

# The Appreciative Organization as a Liberating Space

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*The authors sought, through an Appreciative Inquiry, to discover how Appreciative Inquiry contributes to the creation of an appreciative organization. It was discovered that six essential conditions together liberate or unleash personal and organizational power. The resulting “six freedoms” are described as contributing to the reality of the appreciative stance experienced in an appreciative organization.*

Creating the appreciative organization, as described in *The Appreciative Organization*, begins with appreciation: appreciation of self, others, systems, conversations, relationships, dreams, actions, and beliefs. To appreciate, it is suggested, is a way “to increase in value” through the affirming voices and actions that create the vitality of an organization.

This appreciation takes many forms throughout an organization. We have spent the past 20 years observing organizations and communities around the globe transform themselves using Appreciative Inquiry for organizational and social change. We began to ask ourselves: Why do people get so excited and want to participate with Appreciative Inquiry? Why does participation so readily lead to innovation, productivity, employee satisfaction and profitability? What creates these possibilities for personal transformation, and for people to discover and be their best at work? What are the conditions that foster cooperation throughout a whole system of highly diverse groups of people? In other words, how does Appreciative Inquiry contribute to the creation of the appreciative organization?

In keeping with the spirit of Appreciative Inquiry, we decided to seek answers to these questions by conducting an inquiry. We created a set of questions, held focus groups, and conducted formal and informal interviews in several of our client organizations. We sought to discover *what it is that creates the appreciative organization through the use of Appreciative Inquiry*.

Our key finding is that Appreciative Inquiry is a process that generates six essential conditions that together liberate or unleash personal and organizational power. We call these essential conditions the Six Freedoms. They are described with quotes from employees in various organizations.

## Freedom to be Known in Relationship

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

Appreciative Inquiry doesn’t *just* build relationships it builds bridges across boundaries of power and authority. As Mark Maier, a Machinist, says, “Appreciative Inquiry blew the communication gap wide open.”

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

### **Freedom to be Heard**

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

Mark Maier supervised a group that performed technical maintenance on the Company's production machinery. He and his staff felt undervalued, not heard, and often ignored — even when it came to their particular area of expertise. Mark decided to put Appreciative Inquiry to the test. He initiated an inquiry among all of the team's internal customers: engineers and technical support staff.

He and his staff collected stories of exceptional support that people had experienced both here and at other companies. He invited people to dream about the service that they'd always wanted, and to describe it in detail. What was the result? People felt recognized. They built relationships across functions, in particular between engineering and technical support. Being heard brought the group to life.

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

In American Baptist International Ministries, several months of interviews with over 1200 stakeholders worldwide yielded an entirely new model of service: from *sending people out to do good*, to *linking people and organizations of similar intent* around the globe. This vision was so compelling — and its momentum so great — that by the first anniversary of the summit, close to 30 new initiatives were launched using this “sister organization” template.

In the two years that followed, close to 200 new initiatives unfolded. Consultant Jim Ludema described the power of the community's dream as “unleashing energy that was already there. It was a positive explosion waiting to happen.”

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

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

When people choose to do a project and commit to others to do it, they get very creative and determined about it. A front line employee, for example, who had volunteered to lead an innovation team went to her personnel department and asked for coaching. She declared that she needed to learn to facilitate meetings and help her team make decisions in order for them to succeed.

Her determination paid off for the team, the organization and herself. The team's project was finished in record time and led to significant process improvements. She was promoted to a supervisory position and her new team is thriving with her leadership.

### Freedom to Act with Support

To break through years' worth of apathy and distrust, John Deere Harvester Works initiated a five-day summit — the last two days of which were focused exclusively on what they called “tactical implementation.” Participants selected 10 projects that they believed were most critically important. Then, to their surprise, they began working with one another right there in the Summit to plan, line up resources, and initiate the projects.

As consultant Jim Ludema says, “This immediate, concrete support reversed over 20 years of history by showing that management was serious about involving the whole system in the changes. In response, employees invested huge amounts of knowledge and creativity into finding innovative solutions.” As a result, the plant reduced its new product cycle time from 5 to 3 years and gained millions in new market share.

Tina LaGrange at Hunter Douglas shows us that this freedom liberates individual and organizational power — even when the intended actions fail to reach fruition:

My co-workers and I worked hard to make the case for and create a cross-training program. It was up and running and ready for implementation, and then . . . *nobody signed up!!!* I was deeply disappointed — but ultimately OK. In the end, the only thing I really accomplished was getting an answer: people simply weren't that interested. But an answer was a big thing. It meant that I had the power to get an answer.

### Freedom to be Positive

A long-term employee of an organization mired in deficit discourse shared with dismay: “I have ulcers because of this negative thinking and talking. Every day I come to work and hear nothing but complaints and criticism and blaming. I hate coming to work.”

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

People whose dispositions are basically upbeat are the first to celebrate the Freedom to be Positive. But the effect of Appreciative Inquiry is so strong and powerful that it can even transform deficit discourse and negative thinking. In the words of one employee: “I am a very positive thinker, so this suits me very well. But I believe this process is powerful enough to influence all of the staff — not just those of us who are already this way.”

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

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

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

In our work, we see that Appreciative Inquiry works in designing an appreciative stance, in part, because it unleashes all of the Six Freedoms, over the course of just one complete

4-D Cycle. Deep involvement in the process is the outcome. As noted by a supervisor at Hunter Douglas, “As people tried and got results, they gained confidence. That led to five times as much input, and the desire to get more involved.” Recognizing these freedoms as essential to the process of co-constructing and nurturing the positive culture of an appreciative organization contributes to the liberation of individual and organizational power.

### THE SIX FREEDOMS

- ◆ *Freedom to be Known in Relationship*
- ◆ *Freedom to be Heard*
- ◆ *Freedom to Dream in Community*
- ◆ *Freedom to Choose to Contribute*
- ◆ *Freedom to Act with Support*
- ◆ *Freedom to be Positive*

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

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