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**David Cooperrider is best known for his theory and practice of appreciative inquiry (AI) as it relates to corporate strategy, change leadership, and positive organizational scholarship. The idea behind the AI method is to help organizations globally through strengths-based approaches to multi-stakeholder innovation and sustainable design. He is also a founder and chairman of the Center for Business as an Agent of World Benefit, which proposes that many global issues today are a chance for organizations to embrace social entrepreneurship and eco-innovation, and find new sources of value.**

**Cooperrider has lectured or taught at many prestigious academic institutions, including Harvard, Stanford, Katholieke University in Belgium, and Cambridge. He has authored 14 books and more than 50 articles, and also designed and facilitated a 2004 UN summit on global corporate citizenship for Kofi Annan and 500 business leaders. He also helped build the United Religions Initiative by working with ex-President Jimmy Carter, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and many other religious leaders. Cooperrider's distinctions include receiving ASTD's highest award for "distinguished contribution to the field" for organizational learning in 2004.**

**Q| What was your first job and what lesson did you take away from it?**

My first real job was in college. I was working for a moving company where I became a truck driver and also moved furniture. It was a really powerful lesson for me. As truck drivers, our senior managers and the owners of the business never listened to us regarding strategies and visions for the future. They thought that the truck drivers were just the laborers while they were the smart people who lead. There was a split between the thinkers and doers. It always felt odd to me because the company was losing business, and we were never included in the discussions of the ways to grow the business. That was curious to me because we had so much customer knowledge. We were packing their dishes, moving their pianos, and traveling with them cross-country. We'd get so close to these customers, and yet, managers would never listen to our ideas. It was always command-and-control management, which was very out of touch with what the customers wanted.

## **Q| What is the story behind the development of the AI methodology?**

AI burst onto the academic scene with an article from my dissertation that I published with Suresh Srivastva in 1987. It was titled, “Appreciative Inquiry into Organizational Life.” It argued that, from the Industrial Era on, we’ve reached the end of problem-solving as a mode of management inquiry capable of inspiring the growth and development of people, and creating the cultures of real innovation that are demanded by today’s complex and competitive business environments.

Second, it argued that all these deficit-based forms of management analysis—for example, Six Sigma, gap analysis, training needs analysis, and threat analysis—are keeping us locked in our organizations today, and for a simple but radical reason. All the studies in the world of negative states will tell us nothing about the positive preferred state. All the studies and surveys in the world on low morale will never tell us what a fully engaged workforce looks like. All the studies on high turnover and what causes high turnover will never teach us anything about a magnetic work environment where it’s attracting the best talent in the industry.

We had really painted ourselves into a picture that argued that organizations are big problems to be solved. Appreciative inquiry, in that early phase, called for a shift. Organizations are centers of human relatedness; they’re living systems, alive with infinite imagination and the capacity to connect to a full and rich omnipresence of strengths. This problem-analytic set of traditions can be traced to the machine metaphors of organizational life, to Taylorism and scientific management, and it helps lead to some incremental learning and improvement to find out everything that is holding a system back, but it won’t make the breakthroughs that we need today.

## **Q| What do you see as the future of appreciative inquiry?**

I think the future is unfolding in an exciting way. One of my good colleagues, Marcus Buckingham, calls it the “strengths revolution in management.” We’re on the verge of seeing three levels to the strengths revolution—the elevation of strengths, the concentration and magnification of strengths, and the refraction of our highest human strengths out into society.

The elevation of strengths has to do with all the ways managers can elevate the strengths of every member in their system. Why is that important? Surveys show that if you ask people, “To what extent does your company know your strengths and put your strengths into play everyday?” You get an answer that only 20 percent of people agree that their organizations do that to a great extent. In other words, 80 percent of people are feeling like their supervisors and their teams don’t know their strengths well. I see that all the time. I think we are leaving lots of human capacity untouched, and that leads to huge frustration in organizations, when people live their lives removed from their real strengths.

The second level of the strengths revolution has to do with how you manage, lead, and develop the tools for creating exciting new combinations and chemistries of strengths, and not just individual strengths, but for the whole system. I had a conversation with Peter Drucker, shortly before he passed away. He said, “The task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths in ways that make the system’s weaknesses irrelevant.”

In other words, the second phase of the strengths revolution is all about the tools for bringing people together to not only elevate individual strengths but to create new connections and combinations of strengths and alignments of strengths across the entire system. For example, the AI summit methodology is an organizational planning methodology where we bring between 300 and 500 people in the system together (sometimes 1,000 or even 2,000 people) to plan and design the future.

The third level of the strengths revolution is where we create organizations that become centers for magnifying our highest human strengths, but then refract those out into society—human strengths like courage, wisdom, love of humanity, creativity, and entrepreneurship. The question we're working on now is whether the strengths revolution can lead us to a point where positive institutions can be defined as places that elevate, magnify, and then extend our higher human strengths into the world? In other words, can a corporation be a vehicle for bringing more courage or wisdom into the world? And what we're seeing is that that's absolutely the case.

**Q| Could you talk a little bit about sustainable value creation, the core proposition behind the Center for Business as an Agent of World Benefit?**

The whole domain of creating sustainable value for society is going to be the cutting edge of the fields of human resources, organizational development, and training. Every professional in these areas needs to understand the power of building sustainable enterprises, which are green companies and companies that have tremendous social payoff and impact. We're using the concept of sustainable value creation, which means creating value for shareholders obviously, but also creating value for society's many stakeholders, including for the environment and the community.

What we're noticing is that the top-rated stars in every industry are companies that are emerging as creators of sustainable value. Toyota is 10 business years ahead of GM because of their focus on the environmental contributions, and they're not just resting on their hybrids. For example, the CEO just announced they're working on a car that purifies the air as it's being used.

Companies like Whole Foods have grown thousands of percent in size, energy, and customer loyalty because they are committed to becoming a company that creates sustainable value and more organic, healthier foods. There is a sustainability revolution, but it's not the same old philanthropic or charitable reasons; it's because it's tremendous business.

**Q| What was your experience like designing and facilitating the UN summit on global corporate citizenship in 2004?**

My colleagues and I were called by Kofi Annan's team at the United Nations and were asked to lead and design a leadership summit, the largest of its kind in human history of business leaders from the biggest multinational corporations in the world in conversation together. We developed an appreciative inquiry summit to take them through a process of designing, envisioning, and building strategies to create a whole new level of global corporate citizenship for the 21st century.

Kofi Annan took this strengths-based philosophy and articulated it in his own words. He said, "Let us choose today to unite the strengths of markets with the power of universal ideals. Let us

choose to reconcile the forces of private entrepreneurship with the needs of the great masses of humanity.”

What he realized in his head was that we will never be able to realize our Millennium development goals—for example, eradicating extreme poverty by the year 2050 or healing the earth’s environment—without new, enlightened business models. What emerged was a discussion that maybe business could be the most powerful force for creating a better world than we’ve ever seen.

We had a group of more than 500 CEOs from all over the world planning the next stages of what’s now called the UN Global Compact. It means a global promise for a new vision of business and society in the 21st century. Today there are more than 5,000 corporations, from Wal-Mart, to Microsoft, to Coca-Cola, to Vodafone, to Lafarge, enlisted as a part of this effort.

**Q| What do you find rewarding about teaching, and what do you hope your students gain from it?**

In all the teaching I’ve done, my high point moments have been in the field with the students, not in the classroom. I’m a terrific advocate of action learning and experiential learning in the real world. For example, at the UN Global Leaders Summit in 2004 that we facilitated, I had MBA students, PhD students, and undergraduate students with us. In fact, my son, an undergraduate at that time, was with us.

It’s just amazing that after a session like that at the UN, you meet with the students, and you build concepts and theories of what’s happening, and the students are engaged in creating new visions for business and society in the 21st century. It’s a way of teaching that brings knowledge, learning, and passion alive.

What I’m finding is that with the combination of learning in the field and action learning, plus adding the purpose, meaning, and significance of sustainability to the equation, all of a sudden, students’ lives are changed. The liberalization of the mind and the incredible learning energy that is released is like nothing I’ve ever seen before.

**Q| Are you working on any new books/projects?**

Yes, I’m working on articulating the three circles of the strengths revolution. It’s my favorite topic right now. When I’m doing speeches with executives, companies are really responding to this discussion about creating fully strengths-based organizations.

Some colleagues and I are also working on a book called Business as an Agent of World Benefit where we are pulling together all the stories we have lifted up of innovations, including business as a force for peace in higher conflict zones, business as a force for eco-innovation and imagination, and business as a force for the eradication of extreme poverty.

**Q| How do you enjoy spending your free time?**

My free time is completely spent with the family: Nancy; the kids, Hannah, Matthew, and Daniel; and my mom. It’s often spent in nature—sailing, kayaking, or backpacking. My favorite times spent are in those combinations of the family and nature.