – even creates – the world as we know it
Anticipatory principle	Images inspire action	Human systems move in the direction of their images of the future. The more positive and hopeful the image of the future, the more positive the present-day action
Positive principle	Positive questions lead to positive change	Momentum for [small or] large-scale change requires large amounts of positive affect and social bonding. This momentum is best generated through positive questions that amplify the positive core

Source: Table courtesy of Cooperrider and Whitney (1999)

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Four paradoxes to add, advance and integrate in regenerative facilitation

Facilitation of regenerative transformative change in general and potential regenerative Appreciative Inquiry Summits in particular will then have to increasingly add, advance and integrate a dance with four regenerative paradoxes, as seen in Table 3. These paradoxes can be seen as a regenerative addition to the original polarities and paradoxes in facilitation, as elaborated by Mackewn (2008). Furthermore, if facilitators are to hold space for dancing in between these paradoxes, a lot of subsequent questions arise, such as: when shall we act at which end of the spectrum? In what order? What questions will we use to invite and facilitate these new aspects in the room?

Methodology

This article is based on an exploratory qualitative analysis of a summit prototype designed to facilitate dialogue, learning and transformation in organizations. The primary objective of the analysis was to explore how the facilitation of organizational learning can be designed to foster sustainable and regenerative transformations. The analysis is based on a narrative description of a summit model that was designed around a dialogic OD approach that combines elements from design thinking, Appreciative Inquiry and regenerative leadership. The primary research question we explored was, "How might the traditional Appreciative Inquiry Summit design be refined to better facilitate a regenerative transformative change in organizations?"

A two-day summit was designed and tested in the Network for Sustainable Development at Mid Sweden University, which included organizational leaders and employees from all departments at the university. The aim of the summit was to collectively share learnings as well as clarify the motivation, priorities and actions for strengthening the university's

Paradox	Tensions to embrace in the dance
Sustainable AND regenerative	This paradox "speaks to the important shift from sustainable (measuring, monitoring, controlling, and reducing negative impacts) to regenerative (creating life-affirming outcomes that enhance flourishing for all concerned, including local communities, wider society, and the interconnected fabric of life on earth" (Hutchins, 2022, p. 28). Yet, there will be a need to hold room for both AND
Positive AND negative emotions	Learning to be comfortable with the discomfort to which tensions give rise, rather than avoiding them, is highlighted as an important skill for the facilitation of regenerative transformations (Hutchins, 2022, Hutchins & Storm, 2019). Macy & Johnstone's (2022) regenerative practices are further inspiration for facilitating this tension because the spiral of "the work that reconnects" invites both gratitude AND an honoring of our pain for the world
Human AND more-than-human centric	This paradox is about being able to ask both what gives life to you? As well as acknowledging that a regenerative human culture cares for the planet and it cares for all of life in the awareness that this creates a thriving future for all (Wahl, 2016)
Outer AND inner transformation	The concept of "right relationship" (Villegas, 2010), or "in good relation" (Nickel & Fehr, 2020), which is central to many indigenous cultures, might be more of an appropriate term for a regenerative way of relating, facilitating and dancing with ecosystems. It captures an inner transformative change and way of existing in a sustainable, loving or caring way with all living beings. It reaches into a way of being and an underlying mindset acknowledging the need for a transformative change of both our outer AND inner world

Source: Authors' own creation

Table 3. Paradoxes of regenerative facilitation – dancing with the "Logic of Life"

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contribution to sustainable development. The summit was co-created by the lead author and the coordinator of the network in partnership with members of a larger group from the network, including representatives from multiple departments of the university.

The summit was officially arranged by people from Mid Sweden University and aligned with the 2019 business plan for the whole university, stressing that "sustainable development is one of the most important future issues of our time" (Mid Sweden University, 2019, p. 8)

As a result, all first-line leaders, those who were heads of departments, were encouraged by the chancellor of the university to sign up for the summit and participate.

The summit was facilitated by the lead author and the coordinator for the network at the university, who also participated in the first round of data analysis. A variety of practices from Appreciative Inquiry were used during the summit dialogues, including interview guides (Cooperrider et al., 2008; McQuaid & Cooperrider, 2018), which were combined with insights from the wider field of dialogic OD (Bushe & Marshak, 2015) and complexity leadership (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017; Snowden & Boone, 2007) to formulate the questions used in the different phases of the summit.

Data collection from the summit

The summit started with lunch on Thursday, February 7, and ended with lunch on Friday, February 8. The invitation included the following text and guiding questions:

Workshop with a focus on prioritizing efforts and taking action on Mid Sweden University's goals for sustainable development.

- What can make the biggest difference with the least effort?
- How do our various existing contributions contribute to the 2030 Agenda?
- What are we ready to prioritize and really act upon during 2019?

The summit was facilitated in Swedish and involved 39 participants from the university's diverse departments and institutions, as well as from both student unions. The translation of the questions and the guides into English, as here shared, was done by the first author and checked by proofreading. To get the original Swedish material, please contact the first author.

The workshop design was guided by the following questions:

- Whom do we want and need in the room? (The ideal that the whole system, including the official leadership, be represented in the room and able to make decisions).
- What is it that we want to see more of? (The ideal of inquiring about what it is hoped we will grow).
- How might we refine the traditional Appreciative Inquiry Summit design to better fit the context?

The process and facilitation during the summit were inspired by the 5-D cycle of Appreciative Inquiry. However, summit organizers also initiated two important additional stages and questions focused on creating space for the emergence of meaning, higher purpose and dissent. The physical room was deliberately furnished with small tables with seats for four to six participants at each, and the participants were encouraged to join "strangers," that is, people from other parts of the university with whom they did not interact on a daily basis.

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The data used in this article are derived from both the written material, in terms of the workbook, slides and interview guides used during the summit, as well as the lived experiences of the author as the main facilitator during the summit.

Data analysis

We analyzed the data using a qualitative reflexive approach and argue that authors take a personal, involved and self-critical stance, as reflected in clarity about their role in the research process, the context in which the research takes place and what led to their involvement in this research (Bradbury et al., 2019, p. 17). The lead author of this article is active in research connected to the phenomena of facilitating sustainable and regenerative development and quality management (see, e.g. Fundin, Lilja, Lagrosen, & Bergquist, 2020; Lilja et al., 2022; Palm & Lilja, 2021).

The analysis procedure was a version of reflexive thematic analysis in accordance with Braun, Clarke, Hayfield & Terry (2019). We took an approach to analyzing qualitative data about experiences, views, perceptions and representations of a given phenomenon. Given the research question, the coding was done with a deductive orientation, whereby we approached the data with the "Logic of Life" framework and the paradoxes of regenerative facilitation, which were then explored within the data set. The level at which meaning was identified was latent. Latent coding focuses on a deeper, more implicit or conceptual level of meaning rather than just the obvious content of the data. The themes were then built, molded and given meaning at the intersection of data, researcher experience and subjectivity, and the research question. Because themes did not emerge fully formed from the data, the process of constructing them was akin to the processes of engineering and design by us. The themes were then finally revised for clearer theme names, which signal the scope of them.

Results

In this section of the article, we describe the summit event on the basis of the phases of delivery. The first two phases reflect an expansion of the traditional Appreciative Inquiry method, followed by a 5D-process.

Creating space for why: why is this important and meaningful?

After a short introduction that presented a brief background for the event, the summit process deliberately created and held space for emergence around the question of "Why?" In doing so, it started by sharing some of the official ambitions of the university around "increasing our commitment and make even stronger contributions through joint efforts during 2019" (Mid Sweden University, 2019, p. 8). We then arranged for the participants to have discussions in smaller groups in the room, guided by the "why" question:

> Why is this important and meaningful, that is, that we as a university increase our commitment and make even stronger contributions to a sustainable development through joint efforts during 2019?

The results were harvested digitally by Menti, allowing participants to type in and share insights from their tables by means of smartphones or computers. The emerging and collected insights were shared simultaneously in the room as flowing text boxes on a big screen. As a summary, participants were invited to voluntarily share and make reflections to the whole group.

After that, the intention was to become more concrete by focusing on only one of the Sustainable Development Goals: Goal 13, which focuses on climate action, formulated as

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"Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts" (United Nations, 2015). Given this specific goal, the participants at each table were invited to delve more deeply into "why," guided by the question:

> Why is it important for us as a university to also start taking action to combat our own climate impacts? (Important for you, your unit, our university, our region, the planet?).

These results were harvested using Menti and a joint summing-up procedure.

Creating space for and encouraging dissent – what are your doubts and fears?
After that, a local climate researcher gave a short presentation in which he elaborated on what action is needed in our region and within the university to combat climate change in accordance with the Paris agreement on climate change. After this, participants were invited into a space of dissent. Here, the facilitator actively encouraged expressions of critical thinking, fear, concerns and doubt. This was guided by the following questions:

> What important doubts and critical thoughts should we bring along in doing this? Do we have any worries or fears to keep track of and share (as an expression of care)?

These results were harvested using Menti and a joint summing up.

Discovery – what gives life?
The Discovery phase of the summit was designed using not only one but three different affirmative topics and interview guides. In essence, the participants got to choose the interview guide and topic that they found most interesting and important to learn from and improve for sustainable development engagement and progress at the university to take off. They then formed pairs, once again being encouraged to team up with a "stranger" to build new relationships, and went out for about half an hour to conduct two 15-min interviews. During the interviews, they were asked by their partner the questions from the interview guide they had chosen. The three affirmative topics to choose from are described in the next few sections.

Affirmative topic 1: through joint efforts and innovative collaborations, we achieve more. How do we reach new sustainable progress by collaboration and partnerships during 2019? This topic was explored in interviews starting with a sharing between pairs who were given the following instruction:

> Tell me about a situation or event when you and the colleagues in your unit achieved new levels of abilities, perspectives or values by working together with other parts of the university or in innovative external collaborations. It can be an example linked to sustainability and the 2030 Agenda, if you have already started with it, or in a completely different area where you made it happen.

Affirmative topic 2: we make even stronger contributions to our world and to the local areas in which we live and operate daily. How do we, as a university, enable and create more sustainable development in our immediate area and in society during 2019?

> Tell me about a situation or event when you and your colleagues were involved in contributing to our surroundings on new levels, globally or preferably locally [. . .].

Affirmative topic 3: a leadership that provides the conditions for accelerating our commitment and our pace of progress for sustainable development. How do we lead for an acceleration of sustainable development during 2019?

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> Tell me about a situation or event when you and your colleagues experienced leadership that boosted commitment and succeeded in developing the university's activities, your way of getting things done, thinking, or controlling [. . .].

Dream – what might be?

As a result of the interviews, the participants identified, on the basis of their shared experiences and stories, root causes of success for each of the three affirmative topics. This identification was guided by two interview questions that helped participants identify success factors for the stories shared:

(1) What made this possible, in others, in the context, or in you?

(2) Which three success factors from your story do you consider the most important?

The interview guide also captured visions and dreams for the future, using the following questions:

> It's a year from now; we meet here again, and we take a walk among the snowflakes, and ask each other: Tell me about the three most important advances that you see have begun to happen in terms of how we now strongly contribute to creating a more sustainable society in the local area in which we live and work on a daily basis!

Guiding curiosity questions were as follows:

- What do you see is new, different and really good?
- What are you extra proud and happy about that has happened?
- What makes you say "Wow! We did that really well!"?

The resulting three things/dreams/visions were captured on Post-its in the interview guide and then all put up on a big "dream wall" that was separated into the three affirmative topics. This marked the end of Day 1. People were invited to stay for a bit or visit the dream wall during the evening to try to find patterns and common themes, or opportunity areas, in the many dreams and visions collected for the future.

Design – how can it be?

After a brief check-in, Day 2 continued with the Design phase in accordance with the 5D cycle. As a first step, the whole group gathered around the dream wall, and the facilitator presented the different themes of dreams and of opportunity areas that had been identified. As a result, about ten themes were presented. Each participant then got to vote for the themes that they wanted to develop more, guided by these questions:

- Where does your energy go?
- Which theme do you believe is the most inspiring and important to take further?
- Given three points, how do you vote? You may put them all on one theme or distribute them on several, as you wish.

Seven of the themes were prioritized and brought into prototyping as someone raised their hand when the facilitator asked whether someone would like to take the lead in facilitating further exploration of that specific theme. The seven themes were then distributed on the tables in the room together with prototyping material, and the participants were instructed to join the table where they most wanted to contribute. As a check-in around each table, the participants were asked to share what attracted them to this specific theme/dream.

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After that, participants at each table brainstormed specific ways to bring each dream theme into reality. Each team then stood by a wall and was given traditional brainstorming rules concerning, for instance, "One conversation at a time" and "Avoid criticism." They were also instructed to brainstorm many ideas, at least 20. After about 10 min of brainstorming, each team then got to vote for the ideas they had created, ending up with a specific idea to take further and prototype, guided by the question, "Which one of the ideas do you want to be part of realizing during 2019?"

Each table ended up with one specific idea, or a cluster of related ideas, that they explored further during a prototyping stage. For about 35 min, each team got to build concrete prototypes concerning how their specific idea could be realized. For this purpose, they had access to large pieces of paper, pens, LEGO building blocks, and an array of creative materials. When about 15 min were left, the teams were instructed to fill out a capturing form about their prototype and prepare to make a 2-min video pitch of their prototype. The forms had the title "Prioritized Tests During 2019" to stress that the prototypes were a current best guess about what we could test to learn more during the coming year.

Destiny – what will be?

The summit resulted in the formation of seven self-organized, cross-functional teams with co-created prototypes dealing with how to start acting and how to make progress in response to the affirmative topics during 2019. The pitching videos and capturing forms were shared with the participants after the summit, including contact details for each team so participants could reach more people to join the initiatives, cross-contact and self-organize in a decentralized way. The resulting seven "prioritized tests during 2019" were:

(1) initiate continuous work on sustainable development in all work groups;

(2) visualize and develop traveling for a reduced carbon footprint;

(3) engage in communication and create open arenas for sustainable development;

(4) create a path toward a sustainability coordinator;

(5) develop working methods for interdisciplinary research projects that are idea driven;

(6) encourage sustainable development "for dummies," developing an internal course for employees; and

(7) hold a sustainability competition for students.

All the results were shared on the co-creation platform Trello to enable feedback loops in the living system around the dreams and opportunity areas that emerged from the summit. The transparency aimed to help people track, recognize, learn from, celebrate and amplify the progress being made.

A voluntary check-in meeting on Zoom, every second week, was established to further nurture gratitude and belonging in the living system and to maintain momentum and connection. These biweekly network meetings, to which all employees from all departments of the university were invited, have been sustained since the workshop and are facilitated by two newly hired half-time sustainability coordinators, hired as a direct result of the summit.

Main findings and themes

When analyzing the facilitation prototype in relation to the research question, seen through the lens of the regenerative leadership principles in Table 1, and the identified paradoxes of

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regenerative facilitation in Table 3, three themes of insights evolved and took shape. These insights are presented in the sections that follow.

Dancing that transforms the outer and the inner world

The process of learning that occurs during an Appreciative Inquiry Summit becomes more than just learning about the affirmative topic at hand; it becomes a transformative learning experience and embodiment of being, acting and relating in accordance, much in line with the first and third principles within the regenerative Logic of Life (Hutchins & Storm, 2019). Being interviewed, or interviewing another person, using an Appreciative Inquiry interview guide becomes a way to experience first-hand what it means to be and relate in a life-affirming way (Lilja & Richardsson, 2015). In that way, the Appreciative Inquiry Summit has the natural, strong potential of being a space for not only outer but also inner transformation. However, the focus on outer transformation can easily become dominant, as seen in typical affirmative topics.

Honoring and inviting the tensions of life

In accordance with the basis of Appreciative Inquiry, in terms of research in the field of positive psychology, inviting negative emotions might lead directly to fight-or-flight behaviors, in essence narrowing a person's response options. However, we note that it turned out to be of great value to actively invite this paradox. In the explored prototype, the additional initial stages of creating space for dissent and fear were of great importance for enabling the participants to later move into more of a conventional Appreciative Inquiry process with a higher level of acceptance and authenticity. We should also note that inviting fear turned out to be inviting care, given how the question was phrased ("Do we have any worries or fears to keep track of and share [as an expression of consideration]?"). It became an invitation to be vulnerable, expressing and sharing, for instance, one's insecurity or doubts. This facilitation practice is a way to acknowledge that tension creates the crucible for creativity. Learning to be comfortable with the discomfort to which these tensions give rise, rather than avoiding them, means honoring our pain for the world.

Widening the purpose and circles of the dance

Another explorative unique twist to the summit design used was the substantial time and focus spent on initially holding space for "why" questions (e.g. "Why is this important and meaningful?"). Such questions enabled the participants to connect more strongly with their own motivations and to understand and be inspired by the motivations of others. This specific design turned out to be a booster for engaging people in uncovering collective intentions and shared motivations, something that is stressed as critical for emergent change within the key premises of dialogic OD (Bushe & Marshak, 2015). The additional probing questions ("Important for you, your unit, our university, our region, the planet?)" also helped spark higher aspirations and higher purpose reflections about contributing to the world including the more-than-human world. This facilitation also made it transparent and clear that there is not only one goal in the ecosystem but instead a rich diversity of why the participants saw this initiative as important and meaningful. In that way, it helped open up the discussions and invite diversity.

When analyzing the facilitation prototype more directly in relation to the four paradoxes of regenerative facilitation in Table 3, it appears as a shift toward more of regenerative Appreciative Inquiry Summits can be understood as a matter of widening the circles of the dance of facilitating. Within each of the four paradoxes, there is a need to actively and consciously open up to, and invite, more of the whole spectrum that each paradox embrace.

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The dance of facilitating regenerative transformative change, in organizations and society, will then have to more actively and consciously open up to and invite:

- sustainable development AND *regenerative* development that is about contributing to life's flourishing;
- positive emotions AND *negative emotions* such as honoring grief and pain for the world;
- outer development AND *inner* development that invites new ways of being and relating; and
- human AND the *more-than-human* world to expand the circles of connection, solidarity and belonging.

The illustration in Figure 1 accentuates that the dance of facilitating then needs to be widened, towards inviting more frequently the outer ends of the four paradoxes seen illustrated as four colorful spins.

Discussion

We have an exciting journey ahead, finding out how to dance with living ecosystems, organizations and society in a way that facilitates a regenerative transformative change. What this article and the prototype here explored might contribute to that journey is twofold.

First, the proposal and notion of the "four paradoxes of regenerative facilitation," as seen in Table 3 and elaborated in Figure 1, might provide an important contribution to the ongoing research agenda of "Appreciative Inquiry for Life" (Kabalt, 2023). The notion of the paradoxes intersects and integrates many of the currently leading streams of contributions,



Figure 1.
Widening the dance of facilitating, guided by the spinning within four paradoxes

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practices and frameworks concerning facilitation of sustainable and regenerative transformative learning and change.

Interweaving what has shown to be life-giving aspects both within regenerative leadership (Hutchins, 2022; Hutchins & Storm, 2019) and "the work that reconnects" (Macy & Johnstone, 2022; Macy, 2021) with insights from the leading practices of dialogic OD (Bushe, 2013) and Appreciative Inquiry Summits in particular (McQuaid & Cooperrider, 2018). In doing so, it can be seen as a contribution but also a call for expanding current leading practices and frameworks toward a vision of "Regenerative Appreciative Inquiry Summits" that has the potential of becoming a powerful and leading approach to meet the currently urgent need of facilitating regenerative transformative change in society and organizations. The addition of these four paradoxes to the existing framework of "Polarities and paradox in facilitation" by Mackewn (2008) resonates with an ongoing exploration of the importance of embracing the dark sides of life within positive psychology (Ivtzan, Lomas, Hefferon, & Worth, 2016), and within Appreciative Inquiry (Grieten et al., 2018). It has been noted within these communities for some time that negative emotions can have a positive impact on relationships, on the flow between people and on bringing people together. The very practice of doing so, what it looks like, and what we can learn from it are very interesting to explore further. In doing so, the practices within the regenerative community, such as "the work that reconnects," is a given source of practices, knowledge and frameworks (see, e.g. Macy & Johnstone, 2022; Hutchins, 2022; Hutchins & Storm, 2019).

Second, the study strengthens and advocates for understanding and practicing facilitation as a dance. The facilitation dance captured in the themes are much in line with Meadows' (2001) insightful notion that complex systems cannot be controlled, they are changed by dancing, by dancing with them, as well as Wahl's (2016) notion that regenerative facilitation is about being in a responsive dance with change. This "tapping into the rhythm of life—its playfulness, change, seasonality, depth and emergence" (Hutchins & Storm, 2019, p. 230) is captured and further understood by the themes captured in terms of:

- dancing that transforms the outer and the inner world;
- honoring and inviting the tensions of life; and
- widening the purpose and circles of the dance.

In many ways, the themes relate to the quote from Rumi who saw dance as the very essence of life "now is the time to unite the soul and the world. Now is the time to see the sunlight dancing as one with the shadows" (Rumi).

Theoretical contribution

The main theoretical contribution of this article is likely that it points to emerging and aligned research areas that probably will be of great value if they intersect, given the challenges of our time. To open up for comparison and a potential intersection of the frameworks and principles of Appreciative Inquiry and regenerative leadership are in many ways contributions to Kabalt's (2023) recent call for "Appreciative Inquiry for life." It is also a contribution to the frameworks and practices to move beyond sustainable towards flourishing as explored by Laszlo & Brown (2014).

This article may also provide a theoretical contribution to the field of regenerative leadership when it comes to successfully weaving it into the field of OD. As the focus and interest around regenerative businesses and organizations increase, the regenerative mindset and principles will increasingly have to be integrated and operationalized in an OD context. This article highlights both matching principles and apparent tensions for further exploration.

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Practical implications

From a practical perspective, the "Results" section of this article is deliberately comprehensive and descriptive in sharing the very questions used during the dance of facilitating. In doing this, we hope it is a contribution to others who are currently exploring this kind of facilitation. By highlighting the principles and paradoxes rather than just the practices, we also hope to inspire playful experimentation and redesign in this emerging field of practice. In relation to an Appreciative Inquiry practitioner, the modifications and additions to the traditional 5D cycle, such as adding an inquiry into purpose and fears as part of the initial facilitation, will, we hope, be hands-on and helpful.

Limitations and future research

This research has methodological limitations. One of them concerns the facilitation in the room where the summit was held. A critical foundation of regenerative leadership is to reconnect the historical separation of the feminine and the masculine (Hutchins & Storm, 2019). Thus, a limitation is that the summit was mostly facilitated by one person and thereby, one gender. Future research could further explore various ways of cofacilitating, with facilitators that represent a wider spectrum of gender and gender identities. After all, dancing is more fun when done together.

Another limitation is that a regenerative way of facilitating, or the Logic of Life, can hardly be captured in just a list of principles, as seen in Table 1. The concept of "right relationship" (Villegas, 2010) or "in good relation" (Nickel & Fehr, 2020), which is central to many indigenous cultures, might be more of an appropriate term for this ideal of a regenerative way of relating, facilitating, and dancing with ecosystems. Being in the right relationship does then imply more than just a practice of doing in the outer world; it also reaches into a way of being and an underlying mindset. With regard to future research, it can therefore be seen as related to the current research initiative of the inner development goals (Jordan, 2021), stressing that we seem to lack the inner capacity to deal with our increasingly complex environment and the challenges connected to caring for and sustaining life on this planet (www.innerdevelopmentgoals.org/). This field of research could potentially inform the dance of facilitating life explored herein.

Conclusions

In this study, we identified four paradoxes to add, advance and integrate when facilitating life in complex ecosystems. After that, we empirically experimented with a facilitation prototype that was designed to expand the current framework and practice of Appreciative Inquiry Summits towards regeneration. We then learned that facilitating organizations to learn and dance with the Logic of Life will include widening the dance of facilitating. The dance of facilitating then needs to be widened towards inviting more frequently the ends of the four paradoxes noted as *regenerative, negative emotions, inner, and more-than-human*, illustrated as the four colorful spins in Figure 1.

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