Chapter 4
Appreciative Sharing for Organizational Knowledge Work

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Category: Social Aspects of Knowledge Management

INTRODUCTION

This article investigates an organizational approach to knowledge sharing (Ludema, Whitney, Mohr, & Griffin, 2003; Thatchenkery, 2005) based on the positive change philosophy of appreciative inquiry (AI) (Thatchenkery & Chowdhry, 2007; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Curran, 1991; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Of specific interest is the context of a community model to enable knowledge work through a participative sharing process (Vat, 2009). Of much concern here is an

effort to put into perspective the social dimensions of knowledge sharing (Watkins & Cooperrider, 1996; Brown & Duguid, 1991) which not only deals with the internal and external boundaries of a distributed system of knowledge (Hoadley & Pea, 2002; Tsoukas, 1996), but with knowledge embedded within particular contexts of knowing. The promise of AI is that in every organization something works and change can be managed through the identification of what works, and the analysis of how to do more of what works (Bushe, 1995; Gergen, 1990; Harman, 1990). A key characteristic of the appreciative sharing approach is that it is a generative process. That means it is a moving target, and is created and constantly re-created by the people who use it. The premise in our investigation is that while the support of technologies is essential for a

community in knowledge sharing, its success rests with its people – organizers, information and knowledge providers, sponsors, users, and volunteers – who support the community in a variety of ways (Hemlin, Allwood, & Martin, 2004). Therefore, when attempting to design technology in support of knowledge communities (Linn, 2000), it is important to remember "what is working around here?" in the organization. Such knowledge includes not only information capture and transmission, but also the establishment of social relationships (Hubbard, 1998) in which people can collaboratively construct their understanding.

BACKGROUND OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

The contributions behind the work of appreciative inquiry (AI) (http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu), is mainly attributed to David L. Cooperrider's (1986) doctoral research at Case Western Reserve University. The term AI first appeared in Cooperrider's feedback report to the Cleveland Clinic's Board of Governors following an organizational diagnostic exercise he had been undertaking there in 1980 (Lewis, Passmore, & Cantore, 2008, p.34). In his work at the clinic Cooperrider noticed the level of positive collaboration in the organization and began to study the life-giving factors which gave rise to this. The context of AI is about the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives life to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. Since the appearance of AI some twenty years ago, researchers and practitioners have described it in many ways. It has been called a philosophy, a revolutionizing force, a transformational change process, a life-giving theory and practice, and even a new world view (Watkins &

Mohr, 2001; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). Still, it is helpful to look into AI from the notion of social constructionism developed by Kenneth Gergen (1999), which is so called because it aims to account for the ways in which phenomena (such as knowledge sharing) are socially constructed. Before Gergen, the seminal treatise of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), named *The Social Construction of Reality* is also useful to understand the foundation for AI's peculiar approach to knowledge work because it involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. Further up the AI's origin of research is the name of Kurt Lewin (1946), who is credited with the early development of action research during the 1940s. At the heart of action research is a spirit of inquiry rather than a mechanistic analytical study often considered as an abstract disconnected exercise by observers searching for findings; yet, action research has the potential to bring about change in whatever is being explored as the research proceeds. This characteristic of action research has indeed become an important principle underpinning AI's processes of operation.

The Complexity of Knowledge Work

In 1969, Peter Drucker emphasized that knowledge had become the crucial resource of the economy. He claims the credit for coining the notion of 'knowledge work', which he contrasted with more traditional forms of work such as service work and manual work. Today, the term 'knowledge work' tends to refer to specific occupations which are "characterized by an emphasis on theoretical knowledge, creativity and use of analytical and social skills" (Frenkel et al., 1995, p.773). Knowledge work, interpreted this way, encompasses both what is traditionally referred to as professional work, such as accountancy, scientific and legal work, and more contemporary types of work, such as consultancy, software development, advertis-

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