



David Cooperrider

# Towards an 'economy' of connecting strengths

## Scaling-up the generative power of AI



OPENING KEYNOTE BY DAVID COOPERRIDER, FOUNDER OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Only for the fact that you can see and listen to David Cooperrider in his opening keynote video stream [▶](#), I'm not going to try and give a thorough replay of his speech. And it's not the words that do the generative trick; it's David's attitude that I'm trying to disclose to you in this article. Warmly introduced by the 'Belgian shepherd of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), professor René Bouwen from the University of Leuven,' David recalls his trip to Belgium in 1991 and his appreciation for family life and the joy of his kids visiting 'Manneke Pis.' David loves the word 'Amai.' How on earth am I going to give you a full report on his opening speech? I'm not. Please read the reflections from four voices out of David's audience, and hopefully this will give you a generative impression of what happened there in Ghent, on the morning of Wednesday April 25, 2012. Enjoy reading. It was a pleasure to assemble.

Impressions assembled by Cees Hoogendijk  
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## 'If you can Guide Walmart into a Zero Emission Strategy...'

*This article about the keynote speech of David Cooperrider was to become an example of journalism. I was privileged to look at David's presentation through the 'eyes of wisdom' of Jac De Bruyn. Jac is a global citizen, during his whole live striving for humanity; as member of NGOs, being a manager in a firm, supporting 'chance children' in private. Jac has contributed to successes, but sometimes he missed the sustainability of the changes. In David, he sees the 'prophet' who deserves the utmost podium for his generative, sustainable approach called Appreciative Inquiry:*

'In Europe we tend to see Walmart as the capitalistic, employee abusing supermarket, and maybe that was true. But nowadays, the same company has chosen a sustainable approach, thanks to the (provocative?) interventions of David Cooperrider. Even in just this piece of art, he has proven himself to be someone who can help us make the world a better place. It seems logical – but it is, of course, very extraordinary– that David had significant constructive influence on large scale conventions like the United Nations Business Leaders, chaired by Kofi Anan himself. David's question 'Can business be beneficial to society?' is very intriguing. Personally, I find his style of inquiry, and the way he suggest we practice it, highly appealing. And done collectively, like in the auditorium this afternoon, this inquiry has an amazing strengthening effect on me. In my opinion, David embodies and suggests a method which touches the core, the essence of human being and becoming. For me it is clear that he is the man who we should listen to, and so we did today! And it feels great.'

*This may be the honorable opinion of Jac De Bruyn, but if you would ask me, I would say: 'Jac is right.' What do you think? What are you going to do tomorrow?*



## Pre-conference Reflections of a Senior Participant

*On Wednesday morning, David Cooperrider explained more about the central elements of AI.*

### 'The art of the question is leading us into the process of change.'

When preparing an AI process, 90 per cent of the time is invested in the selection and choice of the right questions to start with. As an example, Cooperrider was telling us about the first meetings leading to the creation of 'United Religions Initiatives (URI).' That is a network of Cooperative Circles bringing persons together of different conviction, faith and spiritual tradition.

As a senior I was touched by this statement: 'One could say a key task in life is to discover and define our life purpose, and then accomplish it to the best of our ability.' Indeed this question was often in my mind, especially being educated in a school of a religious congregation. Personally I suggest all of us to deal with the question David was using in his first AI meeting with religious leaders:

*'Can you share a story of a moment, of the period of time, where Clarity about life purpose emerged for you; a moment where your calling happened, where there was an important awakening or teaching, or where you received some guiding vision? Now, what do you sense you are supposed to do for the rest of your life?'*

The exchange between religious leaders was so rich that it generated energy for the URI creation. It became a fast growing network with about 600 circles all over the world. These circles promote real contact, dialogue, common action.

All of us could start a Cooperative Circle in the URI network. This is how: bring seven persons together of different believes and traditions and start an inquiry into their strengths and common grounds. Being part of a URI Circle myself, it is my experience that this in-depth dialogue broadens our understandings of elements of the Mystery that is carrying the universe.

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## What's Next for Democracy?

*David Cooperrider offers insights learned from Appreciative Inquiry application*

More than 2000 years of democracy have brought many changes to our world. More change is on the way. In the 21st century, democracy movements have been seen across the world. The cry for deliberative democracy is being heard around the world, and is being enacted from Nepal to Bhutan, and from Syria to Somalia. It's met with some success. But the work isn't done.

That same strength of respecting the voice of the people 'as the voice of God' that has brought about change in the past must be reconsidered to find a new way forward yet again. Deliberative democracy may be part of the answer. E-democracy is a likely part of the ecology. Local communities are one of the core strengths to be turned to in creating new paradigms of freedom. The political sphere is filled with the dialogue of gridlock. Communities are crying foul. Jigging voter systems is an increasing trend. Given these realities, David Cooperrider, Case Western Reserve University's internationally renowned organisational behaviour professor and founding thought leader of the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) movement, suggests we need new imaginations around the next phase of democracy. He proposes the strengths-based, AI approach might offer some clues to a way forward: 'From our small experiments with whole cities, what have we learned that might help give birth to something beyond deliberative democracy or dialogical democracy?'

### What about what might be called 'design democracy?'

'Our experience with AI and strengths based approaches is that the very best in human experiences doesn't come out in the discovery stage of dialogue but in the stage of collective making or designing,' David tells Axiom News: 'As people build artifacts, as they build the new conception of the city, re-design building structures, that's when the very best comes out. Look at when the greatest in our communities emerged in the U.S. in the early days, not in conversations, but in the community barn-buildings, in the designing and building of artifacts. Can you imagine our politicians designing the next smart grid systems together with citizens, collectively designing?' says David.

There was a recent U.K. case where an attacked politician was responding to the disgruntled community with the defense, 'but I held dialogue for six months before we put in the new highway, I followed all the protocol, I ticked in the bureaucratic checklist.' Imagine if he, and the community, had sat at the design table together, creating a new transportation system together.

David is currently exploring further the generativity that comes out in this design phase of AI, and the implications of this for the broader political sphere. He chuckles a little as he shares what would be a definite overstatement of the opportunities, a bumper sticker that reads, 'Down with dialogue, up with design.'

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## The Nations United in Hope

The opening day of the WAIC 2012 gives me the impression that we are ready to take on several challenges. Just imagine if each of the 600 participants talk about positive ideas and AI to one person every day and that number exponentially grows. I think within 20 years we will be able to completely convert the planet. This may be termed as wishful thinking, but we don't really have a choice but to be wishful first and practical next. This is a good beginning to think about transformation of structures that we are disappointed with. We have got to believe that we have a chance and think that all is not lost.

These were the first impressions that I got from the opening session. With the examples that David Cooperrider gave, it will be hard to say that people do not have ways to change things. In my own India context, which is filled with issues of discrimination, poverty, vulnerability and what not, 'How does this make sense?' is the skeptical question that arises. Well, then, the answer comes back as a thud: 'Do we have the language of Transformation?' If we don't, we need to invent it. And for that, Appreciative Inquiry comes in handy and helps us to IMAGINE how my country would be without those troubles. I think that this is the beginning of a long journey that will alter perceptions, beliefs and systems.

Ashok Gladston Xavier

