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Appreciative inquiry as a foundation for quality development

Guido CUYVERS*

Abstract

The traditional concept of quality management has the odor of control. Therefore people experience quality management project as threatening and as least as an extra burden. It is often hard to motivate employees in an organization to participate voluntary in quality management projects. A paradigm shift in quality management is necessary. When we focus on the process dimension and continuous development of the organization, it is more appropriate to speak in terms of quality development. The appreciative inquiry approach can be the basis to foster that developmental dimension. The basic principles of AI can reorient as well the meaning of quality as the practices in a way that is motivating all employees in the organization. The real generative principle of AI is the development of relational practices. What really does matter is the way person, from different angles, work together to realize the soma goal: the continuous improvement of the quality of organizational processes and of the personal performance.

Keywords: Appreciative Inquiry; relational practice; quality development; generative principle.

Introduction

In this article we explore how the appreciative inquiry (AI) approach can support quality development. First we describe the evolution from quality management to quality development. Next we use the principles and concepts of AI to underpin the new kind of thinking in quality management. Finally we discuss the concept of relational practice, the real backbone of a successful AI application.

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Quality development

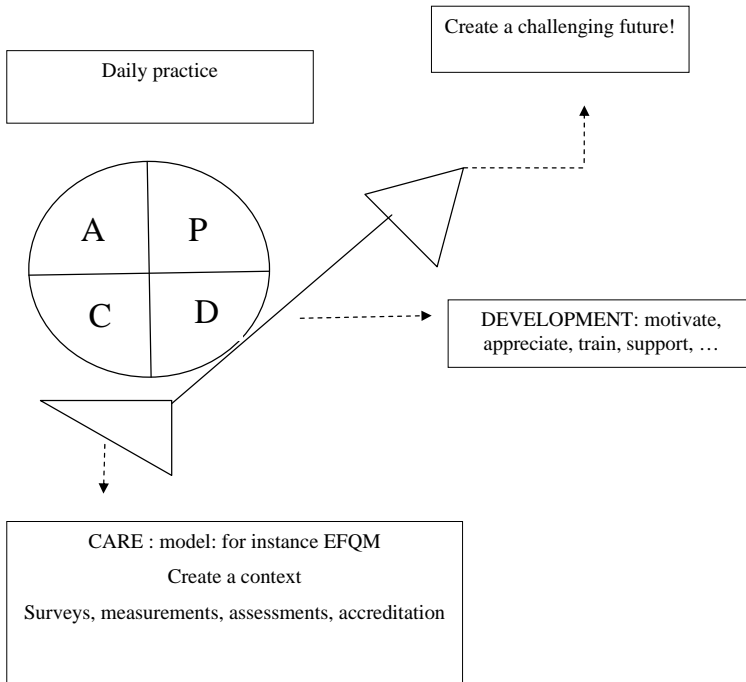
The frequently used terms ‘quality management’, ‘quality care’ or ‘quality control’ are too static in our opinion. Management refers to the control of what already exists with rather stable norms (Cuyvers, 2009). If interpreted in a narrow sense, the weakest part of quality management is that it ends in more rules and procedures and hinders the dynamic involvement of employees in the organization. Therefore quality management could not realize its prior promise to innovate traditional management approaches (Staut, 2000, p. 39). It has of course no sense to burden organizations still more with a system that would raise constraints in the end. We resolutely opt for the term ‘quality development’ to stress dynamics and growth. In most organizations nothing is fixed forever, nor is it perpetuated in rules, standards, nor in procedures. Nevertheless, we want to guard ourselves against an unrealistic and one-sided approach. We do not deny that the care or control dimension is rather important in every organization, also in quality development; but is just one element of a complex process. The pitfall is to formulate indicators that are only designed to clarify the process as well as the results in a measurable way (Cojocaru, 2008; 2009). In that way care ends in control. Such an approach contributes not much to the quality of an organization and its processes. A too rigid steering leaves no space to the developmental dimension. Every organization has to shape its pursuit of quality in its own typical manner. Quality is made-to-measure. Besides the care dimension there is the developmental dimension. That dimension refers to self management by the organizations on the one hand and to the permanent challenge to keep reflecting about the vision on the core processes on the other hand. That calls for permanent renewal and learning, on an individual level as well as on an organizational level.

Keeping the limitations of the traditional quality approach in the back of our minds, we define quality development as: ‘the art and the science of stimulating and streamlining all activities in an organization so that they contribute optimally to the realization of the vision and the objectives of the organization’. We describe the dimensions of quality development in figure 1.

In our model the starting point of quality development is a challenging vision on the future of the organization. For the creation of such a vision we can base ourselves on the appreciative inquiry approach we explain later in this article. Without such a vision quality management degrades to control. To realize that vision, the organization has to invest in developmental activities such as the motivation of the people, the appreciation of their efforts, the availability of training and support. Of course quality development is always situated in an organizational context that guarantees that the acquired quality level is maintained. That is the care dimension of quality management. On the one hand the organization needs a kind of model that directs the efforts of the people; on the other hand it also needs a kind of compass that indicates the quality level that has already been acquired. Audits, surveys and measurements are therefore indis-

pensable instruments. Finally, the core of every qualitative procedure is the PDCA method. On an individual, team and organizational level, the systematic sequence of planning, action, checking and adjustments is the real guarantee for the continuous development of quality.

Figure 1 The dimensions of quality development (Cuyvers, 2007)



We do not only plead for just quality development, but for integral quality development. Integral quality development adds an extra dimension to the quality of an organization. It means that the whole organization is also responsible for the quality of the processes. Integral is not a synonym for the total control of all dimensions of the process. Essential dimensions of the organizational processes are often withdrawn from steering and control. Integral, in fact means that everyone in the organization, from the top to the bottom, has to realize and monitor the quality of the processes. That contrasts with the tradition of controlling quality that checks whether the results obtained match the criteria that were agreed on only at the end of the process. Integral quality development requires a very open attitude from the various elements of an organization and it is averse to one sided involvement. Everyone and every dimension of the process is involved in the continuous pursuit of quality improvement (Cuyvers, 2002).

Appreciative inquiry as the basis for quality development

The complex process of integral quality development must be supported by a psychological and an organizational framework. Both are inspired by the appreciative inquiry approach (Cooperrider, 2005).

The psychological framework

The psychological framework can make a difference and become innovative when it is directed by appreciative inquiry. Let us first describe some conditions that are at the heart of AI (Cooperrider, 2000).

The principles

The positive principle. A positive basic attitude is the basis for quality development. It is our opinion, of course based on experience, that important developments need a lot of positive affective values, like hope, inspiration and the collective pleasure that results from realizing things together. To the extent that development is directed by positive questions, the effort to realize it will be more powerful and will last longer. Drucker states (1993): ' We learn from our failures, we grow by our successes.' Trust is very powerful in an organization. A negative attitude has a vicious circle effect: distrust leads to less ambition, poor results and greater fear of failure. Trust on the contrary leads to a greater effort, better results, a better atmosphere, better co-operation. If we perceive an organization as a dialogue of interested parties, then a positive basic attitude linked to trust in the future is an important driving force of quality development. To foster such a positive basic attitude it is necessary to think in terms of the positive forces that are available in the organization, and not in terms of problems which have to be solved.

The constructionist principle. In the opinion of Cooperrider, organizations are human constructions (Cooperrider, 2000). When we want to understand the quality management of an organization it is necessary to see them as human constructions. Too often quality control is reduced to facts and figures, which bears the risk that so-called objective facts are taken for granted, irrespective from the act of constructing meaning. People in organizations permanently construct quality; quality cannot be understood regardless of the people who interpret processes and results as more or less qualitative or not. To understand this process of constructing quality it is necessary to listen to the stories of people, their conversations and their daily communication. This is in contrast to the opinion that quality is something that should exist irrespective of people. People together create the meaning of quality and they take responsibility for their construction of quality.

The simultaneous principle. The simultaneous principle states that making a diagnosis and changing the organization are not distinct processes. So, analyzing and assessing quality and taking initiatives to improve quality are not separated stages in quality development, but interventions that occur simultaneously. Consequently, quality diagnosis does not precede change. Change starts when we ask questions. The moment and the way we ask questions determine the actions and the changes we will undertake. The questions direct the answers, determine the direction of the search and lay the basis for a new future. In quality management too often the questions are: 'What is going wrong? What are the deficits?' We propose questions as 'What went well? What did we do when our customers were very satisfied?' By asking the right questions, we can get out of blocked patterns and generate new ideas. Often unusual questions are very fruitful to create new horizons for quality development.

The poetic principle. The poetic principle starts from the idea that the story of organizations is written and rewritten by people inside and outside the organization. Like a good story, an organization, and the quality in an organization, can be interpreted in many ways. Quality gets meaning during talks between people. Therefore an organization is more of a process of discovering meaning than a thing. We can study many aspects of quality development; we can choose to study the lack of quality in some processes or departments of an organization; we can study the lack of motivation to construct quality or we can study situations in which people proved to be intrinsically motivated to achieve quality. We can study complaints of customers or we can study what makes customers very satisfied. By telling stories people can also express their emotions, their hopes and despair. Those non-objective aspects usually do not get any attention in a traditional quality management system, although they give energy.

The anticipating principle. This principle states that our collective imagination is a powerful source of inspiration for successful change. Images of the future influence common behavior. To change factual behavior concerning quality management, imagining another way of handling quality is necessary. Expectations and wishes are the driving forces behind action.

A strengths based culture

Despite the fact that an organizational culture cannot be changed in the short term, taking account of it is very important. The success of the introduction of a project of quality development depends on the culture (Cuyvers, 2003). It is not meaningful under all circumstances. If, for instance, the culture is characterized by rather authoritarian forms of interacting, without trust between management and co-workers, the quality project has no chance of success. Management is able to impose decisions from their power position; such an approach is counter-productive for quality development. The culture must create space for co-workers

to become intrinsically motivated to participate in the project. An organizational culture that supports the introduction of a quality management project has to fulfill the following conditions: (1) relations must be open; (2) everybody's thinking and acting must be customer oriented; (3) the organization must have an innovative culture, so that a far reaching project of change management fits with the already existing mentality; (4) there is a critical attitude towards one's own performances and those of the organization: people must be motivated to learn and to improve their performances; (5) people are willing to question their own behavior, unlike with traditional organizations, which can be characterized as professional bureaucracies where the autonomy and the right to take decisions are the central concerns of the employees.

Everyone who is concerned about quality development encounters resistance by colleagues and even by management. Even after a longer period of time, when one could expect that the employees know the quality development system rather well, a kind of apathy to quality can arise. The most important reason is that quality and quality management are too often identified with assessment, control and criticism, with weaknesses and deficits. Unfortunately, in practice quality is indeed too often reduced to control and deficits. The confrontation with negative facts removes people's motivation and energy. The confrontation with deficits is very frustrating when people have the impression that they cannot change the causes. Lists with problems do not motivate people. On the contrary, people need to gain energy somewhere to deliver efforts which are necessary to change the organization. The traditional problem solving approach which starts from an analysis of the problems is very well rooted in the prevailing methods of organizational change. It may paralyze an organization rather than inspire it. It is no co-incidence that many projects of organizational change fail and come to a standstill due to the lack of energy.

Unlike the traditional approach, the appreciative approach starts from the strengths and capabilities of an organization and of the people in that organization. This approach can become a lever for quality development; it is fed by the enthusiasm for an inspiring future perspective and not by the disappointment about the deficits.

Of course, the appreciative approach starts with a very specific view on the organization: an organization is a centre of human solidarity. The relations can only come to life when there is an appreciative eye, when people are willing to see the best in each other, when they share their dreams and concerns in an appreciative manner, and when they engage themselves in creating a new and a better world. By creating the space where everyone in the organization can be heard, a process emerges that makes the organization more vital.

A good system of quality development is an incentive for people to further improve their qualities (Cojocaru, 2010). To realize that ambition a belief in one's own strengths and capabilities is necessary. An appreciative approach will

certainly lead to an organization that is conscious of its strengths and capabilities and that will have the ambition to exceed mediocrity and to belong to the top. Thinking from weaknesses and problems leads at best to the objective to get rid of the deficits, but does not stimulate the ambition to become very good. Where should someone get the motivation and energy, bearing the burden of the deficits and of a limited self-concept, to develop to the level of the leading group?

In the appreciative approach, the contribution of everyone is very important. Quality development is as a book in which everyone writes their contribution. That approach contrasts with the expert approach in which the quality manager is forced in a position to know everything about quality. In that scenario the employees are not involved in quality development at all and they shift all responsibility onto the quality manager. The expert approach often unintentionally gives the impression to the employees that they are not competent in matters of quality. The EFQM model (2009) too states that the leaders have to empower their employees and also have to involve them in the development of the policy. Moreover, all stakeholders must be involved in the development of the organizational policy to a certain degree.

The organizational framework

The process that results in the recognition of quality development is a long-winded work. A lot of prerequisites have to be fulfilled in the realization of it. Quality development which is soundly embedded in the whole organization needs a workable organization structure, a structure which stimulates the involvement of the employees as much as possible. That could be for instance a quality management board in which representatives of all departments participate. That board can create a framework with which departments can build quality. To enhance the involvement of all employees a system of dialogue sessions can be organized. In these sessions employees discuss issues concerning quality on a free basis.

The deployment of quality development is a serious concern. It is necessary that quality management is not reduced to just an office or one person responsible for it. Obviously we need people who do the preparatory research and analysis. That information must be made to the benefit of the organization. The interpretation of data, for instance, is ideally a collective process. That is certainly the case for the conclusions which are drawn from the facts. The core must lie in the communication about the facts. It does not suffice if a lot of people deliver information to update current data.

Leadership. An integral quality development program needs stimulating leadership which believes in the strengths of its co-workers and which can motivate them. Leadership is the critical factor for the success and failure of quality development. In order for leaders to be really stimulating, they have to deliver

efforts. How does leadership cope with resistance in such a way that employees are motivated to engage in the change process and in the process of quality development? Leading such projects is much more than just a technical matter. It is a matter of motivating people to adopt a new state of mind, another attitude and behavior. Leadership has to integrate many aspects and has to take account of the employees, the organization and the means available. The situation of the organization determines which dimension will get more attention than another. In our opinion leadership can be perceived as a range of functions within an organization, which do not have to be incorporated by one person. Shared leadership as a result of a well balanced and well organized delegation can become very powerful en meaningful.

Involvement and commitment. Another basic prerequisite for the success of quality development is a clear commitment of management. The involvement of the leaders is easily the most important critical success factor. Without active participation and commitment of the top, success cannot be guaranteed. Involvement alone is not sufficient. Only when it is clear for everybody in the organization that the top is committed actively to work in a qualitative way and to make quality possible for others, quality development can get the necessary strength. Of course, quality development is impossible without investments. To decide about investments it is of course necessary that the top is convinced of the profitability of such investments, knowing that the results will become visible in the long run.

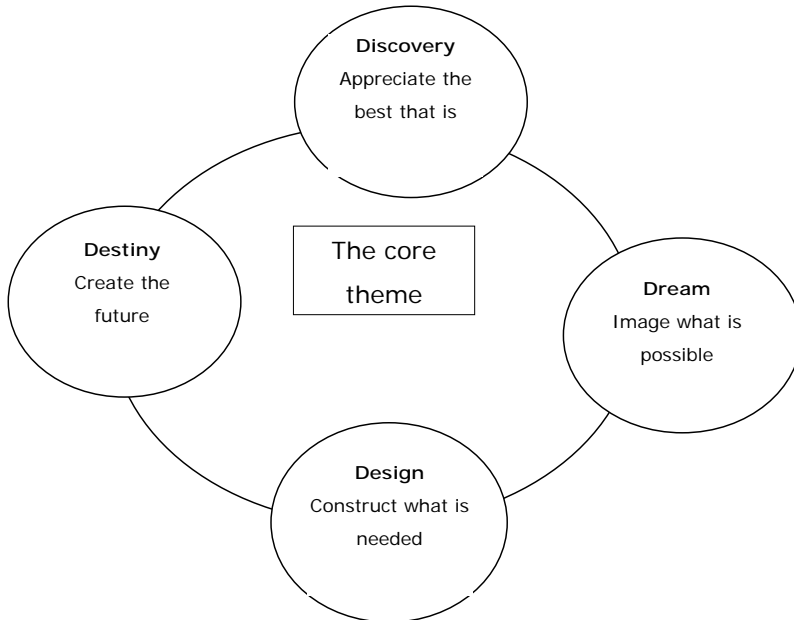
Stages in a project of quality development

At the heart of the process of appreciative inquiry is the four stage cycle that we describe more in detail and apply to integral quality development. Every cycle is based on a positive core theme. The choice of a core theme can be made by the management team, or by a group of representatives of all departments of the organization. The core theme is formulated in a positive way and describes what is wanted. Once the core theme is known, the first stage in the process can start. Figure 2 shows the four stages of the appreciative inquiry cycle.

Stage 1 Discovery: The goal of this stage is to explore the peak experiences of people. Those are experiences of moments when the organization was at its best, that it achieved the best results. The essence is the discovery of the positive capacities of the organization. In this process people examine their experiences to discover the factors which contribute to the peak. The core of the approach in these stages is telling stories about good co-operation, about innovation, about best practices, etc. The first step in this stage is the identification of the stakeholders that should have a voice in determining the future of the organization. In the process of integral quality development those can be the customers or clients, the employees, the persons who are responsible for daily quality management, top

management. Often it is useful also to add the suppliers and partners of the network. The challenge is to involve the whole system. With the selected stakeholders an appreciative interview about their positive experiences with the core theme is done. The questions of the interview protocol are invitations to tell positive stories. This approach differs radically from the quantitative measuring in traditional quality control and expands the objectives of quality management. The information gathered in this stage is the basis for the next stage.

Figure 2. The 4-D cycle (Cooperrider, 2005)



Stage 2 Dream: In this stage people imagine a future for their organization. People are invited to think strategically about the organization and to share images of their hopes and dreams for a collective future. The participants are invited to make a leap forward in time in their imagination. Their creativity is stimulated to imagine what their organization would be like in future.

Stage 3 Design: When the dream about the future is articulated, the participants turn to creating their ideal organization (Cooperrider, 2005). Now the question is raised which changes are necessary to realize the future. Many aspects of the organization are involved, such as strategy, finances, information, relations with customers, leadership, etc. In this stage provocative propositions are formulated to break through status quo and to stimulate real change. They indicate the direction in which the organization should develop.

Stage 4 Destiny: This stage concerns action. Action plans are developed, teams are formed. A set of good actions are defined with a clear lever and ownership.

Relational practices

Shared ownership is an important characteristic of the appreciative approach. Development of quality is, in essence, a collective project that goes far beyond techniques. It is about relations which must be built and renewed repeatedly.

What really matters in appreciative inquiry are relational practices (Bouwen, 2008). The elements that are really generative and which make the difference with the traditional problem solving approach are high quality relational practices. For that reason development relational practices are crucial also for integral quality.

Relational practices are activities in which various parties participate, each with their own concerns, needs and history, in order to realize something new for themselves and for the others. Such relational practice is goal-oriented, interest based and task centered. The quality of relational practice depends on these criteria: (1) shared ownership of tasks; (2) open, specific and personal communication; (3) mutually energizing and rewarding activity; (4) willingness to create and recreate meaning in mutual dependence; (5) opportunity for deep learning (double loop); (6) mutually tested and contradictable statements; (7) recognition of social identities; (8) differences in power are recognized.

Relational practice has two legs: the practice in which people in a task context do something together and the relation in which people give each other a place in the whole. It is typical of relational practice that the different parties participate and are willing to create and recreate meaning in mutual dependence. The determining factors in these processes are: (1) the creation of meaning (searching together for meaning); (2) participation (participate in a collective project); (3) the development of knowledge.

The search for meaning

In an organization top management, the quality manager and the employees should do more than putting together the pieces of the puzzle to determine the quality level of the organization. From different backgrounds, perspectives and experiences they try to give meaning to the achievements and the role of quality in their organization. Contrary to an expert approach, to realize this approach relational practices are necessary.

All partners have to be aware that in relational practice they share collective experiences in a different way and also that they formulate important questions in a different way. Let us take the example of outreaching assistance. Even if there is a common definition, it still seems that every social worker shapes it in their own way in their practice, that every social worker estimates the value of it differently; often it is not evident what could be the added value and the meaning for the clients themselves.

Language

Moreover, using the same language does not mean that the partners interpret words and concepts in the same way. Let us take the term 'quality' as example: for some people this means that a product or service realizes the minimal norms a customer can expect; for other people it means that the organization realizes its objectives and vision. For still others quality is a synonym for a faultless production or service delivery process.

We therefore suppose that in relational practice of quality development many languages interact with each other: the language of the general manager, the language of the employee, the language of the customer, that of the person who is responsible for quality procedures, etc. The challenge is to realize interaction with those different languages and to try to understand people from different backgrounds. Finally, it is also important to search for the meaning of experiences and problems.

The management of relational practices between the parties involved inside and outside the organization needs the clarification and the orchestration of the dialogue, so that the partners can continue to develop themselves with new enthusiasm (Bouwen and De Witte, 1996). Consequently, the role and the place of quality development in a network of relational practices must go far beyond the traditional quality control approach.

Identity

Good communication within a relational practice is more than exchanging words and meanings. In relational practices the partners accept and confirm their identities mutually. The different identities of management, employees, customers, quality managers etc. must all be acknowledged in their specificity. Moreover, the diversity of the parties must be recognized as an added value for the common activities. The fact that the partners bring in experiences and proposals from very diverse perspectives and insights, fosters richer solutions than if only like-minded parties co-operated. It can be very challenging for integral quality development to involve customers for instance as partners in relational practices. They can broaden the approach of problems in a way management and employees alone cannot reach. Every partner has to find its own role in the many meetings in order to realize the best quality. The development of relational practices with partners in integral quality development is an adventure for an organization of which the outcome is not predictable beforehand. It is much more than a purely instrumental relation in which the customers only play a limited role.

Space

To develop relational practices in society, the quality managers must get space from the management. That concerns the level of the organization as such as well as the network of organizations in which the organization operates. The risk exists that some management people consider the investment in relational practices as evidence for a lack of efficiency. In their opinion such practices are too difficult to translate in quantitative indicators. In our experience however, the big challenge is the creation of commitment to the development of relational practices of everybody in an organization, which is endangered when only efficiency is the leading criterion. Integral quality development needs support from the management to innovatively interact with their partners. They especially need a moratorium, a space to experiment, to develop new kinds of relations with organizations, groups and customers in society.

To participate in a collective project

To install relational practice more is needed than an assignment of tasks and good agreements between the parties involved. It is necessary that the partners invest together in a collective project in which they share responsibilities. The term 'interactive participation' clarifies the kind of co-operation that is necessary to realize relational practice. Through adequate discussions the partners participate in the realization of collective projects. We think for instance of social work research that an educational institute carries out together with organizations from the professional field, with representatives of local authorities and with groups of clients. In relational practice the partners contribute in different ways to the development, the preparation and the realization of plans, to the elaboration of solutions and to the application and the dissemination of the results (Bouwen and Tallieu, 2004). The partners are not just partially or indirectly involved, but they are also partially responsible for the consequences of the project. That results in shared responsibility.

We focus on the process of empowerment that constitutes the back bone of all relational practice. It is not sufficient that the partners have a say in the matter. They must also have the power for those matters for which they are competent. Empowerment supplies the partners with the possibility to use their skills and capabilities, to strive for important goals, to raise their self-confidence and to engage themselves in managing projects together.

The development of knowledge

The exchange of experiences and the contribution of one's own knowledge and competences to learn together is the central process of relational practice. It concerns constructing knowledge, knowledge development and sharing

knowledge. All knowledge has a contents aspect as well as a relational aspect. Knowledge always concerns something, but at the same time constructs a relation between the parties involved (Bouwen, Craps and Dewulf, 2005). The expert knowledge of quality managers and the experiential knowledge of the employees and of the customers are complementary. They can be considered as consecutive activities in the cycle of quality development.

People create common knowledge by engaging in collective actions and by sharing and exchanging experiences from practice. By participating in relational practice, every partner learns to create and to recreate the collaborative relations and exchanges experiences permanently. This needs a kind of participation that is not clouded by an asymmetry in power. Existing differences in power are minimized when all the partners share their competences. Moreover, to establish real co-operation, it is necessary that the partners are sensitive to and conscious of differences in power in relations. Only then, a strong sense of co-ownership can develop.

Conclusions

To give quality management a new impetus and richer orientation, the appreciative inquiry approach offers a promising methodology. The orientation to integral quality and development calls for other methods than the traditional methods of quality control and auditing. Whereas the latter are to a lesser or larger extent founded by mistrust, quality development based on the appreciative approach is based on the strengths of people and organizations. Why the appreciative inquiry approach is well suited for the developmental purpose, has to do with its generative power due to the relational practices that it stimulates.

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