
The Positive Arc of Systemic Strengths

How Appreciative Inquiry and Sustainable Designing
Can Bring Out the Best in Human Systems

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‘The Positive Arc of Systemic Strengths’ explores the important question: when is it that the best in human systems comes out most naturally and easily—especially in collective action, planning and design initiatives encompassing regions and cities, extended enterprises, industries and UN-level world summits? By analysing the performance and impacts of six case studies of the ‘whole system in the room’ Appreciative Inquiry design summit, this article provides a bird’s eye view of the opportunities, challenges and exciting new vistas opening up in this, the collaborative age—a time when systemic action and macromanagement skill are the primary leverage points for game-changing innovation, scalable solutions and industry leadership. While management innovation is rare, this article proposes that the tools are at hand for us to stand up, step up and scale up as we build a world where businesses can excel, people can thrive and nature can flourish.

- Systemic action
- Large group planning
- Strengths revolution in management
- Positive psychology
- Design thinking
- Sustainable value
- Mirror flourishing
- New organisational design
- Appreciative Inquiry Summit method

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We are entering the collaborative age. In eras past, the focus was on preparing for organisations to be change frontrunners capable of capturing strategic advantage through disruptive innovation and by creating their own organisational cultures capable of embracing relentless change. Today, however, executives are saying that organisational change is not enough. The overriding question is no longer about change per se, but is about *change at the scale of the whole*. ‘How do we move a 67,000 person telephone company *together*?’ ‘How do we move a whole Northeast Ohio economic region in momentum building alignment and shared consensus?’ ‘How do we move a whole dairy industry toward sustainable dairy, not in fragile isolated pockets that disadvantage some and advantage others, but across an industry-wide strengthening effort together?’ Or, ‘how do we, as a world system, unite the strengths of markets with the millennium development promises of eradicating extreme, grinding poverty via collective action?’ Meanwhile, the list of grand challenges calling out for ‘change at the scale of the whole’ grows in complexity and urgency: the call to systemic climate action; massive energy and infrastructure transition; establishing economic conditions for peace; creating sustainable water, regenerative agriculture, sustainable forestry and fisheries and walkable cities; or designing effective polices for moving from an economic era of contained depression to one of sustainability + flourishing.

Nowhere is this call for change at the scale of the whole more decisive for designing and capturing business and society value than in the sustainability domain. We are entering the next phase of the sustainability age in which systemic action is the primary leverage point for successful change (Chouinard *et al.* 2011).

New convening capacities and leadership tools for aligning strengths, interests and priorities at all levels of a supply system, or across public–private sectors including government, academia and NGOs, and even across entire industries, regions and countries—this is the new strategic capacity for game-changing innovation. An additional consideration, equally important, is speed. Big change is often so slow that no matter how good the visionary impulse, the programme or the strategic imperative, it is often dead on arrival because the momentum stalls, politics drag on, priorities drift apart or, more mundanely, it takes months between small group meetings. Consider the maddening attempts to coordinate calendars across slow bureaucracies and more agile entrepreneurial technology upstarts, or to simply synchronise the collective diaries of hyper-booked executives. Jeffery Sachs, the economist, puts the case persuasively. The single ‘most important variable affecting our fate is global cooperation’ and, as he writes, ‘it’s a fundamental point of blinding simplicity’ (Sachs 2008).

In the realm of sustainable business, it is indeed increasingly clear that we’re no longer lacking in isolated sustainability solutions. Everyone is going green or socially responsible. Our greater challenge lies in system-wide *designing*—for creating mutual advantages, for scaling up for what could be trillion dollar solutions, and for discovering the ways of overcoming the challenges of collaborative

creativity across multi-stakeholder supply chains, entire industries and larger whole systems.

In this article we seek to take the call for systemic collaboration to a new octave by exploring advances in what one CEO, in a key report of the UN Global Compact, singled out as ‘the best large group method in the world today’.¹ While research in this article focuses on the performance and results involved in the Appreciative Inquiry Summit approach, it also seeks to advance our understanding of what this special issue of *JCC* calls ‘the positive psychology of sustainability’—that is, why and how the best in people comes out so spontaneously and consistently when they, and their institutions and cultures, are working across silos and separations to build a world where businesses can excel, people can thrive and nature can flourish.

The use of large group methods such as Appreciative Inquiry (AI) for doing the work of management, once a rare practice, is soaring in business and society efforts around the world. While at first it seems incomprehensible that large groups of hundreds and sometimes thousands in the room can be effective in unleashing coherent system-wide strategies, designing rapid prototypes and taking action, this is exactly what is happening, especially in the sustainability domain. Part of the reason is that the AI process is profoundly strengths-based in its assumptions. It is founded on the premise that we excel only by amplifying strengths, never by simply fixing weaknesses. But the other half of the equation is the underestimated power of wholeness: the best in human systems comes about most naturally, even easily, when people collectively experience the wholeness of their system, when strength ignites strength, across complete configurations of relevant and engaged stakeholders, internal and external, and top to bottom.

Sounds complicated? Surprisingly, it is exactly the opposite. Recent research on multiplier effects demonstrates that it is much easier to convene a whole system of stakeholders under the right conditions for joint design thinking—let’s say 700 people for three days, using the design and strategy tools of AI—and address a big-league opportunity collaboratively, strategically and at higher velocity, than it would be to struggle with hundreds of committee or small group meetings that drag on across silos, specialisations, sectors and subsystems. The key: knowing when and how to create what theorists call ‘positive contagion’ and what large group research is calling ‘the concentration effect of strengths’. There is an unmistakable power in leading through strengths—like an electrical arc sparking across a gap—only today it is not the micro strengths of small silos, it is the macromanagement of systemic strengths.

¹ The *Global Compact Leaders Summit Report* (UN Global Compact 2004) documents the impact of Appreciative Inquiry at the United Nations world summit between Kofi Annan and CEOs from 500 corporations including Hewlett-Packard, Starbucks, Tata, Royal Dutch Shell, Novartis, Microsoft, IBM and Coca-Cola. In the report Rodrigo Loures concludes ‘Appreciative Inquiry is the best large group method in the world today’.

Case study analysis

This article features six systemic cases that illuminate in a grounded way a small but consistently rewarding set of success factors.

The concept-building meta-analysis is drawn from published accounts of the ‘whole system in the room’ AI Summit work with Fairmount Minerals, whose award-winning case shows how a single, exemplar company in the mining industry can punch above its weight through the same principles of systemic collaboration; the UN Global Compact; United Religions Initiative; the city of Cleveland’s decade-long set of annual AI design summits to create ‘a green city on a blue lake’; National Grid and the state-wide energy planning it catalysed for the state of Massachusetts; and finally US Dairy’s industry-wide systems work for sustainable dairy. In addition and perhaps most important, on a theoretical level this article advances our understanding of the concept of ‘mirror flourishing’ (see Cooperrider and Fry 2013 [this issue]), and at the leadership or practice level, it zeroes in on five critical X factors that make systemic collaborations consistently inspiring, innovation producing and simple enough to be leveraged as a mainstream leadership approach.

CEOs worldwide anticipate that sustainability will reach an exponential tipping point within the decade (Lacy *et al.* 2010). Yet at the same time they also report that the majority of managers do not know how to turn systemic sustainability challenges into innovation opportunities, for opening wide new vistas of shared value. Systemic collaboration across whole systems, we hope to demonstrate, holds a golden key. So let’s consider first a single company example—and then move to consider cities, regions, industries and world summits—with a special eye to scalability; that is, the question of change at the scale of the whole.

Fairmount Minerals

On 24 June 2005, Jenniffer Deckard, the CFO of Fairmount Minerals, opened her first ‘whole-system-in-the room’ large-group and company-wide design summit. The idea started when she wondered how to introduce sustainability not as a bolt-on but as an embedded, organisation-wide passion. Looking at a marketplace of unprecedented complexity, Jenniffer felt that ultimate speed, dexterity and collaborative capacity could not be found in older models of management, for example engaging one small group at a time. It was critical, decided Jenniffer, to reach way beyond silos, fiefdoms and specialities and to create a ‘one firm’ alignment of strengths. Jenniffer found solid support from Chuck Fowler, the President and CEO of Fairmount Minerals, and Founder and Chairman, Bill Conway.

Their first sustainable design summit, with hundreds of stakeholders in the room, including customers, global supply chain partners, NGOs and communities, proved successful beyond aspirations. Between 2005 and 2007 revenues

from their new sustainability designed products almost doubled, while earnings from growth and operational efficiencies took a gigantic leap to more than 40% per year. Post-summit research documented an inspired workforce on fire, engaged and empowered. They were proud of Fairmount Minerals. They were engaged top to bottom. And plans from the initiative—including prototypes of new products, the discovery of new markets and the design of renewable energy facilities including aggressive zero waste and carbon targets—were put into practice with precision and speed. Within two years of their launch, Fairmount Minerals would receive the nation's 'top corporate citizen' award from the United States Chamber of Commerce. Today, Fairmount is a magnet for companies around the world wishing to benchmark their success, and it has been singled out in a UN Global Compact leadership book as a best practice case for the mining industry (Lawrence and Beamish 2013).

All of this was surprisingly easy: 'Today's customers, supply chain partners, community leaders, and employees want to be engaged in radically new ways', Jenniffer recalls. 'Now, I realise that it is not a pipedream to manage important targets as a whole system—in fact, it's fast. I call it my management macro-moment'.

An Appreciative Inquiry design summit is a large group strategic planning, designing or implementation meeting that brings a whole system of 300 to 1,000 or more internal and external stakeholders together in a concentrated way to work on a task of strategic, and especially creative, value. Moreover, it is a meeting where everyone is engaged as designers, across all relevant and resource-rich boundaries, to share leadership and take ownership for making the future of some big league opportunity successful. The meeting appears bold at first, but is based on a simple notion: when it comes to enterprise innovation and integration, there is nothing that brings out the best in human systems—faster, more consistently and more effectively—than the power of 'the whole'. Flowing from the tradition of strengths-based management (Cooperrider 2012), the AI Summit says that in a multi-stakeholder world it is not about (isolated) strengths per se, but about configurations, combinations and interfaces.

While at first it seems incomprehensible that large groups of hundreds of people in the room can be effective in unleashing system-wide strategies, making organisational decisions and designing rapid prototypes, this is exactly what is happening in organisations around the world. Fairmount Mineral's experience was not an isolated or atypical triumph. For Fairmount's customers and external stakeholders such as community leaders and supply chain partners, the experience was eye-opening. First, they saw the integrity, energy and collaborative capacity of the high-engagement company. Then, across every silo, they saw one new business idea after another being discovered. The one that amazed you the most was the new multi-million dollar business opportunity designed to take old, spent sand—the stuff that is discarded after its use in factories—and turn that into clean biofuel for powering the company's heavy trucks. How could this be? Well, an engineer in one group shared how spent sand, when placed on farmland, has been shown to help grow higher yields of biomass. Another person declared that the company's sand-mining facilities

are located in rural locations near many farms. Between the two observations a light bulb goes off. How might we create a new business for spent sand? Why not create a new partnership with farmers—a partnership where sand-assisted biomass growth becomes the basis for lower cost, green biofuels to power the heavy truck fleet. Participants experienced first-hand the power of this virtuous cycle, where one good idea meets another.

This single innovation, coupled with a dozen other win-win-win sustainability breakthroughs such as a low-cost, sand water filter to purify and clean putrid water in areas where families have no access to clean healthy water, soon helped double Fairmount's already superior double-digit growth rates, and set it on a pathway of differentiation unheard of in its industry. The business news in a Wisconsin newspaper told much of the story when it penned a headline article, 'The Tale of Two Sand Companies'. Fairmount Minerals, because of its agility and speed to market with its sustainability offerings wins its licence to operate. A larger competitor fails in its bid. It did not have any kind of macro method for bringing the whole community into genuine, joint designing. The impact for Fairmount Minerals soon translated into billions of dollars in market value and advancement of social capital in terms of stakeholder endearment. It's an organisation that leads humbly and honestly through its mission to 'do good, do well' and shows what happens when sustainability *convening capacity* is designed in, not as a bolted-on activity but is embedded as a distinctive, strategic competence (Laszlo and Zhexembayeva 2011).

The five success factors

In the remainder of this article we will show, at progressively larger system levels, how the successfully managed macro-moment represents an almost totally undefined, untaught and underestimated leadership leverage point like no other. We describe what a macromanagement approach to systemic strengths is and what it isn't (for example, it is not a large-scale conference of talking heads and pre-negotiated announcements) and then detail the unique success factors and guidelines for leveraging the strengths-based management approach. Moreover, we explain why the AI Summit method, as an example of today's macro-strengths mandate and design thinking turn, is catching fire in hundreds of multi-stakeholder, system-wide initiatives and is becoming an indispensable new capacity not only for the high stakes occasion, but also for accomplishing the everyday work of management. However, there are conditions that need to be set into place. Once understood, these five success factors open significant new doors for the discipline. Many have already mastered micro aspects of sustainability. What's next? It's the macromanagement of systemic strengths. Here's how.

Success Factor #1. Think Strengths, Think Drucker: Reverse the 80/20 rule. Start by preparing your systemic change leaders with the best in strengths-based research and the

positive psychology of human strengths and thereby prepare the logical groundwork for reversing the deficit bias that pervades the media, our helping professions, our culture at large and almost every systemic or global change effort.

United Nations Global Compact

The year was 1999. The business and society debates were heated. News of the Enron scandal was yet to break; however, spontaneous protests against businesses were happening around the world. Most recognised was the protest in Seattle. Targets of the torrent were companies such as Nike, Starbucks, Gap and others. The scale of the demonstrations—even the lowest estimates put the crowd at over 40,000—dwarfed any previous demonstration of its kind in the United States. Later would come Enron, WorldCom and the meltdown of Arthur Anderson. It was in this context that the debates were most heated: ‘Will Big Business Save or Destroy the World?’—this was the emerging debate, echoing everywhere, and the lines were being drawn.

It was within this context that Kofi Annan was invited to address CEOs from around the world. Which side of the debate would he come out on? What would he say? But rather than making predictions about the future, as if trajectories were inevitable such as laws of nature, or instead of joining in the polarising critiques, Kofi Annan, then Secretary-General of the UN, presented a third way. The occasion was the 1999 World Economic Forum. And the Secretary-General was about to give his speech to hundreds of CEOs. Many expected an extensive critique. But Kofi Annan had something else in store. Perhaps he knew that we will never be able to eradicate extreme poverty in the world, or realise any of the other Millennium Development Goals for healing the environment or creating cultures of peace, without the strengths, innovation capacity and effectiveness of new business models and better markets. So, he shifted the debate and reached out his hand in partnership. He spoke about *choice*. He spoke about aligning strengths. His words touched a chord. At the height of his remarks, he said to the business leaders: ‘*Let us choose today to unite the strengths of markets with the power of universal ideals. Let us choose to reconcile the creative forces of private entrepreneurship with the needs of the disadvantaged and the requirements of future generations*’.

The CEOs responded to the words ‘let us choose’. An active working group was created. A set of principles for business and society for the 21st century were soon jointly developed and the UN Global Compact was officially launched at the UN headquarters in New York in July 2000.

Ultimately, Kofi Annan’s strengths-focused call to a new era of business and society leadership would lead to an unprecedented whole-system-in-the-room AI Summit to jointly design the growth strategy for mainstreaming the idea ‘to unite the strengths of markets with the power of universal ideals’. On 24 June 2004, Annan convened the Global Compact Leaders Summit at United Nations headquarters in New York as the largest meeting of its kind ever held at the UN,

with CEOs from corporations such as Alcoa, Royal Dutch Shell, Goldman Sachs, Novartis, Coca-Cola and Microsoft seated in the General Assembly alongside heads of state and leaders of international NGOs such as Oxfam and the World Wildlife Fund. Nearly 500 leaders attended the Summit including chief executive officers, government officials, and the heads of various labour groups, civil society organisations and UN agencies to discuss and produce strategic designs and action imperatives to scale up the initiative. Within three years, by the next summit in Geneva, Switzerland, the Global Compact had grown from 1,500 firms to over 8,000 of the world’s largest corporations—a 433% growth rate, averaging 144.4% per year. As a system, a momentum-building consensus was forged for the long-term strategy. People came away committed to what they helped to create. Engagement in the Global Compact reached record levels (Cooperrider and Zhexembayeva 2012).²

The summit also involved a set of executive briefings on the logic of strengths, the management mind-sets and methods of AI, and the research findings on the role of the positive in human systems. This pre-summit education proved to be crucial for paving the way (see Table 1 on the positive-strengths philosophy).

Table 1 Philosophy of AI’s strengths-based management

Source: Cooperrider and Godwin 2011

Appreciative Inquiry and strengths-based principles for positive organisation development and change

1. We live in worlds our inquiries create; no change initiative outperforms its ‘return on attention’ whether we are studying deficiencies or the best in life

2. We excel only by amplifying strengths, never by simply fixing weaknesses; therefore, beware of the negativity bias of first framing because excellence is not the opposite of failure

3. Small shifts make seismic differences; strengths-based change obeys a tipping point; instead of focusing 80% on what’s not working and 20% on strengths it is important to put this 80/20 rule in reverse to harness the transformative power of the ‘positivity ratio’

4. Strengths do more than perform, they transform—strengths are what make us feel stronger therefore magnify ‘what is best’ and imagine ‘what is next’ in order to create upward spirals

5. We live in a universe of strengths—the wider the lens, the better the view. The appreciable world is so much larger than our normal appreciative eye. What we appreciate (seeing value), appreciates (increases in value)

A design team from the Global Compact office visited Case Western Reserve University’s Executive Education Center to immerse themselves in the logic, the science and what’s now called ‘the three circles of the strengths revolution’,

2 To see the positive and constructive collaborations that are possible when whole systems take a strengths analytic approach, and to see live scenes from the AI design summit at the UN as well as others, go to appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/practice/video.cfm.

including tools for the elevation and configuration of systemic strengths, and tools for magnifying those strengths through our collaborations and, ultimately, the systemic refraction of our highest human strengths to where it matters most—out into the world (Cooperrider 2012). A number of essential concepts spoke most powerfully to the United Nations. The first was the overarching idea that leadership might well be *all* about strengths. Here Peter Drucker's core management principle formed the foundational logic for the briefing. In an interview I did with Drucker when he was 93 years old he shared his powerful insight: 'The task of leadership is ageless in its essence', Drucker said, 'The great task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths in ways that make a system's weaknesses irrelevant'. Indeed, people often write that one down. It's clear, it's compelling and it is pragmatic—for what else do we, as leaders and managers, have to work with anyway, other than strengths? Could it be that leading change is all about strengths?

But here's the rub. It's not working that way in many domains of life. In management, we call it the 80-20 deficit-bias (Cooperrider and Godwin 2011). Even after years of sharing and evolving the strengths theory, a majority of employees still feel their signature strengths are not understood or appreciated by key leaders. Eighty per cent of the workforce worldwide continues to feel undervalued or underutilised. Only 20% agree with the following statement: 'At work I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day'. But it doesn't stop at the door of our institutions. The industry of deficit-based management carries over into the news media and domains of everyday life such as diagnostic medicine. Headlines in our big-city newspapers have at least 80 articles or more of violence, greed and corruption for every 20 on human excellence. Likewise, the past 100 years of psychological research, modelled after the medical industry's disease paradigm of diagnosis and treatment of symptoms, has until recently been mostly the study of pathology, weakness and damage (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000).

Within the domain of global change, the observable bias toward deficit-based or problem-focused analytics makes it almost impossible to see strengths, dynamic solutions that inspire, and those progress possibilities that invite, because of their success, even more investment. Not many people know, for example, how advanced and exciting the progress of global development has been since 1950. For example, consider that nearly 90% of the world's children are now enrolled in primary schools, compared with less than half in 1950. In his volume *Getting Better: Why Global Development is Succeeding and How We Can Improve the World Even More*, Charles Kenny (2011) shows what happens when we reverse the 80/20 deficit bias, not by ignoring the challenges or crises (there is still a 20% focus on those challenges) but by rigorously studying progress markers, successes, strengths and innovations that are emerging as solutions. Commenting on the book, Bill Gates said,

Getting Better dispels the gloom and doom with a wealth of convincing data on the remarkable, underappreciated progress . . . fifty years ago, more than half the world's population struggled with getting enough daily calories. By the 1990s this figure was below 10 percent.

What's becoming increasingly apparent in our complex multi-stakeholder world is that the global agenda for change faces a paradox. The global issues of our day are tremendously complex, scientifically uncertain, interrelated and monumental. Imagine the setting the Global Compact was preparing for: a summit with over 500 leaders from business and industry, civil society, governmental agencies coming together to deal with the questions of global climate change; the challenges of billions living in abject, grinding poverty; the end of peak oil; the epidemic of HIV/Aids; and the spectre of terror spreading across geographic boundaries. Imagine further the typical approach to analysis or inquiry at this kind of meeting: a massive database documenting the depth of the problematic, the root causes of the failures and forecasts for even greater disaster.

As we all know it is not too long then, in meetings such as a UN world summit, before the finger pointing begins and substantial disagreements reach a point of diminishing returns and agonising immobilisation. The scenario is so common and familiar that very few expect much from these global meetings. So this is the global change paradox: the more sophisticated we as human beings become with our diagnostic sciences—where the world is treated as a problem-to-be-solved—the less able we are to create the collaborative bond and inspired aspirations needed to organise, to innovate and mobilise positive actions forward. While the diagnosis of the weighty problem might be totally accurate, it doesn't matter—indeed, the more sophisticated the problem analytic lens the less productive the human dimensions, the relational dimensions, of the response. Why? Because somehow the deficit-oriented lens for examining 'out there' becomes also the analytic lens applied in the 'here and now' dynamic of the human relationships. It's not long before the predictable happens: a growing sense of threat leads to separation, fault finding and the application of the problematising modes of analysis to the nascent, new systemic relationships. No wonder large group meetings are dominated by panel speakers and monological patterns. No wonder the agendas are filled with talking heads, well scripted and monitored. And no wonder the 'success' of such meetings depends not on the meeting process itself but the pre-negotiated agreements. Why would we even consider designing such a meeting for spontaneous, open dialogue and emergent, unscripted planning? The sophisticated search for what's wrong, no matter how well intended, can create a contagion effect: we all become a 'problem-to-be-solved'.³

To explore the deficit bias even further, the Global Compact leaders were asked, 'How many of your last six meetings were called to fix the *problem* of . . . ?' We went further: 'How many of you would say at least 80% of your last six meetings were problem analytic?' Every hand went up. One person suggested that at the UN there might be over 2,000 measures of what can go wrong. Another

³ The deficit bias in our collective spheres—the news media, our gridlocked politics, the helping professions and therapy fields, and international development—has been well documented; see Gergen 1994, especially Chapter Four on 'the cultural consequences of deficit discourse'.

commented on the negative media and deficit analytic consulting world: ‘We literally have an army of deficit-based consultants’, each one with sophisticated technologies for studying ‘what’s wrong’. In fact it is true: the deficit-based industry—focused primarily on problem analysis, error reduction and repair—represents a US\$350 billion market (Cooperrider and Godwin 2011). In this instance, it was estimated that 80% of the consultant attention was on what’s wrong at the UN, and less than 20% was devoted to strengths analysis. It’s time, our briefing suggested, for a reversal of this 80-20 rule.

The radical idea at the core of the strengths movement has two dimensions. One is that excellence is not the opposite of failure and that you will learn little about excellence from studying failure. All the studies in the world of ‘ethical meltdown’, for example, will teach little about what leads to, enables and advances ‘business as an agent of world benefit’—what does that look like, where is it happening and what are the results? But even more radical, argues the Appreciative Inquiry perspective, is that the process of studying a phenomenon actually changes that phenomenon: We create new realities during the process of inquiry. Studying low morale produces its own ripple effects through the ‘mere measurement effect’. So does inquiry into the true, the good, the better and the possible. Imagine asking 500 people in an organisation to reflect on the ups and downs in their lives and to deepen the analysis or focus on one of the high-point moments in their leadership careers: ‘Describe the moment or time that you felt most successful, effective and most alive. When and how did it happen? What were the experiences? What about the results?’ Now imagine at least five other sets of similar questions asking about times when they witnessed an improbable but ‘extraordinary collaboration’ between sectors that produced breakthroughs. This is exactly what the Global Compact team did in the briefing. In the midst of discovery, they experienced the key idea that *we live in worlds our questions create*. When we study excellence there will be an impact. When we study depression or threat there will be an impact. The questions we ask determine what we find, and what we find becomes a powerful source and resource for our systemic planning. Our goal in the pre-summit phase briefing was to create an experience based on Albert Einstein’s powerful insight: ‘No problem can be solved by the consciousness that created it; we must learn to see the world anew’ (see Holman 2010: ix).

Appreciative Inquiry is about the rigorous search for the best in people, their organisations and the strengths-filled, opportunity-rich systems around them (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987; Cooperrider 2012).⁴ In its broadest focus, AI involves systematic discovery of everything that gives ‘life’ to a living system when it is most effective, alive and most capable in economic, ecological and human terms. AI involves, in a disciplined way, the craft of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate and heighten positive potential. It centrally involves the mobilisation of whole system strengths-based

⁴ Two books that trace the fundamental impact of Appreciative Inquiry on the positive-strengths movement include M. Buckingham’s *Go Put Your Strengths to Work* (2007) and K. Cameron *et al.*’s *Positive Organizational Scholarship* (2003).

discovery through the crafting of the ‘unconditional positive question’ often involving hundreds or sometimes thousands of people in mutual collaboration. To appreciate means to value that which has value; it is a way of knowing the best in life. To appreciate also means ‘to increase in value’. We say, for example, that the economy has appreciated in value. Combining the two—appreciation as a way of knowing the best *and* appreciation as an increase in value—suggests that Appreciative Inquiry is simultaneously a life-centric or strengths-based form of study and a constructive mode of action where *valuing is creating*, where inquiry and change are powerfully related and understood as a seamless and integral whole. To inquire into the true, the good, the better and the possible is what AI is about, and its social constructionist premise is this: human systems move in the direction of what they most deeply, rigorously and persistently ask questions about. AI is not, it must be underscored, about putting a superficial sense of hope on a troubled time. The summit’s task is to elevate systemic strengths and build the ties of trust and confidence needed to take decisive action.

After the large group AI Summit at the UN, Secretary-General Kofi Annan wrote to one of the authors, David Cooperrider, on 21 July 2004:

I would like to commend your innovative methodology of Appreciative Inquiry and to thank you for introducing it to the United Nations. Without this, it would have been very difficult, perhaps even impossible, to constructively engage so many leaders of business, civil society and government.

Success Factor #2: Pre-frame a powerful ‘task’ for the summit with a purpose bigger than the system.

Often people say the positive psychology of human strengths is nice when times are good. But how can you even think of bringing a whole system into the room during times of crises? Whether times are good or awash in complexity, the summit process consistently brings out the best in human systems and one of the success factors par excellence is the creative work that a summit design team does to articulate the expansive, systemic ‘task’ of the summit. You never do a summit unless there is some important systemic need or opportunity—hopefully some big-league, game-changing opportunity—something that can benefit from everything that a diverse set of stakeholders might be able to pull off.

United Religions Initiative

A couple of years ago, His Holiness the Dalai Lama was in Jerusalem. Tensions—especially between the religions—were intense. ‘If only the world’s religious leaders would just talk to one another’, Dalai Lama shared, ‘the world would be a better place. At the highest levels of religious leadership we don’t talk, we don’t know what’s in each other’s hearts’. He also cited a Harvard study that showed that 87% of the world’s armed conflicts were not between nation states, but between groups of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Learning of

Appreciative Inquiry, he invited us to help launch a series of dialogues, including sessions at the Carter Center with former President Jimmy Carter.

Several of the participants, including Bishop William Swing and the Right Reverend Charles Gibbs, had an even larger vision. Their idea was that in today's complex, interdependent world there was a need for a permanent place for this dialogue. The Bishop observed:

For over 50 years the nation state leaders of the world had the moral conviction to talk and created a place for it in the form of the UN; but what have our religious leaders done? Not only do we not have that kind of place or commitment to work together, but in many cases, our religions are in conflict to the point where our young people see religion not as a force for peace, but for separation and bitterness.

We have images in our magazines of black and white coming together, such as Mandela and de Klerk grasping each other's hands in the soccer stadium. We have nothing like that across religions: for example, the Pope and the Dalai Lama connecting their hands high. At the 50th anniversary of the UN, Bishop Swing and Rev. Gibbs declared they would spend the rest of their lives building something akin to a UN (but hopefully less bureaucratic) for people of all faiths. They called on the AI Summit method to help accomplish it by establishing a charter for a United Religions Initiative.⁵

The first thing we did was to challenge the framing. The Bishop shared how there had been over 20 failures to create something like a UN among religions over the past 100 years. Time after time it proved impossible to find agreements among religious leaders across so much diversity in belief and culture. So we queried: 'Do you have a title for the summit you've planned?' 'Yes', the Bishop said, 'and a location; it's being held at the Fairmount Hotel in San Francisco, in the same room where the UN was conceived'. Again we pressed for the task or title. The Bishop replied, a bit hesitant, 'Well the title is, 'Should the World Have a United Religions?' We challenged back: 'Didn't you already declare that you were going to spend the rest of your life building this?' He acknowledged: yes. So we asked: 'Didn't you say that this idea has failed 20 times in the past 100 years—because it got bogged down in endless dialogue?' We suggested that his title was not a summit task, but an invitation to a 49-51 debate, with no agreements likely. So the summit needed a better mandate or task. One began to emerge as we talked. After several iterations, this is what was articulated: 'A Time for Action: Coming Together to Design the Global Charter for a United Religions'.

The task said it all. It would no longer be a debate; it would be a design session. We teamed up with the founder and CEO of Visa, Dee Hock, and subsequently held five design summits at Stanford University and modelled the new organisation similar to Visa, which joined 50,000 competing banks into a new alliance

⁵ See the *Fast Company* article (Salter 2000) covering the establishment of the United Religions Initiative called 'We're Trying to Change World History', which chronicles the coming together of Appreciative Inquiry with a Visa-like 'chaordic alliance'—the design process was a powerful collaboration between Dee Hock (Founder and CEO of Visa) and David Cooperrider (one of the founders of Appreciative Inquiry's human factor design summit).

of cooperation. In 2000, at Carnegie Hall, the charter was signed. Today, more than 600 URI centres situated across every continent work to 'end religious violence and create cultures of peace and justice' in many of the most difficult conflict settings in the world. Several observers have suggested that the URI has the strength and potential to become one of the few *organisations* to receive a Nobel Peace Prize (see Gibbs and Mahe 2003).

Sustainable Cleveland 2019

The city of Cleveland took the idea of topic framing seriously and with great benefit. Beset with job loss and population flight from the city, Cleveland's Mayor, Frank Jackson, wanted to find a way to unite the whole together to innovate and build systemically. He observed an AI Summit at the UN and immediately felt the macro-strengths approach was exactly what his city needed. He also noticed how much of the newer energy in Cleveland was around sustainability. He saw it bubbling up at the universities, in businesses such as Sherwin Williams and Eaton, and through networks such as Entrepreneurs for Sustainability. So he formed a summit design committee of business and community leaders. While searching for the topic and task for a summit, everyone talked about the precious assets or innate strengths in the region such as Lake Erie, but also how the city almost lost all of it at the height of the industrial era. Images of a polluted river on fire were seared into the national consciousness. The summit design team started there, but engaged in pre-framing. The summit task needed to address economic and ecological concerns and call people out from their silos. In the end, it became one of the best summit tasks I've ever seen: *Sustainable Cleveland 2019: Creating an Economic Engine to Empower a Green City on a Blue Lake*. Over 700 business leaders and civic entrepreneurs showed up to design it, the future for a green city on a blue lake. At the end, the Mayor announced the City's dedication to do this AI Summit every year for a 'decade of determination'.

Topic choice is fateful. It affects what we see and do. It shapes relationships and realities. It is a constructive discipline that can be passed on and learned in management, whether one is doing a summit or not. The key question is what do we want to create, not what do we wish to avoid or solve? Human systems tend to move in the direction of what they most frequently and deeply ask questions about. Thus, positive reframing can be practised every day in management in everything we do. Is our task to get stuck poring through 'customer complaints' or is it to better manage the complaints but get on with a rigorous exploration and analysis of times of 'revolutionary customer responsiveness'—where is it happening, what does it look like and how can we multiply it?

Think about these phases: the pre-summit work; the summit itself; and post-summit follow through. In the pre-summit phase you often have a 20–30 person steering committee or summit design team. Leaders succeed when they and their design teams pre-frame the summit task *as if* that seed investment will produce a windfall of systemic value and enduring payoff. The task articulation

is that seminal; indeed, it is a tiny yet mighty seed that can produce a towering oak. The lesson: embrace pre-framing not as a semantic excursion but as tipping point likelihood. What comes next, however, may be even more decisive.

Success Factor #3. Embrace whole configurations including 'improbable configurations' that can combine constellations of systemic strengths to create magic.

As we move to the second phase of the strengths revolution in management, it's not about strengths per se; it's about a single major discovery of how the experience of the *wholeness brings out the best* in human beings, perhaps more powerfully and consistently than anything we have ever seen in the field of change leadership.

Great leaders and great summits work from complete patterns of the whole, constellations of stars. It's not the number of people that matters most. There can be an AI Summit with 20 people. What matters most is the quality of the configuration as measured by *completeness*—in relationship to the systemic task. Indeed, the system is defined by the primary task. An orchestra, for example, is at its best and most likely to hit the groove when the whole system is in the room—including 'customers' and 'cameras' and 'students' and the like, even the art 'critics'. What matters most is the chemistry of the whole. This 'magic of macro' is replicable not just in symphonies, but also in summits. The formula is simple: 'Think strengths, think complete configurations'.

Deceptively simple in theory, the idea of a complete pattern of the whole is too quickly compromised and is nearly always underestimated from a positivity *producing* perspective. Consider these common comments: 'We can't have our customers in the room because what will happen if our adversarial labour-management dynamic rears its ugly head?' or 'We can't have our suppliers in the room because they are in competition with one another' or 'We shouldn't bring our frontline into our strategy work until we as a senior team get our act together and are more cohesive at the executive level', or 'This IT transformation is so technical that users will just get in the way', or 'Our hospital will not be able to run if we have the whole system at the summit'.

Certainly these are important considerations. Unfortunately, they interfere with the most important point about the opportunity of wholeness. The well-known formula for bringing out the worst in human systems is separateness: entrenched silos, bureaucratic layering, solo players, we-they posturing, protecting local resources without appreciation for the total good, distorted communications and drawn-out coordination across layers, not-invented-here syndrome, stereotyping, entrenched specialisations that don't talk to other specialisations, hallway or media negativity, and inbreeding. And this negativity is self-reinforcing and contagious. The more separateness the more chance we see (or presume) the worst in the other and the more closed door and bureaucratized we become. The more bureaucratized and entrenched the less apt we are to even entertain the idea that a whole system in the room is the formula for bringing out the best in human enterprise. We know we should think in systems terms. Everybody teaches it; however we don't *live* it. We rarely bring the whole living system together to do systems thinking, planning and designing in real time. So

we create pendulum swings between top-down and bottom-up. First everything is centralised, but then the reaction sets in and we rush to decentralisation and bottom-up. Indeed, it is nearly impossible for most to think beyond these two forms of management.

While management innovation in comparison to technical innovation is rare, we believe a third form of management is emerging as exemplified by the AI Summit. It's something that is not top-down or bottom-up—*it's whole*. Macromanagement includes both top-down and bottom-up simultaneously. This macro-strengths approach might well represent the formula for bringing out the better angels of each of the others—top-down and bottom-up. Why? Because wholeness, by definition, embraces both. We will always need the special capabilities of well-managed top-down and what's called hard power. We will always need the distinctive strengths of inspired bottom-up, what's often called soft power. The macromanagement of strengths is a significant breakthrough as an additional management tool that combines soft and hard power to create smart power. Our experience shows that this kind of macro-forum for collective designing does not have to happen often. But when it does happen—when there is some major league opportunity for systemic impact—it carries with it many collateral benefits such as more trust in top-down systems and more collaborative coherence in bottom-up movements, undisciplined web networks and the open innovation of crowds. In addition, it's fast: one three-day summit focused on a time critical and strategically important 'change at the scale of the whole' initiative can save hundreds of smaller committee meetings.

Consider the seemingly impossible collective action issues of creating radical productivity increases in our energy sector. Amory Lovins (2011) has articulated the stakes involved. The epic transition from a fossil fuel economy to a renewable, clean energy future has been called *humanity's supreme energy challenge*. There are the economic costs of oil dependence, huge military expenditures, massive coal facilities that generate near half of world electricity, polar caps where waterways are opening that we could not have imagined a few years ago, rising sea levels, peak oil, rising costs and contained depression—all of these and more highlight systemic challenges—and multiple order effects—inherent in the questions of energy transition. We simply can't withdraw from humanity's vast deposits forever. For Lovins, the first step in the transition—the cheapest and best 'source' of energy—is designing ways to need less of it in the first place by creating radical increases in energy productivity, with no miracles required. With current technologies, his research demonstrates, we can realise the goal of no oil burning by 2050 while saving about US\$5 trillion, just in the US alone. Eliminating waste is a multi-trillion dollar business opportunity.

National Grid and the most energy efficient state in America

National Grid came to realise this when, as a utility concerned with advancing the smart grid for realising radical energy efficiencies and paving the way for

distributed renewables, it faced one roadblock after another. There was regulator inertia, outmoded government energy standards, pricing mechanisms that favoured the past, systemic incentives to sell more not less energy, and public fears about new smart sensors in homes that provide feedback on how people can save water, energy and waste by following simple tips without sacrificing comfort—the fears were mounting nation-wide, starting in California, that ‘big brother’ was soon to be following your every move. Amory Lovins, chairman/chief scientist of the Rocky Mountain Institute, raises the hugely troubling observation:

If this vision of a far more energy-efficient building sector, with its rich prize of \$1.4 trillion net (and a host of other, more powerful benefits) is really so compelling, then America should be rushing to embrace it. But we are not.

That’s what National Grid was experiencing in every region and city it worked with in the state of Massachusetts; for example Worcester, the second largest city in the state and where the Declaration of Independence was first publicly read. National Grid originally proposed to build and operate a smart grid pilot in Worcester in April 2009. The proposal was to involve some 15,000 customers and collect data for two years on improved customer services, with options for energy savings, grid automation and reliability enhancements through use of a two-way communications, advanced metering and monitoring systems. It faced significant opposition, however, so in February 2011, National Grid withdrew the pilot proposal. It was then revised substantially in part to lower its cost, but mostly to truly listen to customers and then resubmitted to the Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities. The launch of the smart grid pilot was finally approved after going through an 8 month regulatory process to address public issues as well as regulatory challenges in the ratemaking and rulemaking proceedings. Ratemaking typically emphasises development of issues and evidence, particularly testimony, cross-examination and briefs, and is not conducive to collaborative or cooperative solutions. Rather, it simply focuses on compromise solutions (see Cooperrider *et al.* 2013).

That’s when Cheri Warren, National Grid’s VP for Asset Management, and Ed White, VP Customer and Business Strategy, called on the AI design summit methodology. They believed that much of the opposition was not only misplaced based on misconceptions about smart grid and its possible benefits, but that stakeholders needed to own and design the strategies for the future right at the ground floor, *together*. And that’s when the tide turned: when Cheri and Ed and a steering committee began to design the summit based on the concept of configurations—constellations of all the strengths in the system across every boundary imaginable. Instead of planning silo by silo, the design summit would include regulators, National Grid executives from finance to R&D, the Worcester Mayor and city manager, state officials, personnel from the Department of Public Utilities, universities, vendors and so-called external stakeholders such as customers, citizens, business executives and community leaders. Everyone told Cheri that the customers and state officials and business leaders would not devote the time. Others feared chaos. But Cheri and Ed knew they had a secret weapon: ‘Today, we have the collaborative tools whereby everyone can be part of the inner circle of strategy’.

They even brought stakeholders from other states—innovation pioneers—and perhaps most important, they decided that a major stakeholder group would be youth leaders, students who represented the future. The youth were not invited as observers. They were invited into the technical, financial and legal design issues—peer to peer, with all other stakeholders. And it worked. The velocity of ideas and common ground visions of the long-term future broke through the inertia of institutional separations. The concentration effect of strengths ignited 14 prototypes for initiatives ranging from net zero neighbourhoods (shifting to renewables) to smart grid pilots in 15,000 homes. A few months later it was funded—the US\$44 million smart grid prototyping was now reality. Moreover, this citywide effort then led National Grid to harness this strategic convening capacity at the state level with Governor Deval Patrick.

So in May 2012, National Grid and the state's other utilities co-convened an unprecedented macro collaboration entitled 'Massachusetts: Leading the Nation in the Energy Savings Revolution—Building a Better Tomorrow through Energy Efficiency Today'. Since the summit was held, the systemic collaboration unveiled a new three-year plan to deliver energy efficiency services that will result in nearly US\$9 billion in benefits to residents and businesses across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The whole system collaboration was soon recognised as a major innovation—receiving a prestigious award from ASEP (Association of Energy Service Professionals) in 2013—and Edward White, VP at National Grid, when receiving the award, said: 'The Appreciative Inquiry Summit was a great forum for us to connect directly with customers and others concerned with how energy affects our lives. Efforts like this exemplify why Massachusetts leads the nation on energy efficiency'.⁶

Years ago we were taught in management that the most effective size group is 8–10 people, so subsequently almost everything unfolds that way. In its top-down form it is 8–10 people at the top doing the planning and then the communications rollout. Then in the 1960s and 1970s, the field began to turn hierarchies upside down. Quality circles, for example, were all the rage. While they looked like opposites, the family resemblance was this: it was still micro, with small groups of 8–10 people. We did not know, in an everyday management sense, how to unite universes of strengths or harness the best in systems thinking. With AI we learned that organisations are centres of human relationships, and that relationships come alive where there is an appreciative eye—when people take the time to see the best in each other. It's a major X factor: thinking in patterns, in terms of constellations of strengths, including improbable partners, is foundational. True innovation happens when strong, multi-disciplinary groups come together, build a collaborative and appreciative interchange and explore the intersection of their different points of strength. Moreover, this macro-minded capability—the ability to connect ideas, people and resources from across boundaries of all kinds—then paves the way for something even more inspiring in management.

⁶ For video clips of this work by National Grid in collaboration with Worcester, Massachusetts, see the AI Summit human factor design tools on the IEEE website: smartgrid.ieee.org/constructive-engagement-toolkit (accessed 5 March 2013).

Success Factor #4. Create a system where innovation can emerge from everywhere: it's time for design-inspired collaboration. In today's world dialogue is not enough. People are tired of conferences, community conversations and system change efforts that are deficit-based and stop at dialogue. They want to be involved in the real thing, and they want more than words—they want to be part of enduring action, impact and the sense of meaning that comes from collaborative achievement.

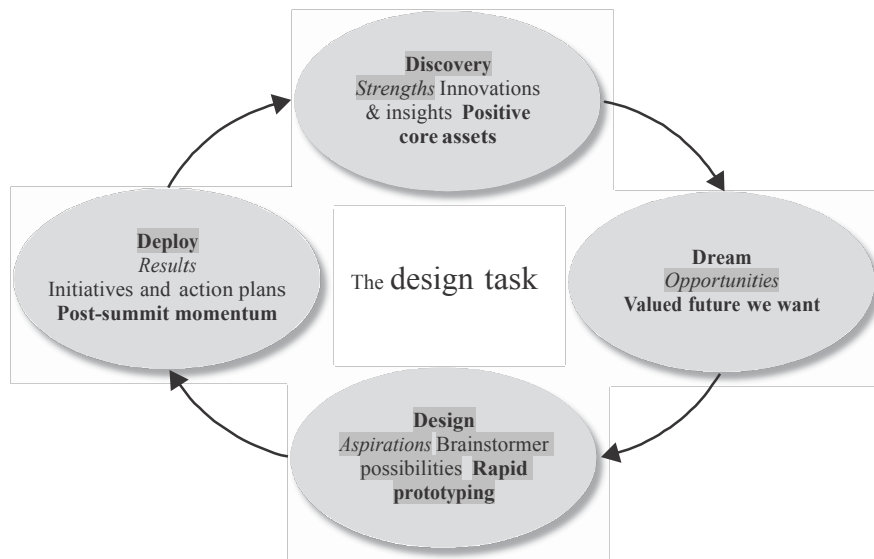
From The Conference Board's studies of design-inspired innovation in 2007 and 2013, there has been a recent and exciting sea change in management driven largely by one thing: managers and leaders are absorbing everything they can from designers.⁷ They are learning the skills of 'design thinking' from architects and product designers as well as orchestra leaders and graphic artists. Companies from Apple to Procter & Gamble are going to the bank on it. They are embracing the power of design and the 'how to' of synthetic thinking, empathy, story, iteration, visual thinking, multiple solutions, teamwork and rapid prototyping. Design thinkers see the world through a 'positive lens' where even mistakes are viewed as 'material' for new possibilities; for example, when jazz musicians thrive in moments of unpredictable complexity and 'say yes to the mess' (Barrett 1998).

This affirmative competence, argues Frank Barrett, is exactly what the whole system macro-strengths perspective propels. Well-known design firms such as IDEO are embracing the positive organisation development approach of the AI Summit to move beyond hot teams to large groups. 'Design is too important to leave to designers' argues Tim Brown, the head of IDEO, in the recent book *Change By Design* (Brown 2009). That's why he and his colleagues are drawn to the systemic approach of large group AI. Design thinkers and scholars of the positive in human systems both use an approach called abductive reasoning (a phrase coined by Peirce in 1938 to indicate a third kind of logic beyond inductive and deductive), which happens via 'logical leaps of mind' from even a single deviating data point that does not fit with the existing models.

The new, design-focused AI Summit achieves this through its '4-D cycle' of discovery, dream and design, and deployment—approximately one day on each D (see Fig. 1). The discovery phase is crucial. It's an analytic phase for studying the positive core of the system, defined as all past, present and future (potential) capacity. In this phase, AI achieves a union, a knowledge link, between the whole system of stakeholders and its life-giving strengths (in relation to its task-topic) as well its smallest and biggest opportunities. The dream phase, which involves an abductive, logical leap of mind from the positive deviation analysis of what's best, moves beyond and asks, 'What's next?' Based on the theory of positive image—positive action—how human systems are propelled in the present by their guiding images of the future—the AI Summit asks people to anticipate what positive progress, achievements, breakthroughs and end results look like at some key point in time in the future. The questions help participants think beyond the internal systems:

⁷ For two influential reports on design-inspired innovation see The Conference Board 2008, 2013.

Figure 1 Appreciative Inquiry 4-D cycle for collaborative designing and strategic planning in large groups of 300 to 2,000 people—and with 1,000s more with open innovation web tools



When we look at our history and the positive core of our past, present and future capacity as a system and when we listen to what our world is calling for (our valued customers, communities, ecosystems, society and world) then what do we see as possible in the future that instills a major sense of purpose and makes us proud: What results? What positive pathways? What do we see happening that's new, better, and different, and how do we know?

This phase leads to the discovery of not just common ground, but higher ground. It's about big picture scenario development, and it identifies design opportunities. It's clear that having this kind of design thinking in the mix is a key to success in interdisciplinary collaboration; it's critical to uncovering unexplored areas for innovation (see Cooperrider and Fry 2010, for applying design thinking to corporate citizenship). The first time we combined AI's large group format and state-of-the-art design thinking tools—with Peter Coughlan from IDEO—it was with a large trucking company. The topic was establishing customer peace of mind. At the summit's key transition moment from the dream to design phase, opportunities emerged: new time-critical products; the design of customer intelligence teams; new throughput designs for achieving double the shipments per hour; and about 20 other opportunities, including new orientation and training programmes focusing every employee's attention on customer experience. The design-focused question for each design studio was: 'How might we . . . ?' It's a designer's dream question because it invites practical imagination and multiple possibilities. Then, with minimal training in concepts such as analogous storytelling, non-judgemental ideation principles and rapid prototyping, an enterprise-wide constellation of dock workers, truck

drivers, senior executives, operations specialists, marketing people and others started creating, alongside their customers, new designs for customer peace of mind. Instead of writing action plans for action later on, or words on a piece of paper, the assignment was to construct and build the first prototypes. In one case it involved a re-design of a dock layout to achieve breakthrough increases in speed and the assignment was to build a block model of it. It became tangible. It invited feedback. And because it was designed via the whole system in the room, there was nothing like the ‘not-invented-here’ dynamic. The design was a win–win for customers and company. Moreover, it did not take years to achieve. The prototype was built in a morning.

Dairy Management Inc.

The same thing is now happening in each of the next generation AI ‘design studios’ in the sustainability domain. In 2007, the board of directors for Dairy Management Inc. brought together more than 250 stakeholders from farms, academia, governmental and non-governmental organisations and food retailers to focus on opportunities to build consensus for a ‘constitution for sustainable dairy’ and to find ways to spark sustainability innovations that would strengthen farm businesses, reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions for fluid milk by 25% and increase business value. What they discovered by building strategic plans and designs together, was a gold mine in waste to wealth initiatives, wind energy opportunities, ways to shrink packaging and therefore transportation costs and more. That first summit created consensus for action around projects that will increase in farm business value on the order of US\$238 million within two years. Many farmers, at first, were wary of an industry-wide sustainability commitment. However, by designing together they launched an unstoppable movement. An Arizona dairy producer, Paul Rovey, said of the AI Summit: ‘this process is a great example of how system wide collaborative efforts can help dairy secure a bright future, providing healthy products, healthy business, and a healthy planet to future generations’.⁸

A research report published by Blu Skye called it ‘Big Change Fast’ and described it as follows:

At this summit, competitors sat next to each other, and even more remarkably, dairy farmers and processors, who historically have seen each other as opponents in a zero sum game, came together to innovate across the value chain . . . At the climate summit in Copenhagen, USDA Secretary Vilsack held out dairy’s work as a template for innovation in agriculture, and signed memorandum of understanding with the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy to work together to support and accelerate his innovation agenda, promising to provide government funding to support capital investment and research for GHG-related innovation (Whalen 2010: 3).

⁸ ‘Big Change Fast’ by John Whalen (2010) offers a detailed report of the dairy industry’s sustainable design summit using AI.

One of the keys to all the elevated collaboration and positivity was this: when people go beyond dialogue and dreams, and enter the rapid prototyping phase of design work, this is the moment trust expands. At the dairy summit the key moment was when over 20 prototypes were developed and displayed: prototypes for everything from research programmes (actual research proposals designed in the summit) to redesigned national transportation systems (actual drawings and concept models were built that people could see and touch). For it is through the *joint creation of the future* that the best in human systems develops most easily, and naturally.

From a positive psychology of human strengths perspective, the key insight is about the concept of high-quality connections (HQCs) and the power of design. People in HQCs, propose Dutton and Heaphy (2003), in contrast to toxic or corrosive connections of mistrust and negativity, share three subjective experiences. First, HQCs are sensed by feelings of vitality and aliveness, including sense of positive energy. Second, being in a HQC is also felt through a heightened sense of positive regard or profound contact. Finally, the experience of being in an HQC is marked by felt mutuality that captures the sense that both people in a connection are engaged, actively participating and sense vast potential in the connection. The highest quality connections are born not only in contexts that include systemic configurations of the whole universe of strengths, but when people leap beyond dialogue and move into design. It's as if there is a dynamic whereby *doing is an undergoing* and where positive doing (designing and building together) and positive undergoing are inseparable. Think about the early pioneers in America. The whole community would show up at their neighbour's, bring whatever resources they had, and build the neighbour's new barn. They didn't just talk about it. They rolled up their sleeves together. The barn-building built HQCs, not just buildings. These were moments of collaborative vitality and aliveness, perhaps models of human dynamics at their best.

One of the important new rules of thumb in the AI Summit is that dialogue is not enough. A focus on design thinking and its role in building HQCs provides a new window for understanding positive system-level behaviour and actions. Inviting people to design the future is a powerful way to affirm their strengths. Designing is often an act of legacy leadership that can have impact and reverberate across the years and sometimes generations (Boland and Collopy 2004).

Success Factor #5. Make the concentration effect of strengths a vital management skill across your system and across improbable systems themselves. Turn the strengths revolution into a macromanagement advantage for creating cultures of open innovation, systemic acceleration and scaling up solutions.

Perhaps the most frequent question that is asked everywhere is: Yes, it was an exciting summit, but how do you make this last? How do you sustain the work?

While it is beyond the scope of this article to spell out the detail, the concept is simple: it's now time to embed the appreciative intelligence, the capacity to see and spread the true, the good and the possible across the arc of systemic strengths as a systemic habit or culture (Barrett 1998). In the case of sustainable

dairy, a major award system was set up and used for honouring and scaling up system innovations. In the case of Cleveland's Green City on a Blue Lake initiative, the city put up a state-of-the-art platform to create a narrative-rich storytelling culture, and they created a 400 page strategy document (emerging from the first summit) to guide the next nine years of annual summits.⁹ And, at the United Nations, industry-specific platforms were created, some using open innovation tools that are very exciting for fostering self-organising. One idea to emerge at the 2004 leaders summit, for example, was to create something akin to a Nobel Prize for Business as an Agent of World Benefit. The emphasis was not so much a prize but a world inquiry mechanism to honour and elevate thousands of stories. And it's being prototyped right now with the help of IDEO's open innovation web where people all over the world use the design thinking tools of one of the world's top design firms. Indeed, this systemic culture of embedding appreciative intelligence is about habit formation. As Aristotle stated it: 'We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit'.

When Does the Best in Human Collaboration Occur?

We want to conclude with several speculations and an invitation to future research. Nothing in our careers in the field of management has given us more hope about what we are capable of as human beings than these two things coming together: the whole system in the room Appreciative Inquiry Summit as a macromanagement innovation in addition to and coupled with the high purpose work of transitioning our world to a sustainable future. Whole system in the room, under the kinds of conditions and using the success factors elaborated upon here, consistently brings out some of the best in people we've ever seen—the best listening, opening of minds and hearts, respecting, imagining, designing, responsible promising, acting, collaborating, building collective logic, caring, discerning, learning, overcoming partisan politics, entrepreneurship, trusting, creating game-changing business opportunities, and more. And it's been much the same when people are called upon and engage themselves in the act of building a bright green, more humanly significant and sustainable world. But the two together take it all to a new octave. What brings out the best so quickly? Here are two sets of speculations: the first one on stages and dynamics involved in the Appreciative Inquiry Summit, and the second on the

⁹ For the kind of substantive strategic planning document that can come from a 700-person AI design summit, see the 'SC2019 Action and Resources Guide', www.city.cleveland.oh.us/CityofCleveland/Home/Community/ThingsToDo/AISummit, accessed 5 March 2013.

mirror flourishing dynamic of engaging ourselves in building a sustainable, flourishing Earth.

We Need Theory and Research on the Stages of Large Group Dynamics

While we have good theories on the stages of small group dynamics, we have nothing close to those in terms of large groups and whole systems. It's an area ripe for research. Here is an invitation.

The AI Summit creates the concentration effect of strengths in three stages: 1) the elevation-and-extension of strengths; 2) the broaden-and-buildup of capacity; and 3) the establish-and-eclipse stage of innovation. A useful metaphor is the idea of fusion from the energy sciences. Fusion, in contrast to fission or splitting apart, results when two positively charged hydrogen elements combine. It is the source of the sun and the stars. The parallel in human beings is that the more scholars study the dynamic of 'the positive' in human systems change, the more they are coming to realise that strengths do more than perform; they transform. We are learning about how to create spaces for this kind of *transformational positivity*; that is, the intentional use of combinations of positive assets, strengths, positive emotions and whole system network effects to initiate, inspire and better manage change.

Let's look at the three proposed stages:

1. The elevation-and-extension phase

Here the word 'elevation' means the elevation of inquiry and 'extension' means the extension of relationships. The AI Summit begins in the planning phase by creating novel whole system configurations or extensions of relationships. It believes in the power of early beginnings. And as we know, starting points—such as the questions we ask and the curiosity we bring to the table—can have big effects. In complexity science this phenomenon is called *sensitive dependence on initial conditions*, where a small change at one place can result in large differences to a later state. We all know the snowball effect. The concentration effect of strengths begins this sensitive dependence on initial conditions, especially the quality of inquiry or curiosity that the space invites. Everything from a positive-strengths perspective is offered in support of cultivating a spirit of inquiry and the power of what researchers now call the curiosity advantage (Kashdan 2009). Research shows that curiosity is an underestimated power: it inspires relationships; it helps people leave the familiar and take risks; it involves the art of sparking interest among potential collaborators; it intensifies or helps us savour past successes and achievements as resources; it provides the motivation to grow and draws us out of ourselves and our certainties; it predicts the performance success of executive teams; and it induces positive energetic states.

2. The broaden-and-build phase

The more that positive organisational scholars study the dynamic of ‘the positive’ in human systems change, the more evidence they find that our change management models may be obsolete. While most change theories emphasise the need to establish the burning platform or to heighten dissatisfaction with the status quo to overcome resistance, the positive-strengths perspective argues that human systems usually do not embrace change well under conditions of fear, trauma or any kind of manufactured urgency. It might be the opposite. Human systems might well become more resilient and capable of realising their potentials the more we engage not the negative emotions, but the positive emotions—for example, hope, inspiration and joy. As people come together through the elevation of inquiry, the emotions they experience are often amplified *positive* emotions, which tend to broaden-and-build and open minds. In contrast to anger or fear, which constricts cognition, positivity tends to open thought-action repertoires, whereby we are able to see the best in the world (see Fredrickson’s *Positivity* (2009)).

3. The establish-and-eclipse phase of positive change

The elevation of inquiry helps a large group connect to the positive core—the sum total of all past, present and future capacity of the system. The extension of relatedness makes possible the formation of powerful new configurations of high quality connections—relationships that are life-giving versus life-depleting, marked by mutuality and high positive regard. Both of these broaden minds with new knowledge and generate a build-up of emotional, cognitive and relational resources. What’s the impact? It’s the activation of energy—for designing the new and eclipsing the old.

Now, critics of the positive-strengths dynamic might say, ‘Well, what about all the problems?’ It’s an important question. First, there is nothing in the positive-strengths research or practice that says that the problematic should be avoided, ignored or denied. Rather, we propose a new *imbalance* of an at least 80/20 focus on strengths, opportunities, aspirations and valued results (the acronym is ‘soar’ and is often placed in contrast to swot analysis). This broad 4:1 ratio—the positivity ratio found in virtuous upward swings in flourishing—is not 4:0 and it’s clear that in every summit there are difficult issues that need to be addressed and are once the high quality connections reach a point of tensile strength capable of handling the issues with mutuality and respect. Prior to the UN’s leaders summit, there was an angry protest with people protesting that UN leaders were hosting major global corporations at the UN. So with the whole system in the room mind-set, NGO protesters were also invited into the UN Global Compact design summit. At the end of the summit, one of the protest group leaders stood up and declared: ‘What I see here are images of the models of where our world’s business and society cooperation can, and should go. I applaud this initiative and everyone in this room’.

Mirror flourishing: In addition to the concentration effect of strengths

Much has been researched about the power of appreciation and inquiry in human systems. Much has been written about the power of whole systems of strengths coming together—for example in the AI design summit. But now in addition to these two there is a third observable phenomenon that is unmistakable. We, in the introduction to this special issue (Cooperrider and Fry 2013 [this issue]), termed it ‘mirror flourishing’ and it is a concept that emerges from our fieldwork, in a grounded theory way, from our many hours of participant observer work. After participating in hundreds of AI Summits on every business imperative imaginable—driving operational excellence, introducing smart technology systems, doing total quality summits, introducing lean and re-engineering, strategic positioning, or even mergers between two US\$4 billion companies—we have never seen summits come more alive with innovation, passion, motivation, spontaneously open and positive mind-sets, collaborative capacity and inspired follow-through to action, than when the focus is on sustainability. Using the lens of positive psychology research, Marty Seligman’s formula for flourishing PERMA, we can begin to speculate why (Seligman 2010).

In many respects, the PERMA model represents a great summation of the findings of positive psychology from the last decade. **P** stands for the study of positive emotion and explores questions such as ‘what good are positive emotions such as hope, inspiration and joy?’ **E** signifies ‘the engaged life’ or a life where our signature strengths are engaged. **R** underscores high-quality relationships and the centrality of the ‘other’ in a theory of flourishing. **M** is all about the role of meaning making—and how, without a life of meaning and purpose, there can be no deep sense of flourishing. And finally **A**, or accomplishment, is about the part of human happiness or well-being that is not fleeting but enduring. Yet with all the comprehensive work on this conceptualisation, there is a conspicuous gap. This is not meant as criticism; however, positive psychology research scarcely approaches the question of our relationship to the Earth, or our economy, or the matrix of our biosphere—everything we depend on for life. The reason that we believe that the systemic sustainability work is so powerful is that it gives people, each participant in it, a vehicle to take constructive action. We know that action is an antidote to despair. And just like ‘the helpers high’ that has been documented when we feel the joy of giving to and benefiting others (Post 2007), we experience a magnified sense of PERMA in every mutually reinforcing dimension when we fuse our strengths collectively in ways that generate breakthroughs that hold promise for building a better world. We call this ‘mirror flourishing’ because the concept offers richness both in metaphor and empirical field experience—it is palpable, something we have observed in almost every AI design summit devoted to sustainability + flourishing.

In recent neuroscience, for example, exploring the relationship between connections and contagion, there has been the conceptualisation of a biological basis for empathy, the spread of emotion and interaction consonance. It's called the mirror neuron system where physical parts of the brain light up when we merely observe a tennis match—just *as if* we were ourselves actually playing the match (Christakis and Fowler 2011). The discovery of the mirror neuron is shaking up numerous scientific disciplines, shifting the understanding of culture, empathy, philosophy, language, imitation and the spread of happiness across networks in a synchronised or consonant way. Mirror neurons help explain the dynamic of consonance across living systems, the property of being alike, in harmony with, becoming at one with, or *a growing together*. Of course this growing together or concrescence can work for good and ill. When our companies are involved in destroying nature or destroying value in the world—think how the people of BP were and still are feeling in relation to out-of-control scenes from the Gulf oil spill—the human side of that enterprise might enter a momentary state of dissonant discontent or languishing, the very opposite of flourishing.

Mirror flourishing suggests that there is no outside and inside, only the creative unfolding of an entire *field of relations* or connections. *We define mirror flourishing as the consonant flourishing or growing together that happens naturally and reciprocally to us when we actively help, or witness the acts, that help nature flourish, others flourish or the world as a whole to flourish.* It is a developmental force: we can consciously create a flourishing workplace by working to build a better world that flourishes.

The implications of this hypothesis are enormous. *Do good, do well* becomes more than a mantra. It becomes, when it is experienced as grounded and real, the human development *economic and business opportunity* of our time. In more common parlance, what we are seeing emerge is an incomparable way to engage and turn on the entire workforce or bring people together across polarised systems—where people are collaboratively on fire with purpose, meaning, hope, inspiration and engaged accomplishment. Mirror flourishing speaks to the unified and integral two-way flow between business and our world. Might the reversal of so much of the active disengagement in the workplace, systemic splintering in our politics, as well as depression in our culture at large, be closer than we think? Imagine the mirror flourishing effect of sustainability coupled with the concentration effect of strengths via whole systems collaboration—together reverberating, scaling up and amplifying.

All the tools for doing so are at hand. Obviously we are as yet still infants when it comes to our cooperative capacity for building sustainable systems and a flourishing world. But we need not be cautiously afraid of each other or timid about the great work ahead. It's time to think strengths, think macro and think in ways that harness the concentration effect of configurations. For management is, ultimately, all about elevation, alignment and magnification of strengths. This—the five combined success factors explored in this article—forms the positive arc of systemic strengths, and it's a simple formula for consistently bringing out the best in human systems.

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9

Appendix: Sources of case study data

Six Appreciative Inquiry Summits for addressing systemic change

The United Nations Global Compact

On 24 June 2004, Secretary-General Kofi Annan convened the Global Compact Leaders Summit at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. Nearly 500 leaders attended the Summit, including chief executive officers, government officials and the heads of various labour groups, civil society organisations and UN agencies, to produce strategic designs and action imperatives to grow, mainstream and scale up the initiative. The impacts were significant. Within three years—by the next summit in Geneva, Switzerland—the Global Compact had grown from 1,500 firms to over 8,000 of the world's largest corporations; measures showed a 433% growth rate, averaging 144.4% per year. 'I would like to commend your innovative methodology of Appreciative Inquiry', said Kofi Annan in a letter, 'and to thank you for introducing it to the United Nations.'

Without this, it would have been very difficult, perhaps even impossible, to constructively engage so many leaders of business, civil society and government’.

National Grid and the State Energy Planning With Governor Deval Patrick

How does the number one energy efficiency state in the US do its state-wide energy planning with a focus on capturing radical energy efficiencies and ‘paying it forward’ to build a future of renewable and advanced energy? They design collaboratively: with 300 energy institutions, leaders from business, government and civil society using the strengths-based AI Summit. In May 2012, National Grid and the state’s other utilities co-convened an unprecedented macro collaboration entitled ‘Massachusetts: Leading the Nation in the Energy Savings Revolution—Building a Better Tomorrow through Energy Efficiency Today’. Since the Summit was held, the collaboration unveiled a new three-year plan to deliver energy efficiency services that will result in nearly US\$9 billion in benefits to residents and businesses across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The whole system collaboration was soon recognised as a major innovation—receiving the prestigious award of ASEP in 2013—and Edward White, VP at National Grid, when receiving the award said: ‘The Appreciative Inquiry Summit was a great forum for us to connect directly with customers and others concerned with how energy affects our lives. Efforts like this exemplify why Massachusetts leads the nation on energy efficiency’.

Fairmount Minerals

2005 was a landmark year for Fairmount Minerals, a leader in production of industrial sand in the United States. It was the year when sustainability was articulated as the business strategy for the entire organisation. The care and concern that the organisation has always exhibited for its employees was expanded to include the environment and the community. But it was not always like this. The company shared the reputation of the rest of the mining industry. Mining is not a pretty job—leaving quite a footprint behind. Being referred to as ‘dune-rapers’ by environmental protesters, Fairmount expanded the inner circle of strategy to include customers, NGOs and communities in their business strategy work. They did not announce their sustainability strategy. It was win-win: two years later when they were recognised as the top corporate citizen in the US, they also doubled their earnings, with 40% per year earnings growth in each of the years following the summit. Today Fairmount brings the whole system together every three years for advancing new sustainability visions and strategies for their high growth enterprise.

The US Dairy Industry Sustainable Innovation Summit

In 2007, the board of directors for Dairy Management Inc. brought together more than 250 stakeholders from farms, academia, governmental and non-governmental organisations, and food retailers to focus on opportunities to build consensus for a ‘constitution for sustainable dairy’ and to find ways to spark sustainability innovations that would strengthen farm businesses, reduce

GHG emissions for fluid milk by 25%, and increase business value. That first summit created consensus for action around projects that would increase in farm business value on the order of US\$238 million by 2009.

At the climate summit in Copenhagen, USDA Secretary Vilsack held out dairy's work as a template for innovation in agriculture, and signed memorandum of understanding with the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy to work together to support and accelerate his innovation agenda, promising to provide government funding to support capital investment and research for GHG-related innovation (Whalen 2010).

In April 2013 representatives from the effort will meet at the White House, not only in recognition of their achievements but to recognise the innovative design process with stakeholders from across the whole life-cycle value chain.

The City of Cleveland: Designing a green city on a blue lake

Despite media attention on federal efforts to transition to a green economy, the real change happening is a quiet revolution taking places among US cities. Over 973 mayors have signed up to the US Mayors Climate Protection Agreement. However, even with the exponential growth of effort by cities, most of the action remains fragmented. Most initiatives are either within a specific sector or a small area of a city resulting in the absence of systemic approaches to change. In Cleveland, Mayor Jackson did not want to see the city fall behind, but to lead. As a member city in the UN Global Compact, Mayor Jackson heard about the power of systemic collaboration and drew together business leaders, grass-roots networks, universities, the faith community, the public schools and the design field to hold an unprecedented three-day design summit called 'Creating an Economic Engine to Empower a Green City on a Blue Lake'. In addition, representatives of the White House and other cities around the US and Europe were present in order to study the process. Senior leaders from IBM, Ford, Microsoft and Walmart participated. Quite literally, the eyes of key leaders in sustainability were on Cleveland to learn how to create a local sustainable economy. The summit emerged with 25 prototypes for action: working on radical energy efficiency; transforming abandoned land into urban farms; sustainable mobility systems; and many more. Imagine their public hall looking like a design studio at Apple—25 design studios. That's what is happening in Cleveland. It's not the kind of politics—the gridlock of dialogue—one sees in Congress. One article suggested it might be a new kind of democracy, not dialogical democracy, but design democracy, saying: 'the best in human beings comes out, for example the pioneering days of community barn-building, when whole systems design something together; that's when trust flows, new realities are felt and seen right there, and confidence grows'.

The United Religions Initiative

The purpose of the United Religions Initiative is to promote enduring, daily interfaith cooperation, to end religiously motivated violence and to create cultures of peace, justice and healing for the Earth and all living beings. It started

as a vision of Bishop Swing in California when he spoke at the 50th anniversary of the UN's charter signing. There he declared the hope of a 'UN among religions'—a place of dialogue to unite the strengths of people of all faiths. But he did not want just words or a vision on a piece of paper: he wanted to lift up a self-organising system that could self-replicate its powerful purpose and principles. Over five years, five global Appreciative Inquiry Summits with approximately 700 business leaders, people of faith and government leaders were held at Stanford University to write the charter and design the organisation, based on nature's design principles. On 24 June 2000 the charter was signed at Carnegie Hall. Today there are over 600 collaboration centres around the world with an estimated 7 million people who have been involved. A feature article in *Fast Company* (2001) covered the initiative and showed how AI's systemic methods together with Visa Founder and CEO Dee Hock's chaordic alliance concepts came together to create this orchestrated movement to build a better world. One book, *Birth of Global Community* (Gibbs and Mahe 2003), suggests that the organisation will soon be nominated for a Nobel Prize.