

# Positive psychology and managing change

Sarah Lewis, Jonathan Passmore and Stefan Cantore on the use of the 'appreciative inquiry' approach

**Models of organisational change tend to be outdated, and built on a concept of people as negative, scared and resistant to change. How can the emerging scientific base of positive psychology overhaul this view and give managers new tools to use in managing change?**

**This article looks at the impact of positive emotional states in the change management process, and how this has been developed into an integrated, organisational level method in 'appreciative inquiry'.**

## questions

Is positive psychology a fast-growing fad or a real scientific breakthrough in our understanding of the psychology of people?

How could you use the scientific method to investigate the efficacy of appreciative inquiry?

How might you encourage managers to use positive methods of organisational change, rather than 'building a burning platform'?

## resources

Ludema, J.D. et al. (2003) *The appreciative inquiry summit – A practitioner's guide for leading large group change*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

The Appreciative Inquiry Resource Centre: [www.jemstoneconsultancy.co.uk/appreciative.htm](http://www.jemstoneconsultancy.co.uk/appreciative.htm)

As occupational psychologists, we are interested in exploring managers' understanding of how psychology can help them tackle the changes their organisations need to make to stay competitive. But when the average manager gropes for their toolkit, do they tend to find that the contents are unsuitable or outdated?

## Standard models of change

The first psychological model managers think of when asked about change is often the 'change curve' (Kübler-Ross, 1969), which appears to be ubiquitous in management training. Interestingly, the change curve has origins as a therapeutic model to assist bereavement counsellors; few people think about how applying it to the workplace might influence the model. Other psychological theories regularly referred to date back 40 years or more: Lewin's three-stage model of change (1951), Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954), McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y (1960), Herzberg's hygiene factors (1966). These models, while displaying enviable

enduring face validity, have stood up less well to empirical study of their validity (Miner, 2005). Sadly, even pop psychology theories, such as neurolinguistic programming, make a regular appearance in these discussions. Science-based psychology, such as behavioural analysis and personality theory, is almost conspicuous by its absence, with the exception of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.

## An emerging alternative

The scientific base of positive psychology offers organisations an understanding of human growth and change that challenges the prevailing view of people as 'resistant to change'. It recognises people as resourceful and adaptive, and sees the ability to change behaviour as an inherent growth and survival skill. A practical methodology that has grown up in parallel with positive psychology and that we consider to be part of this emerging field is appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).

Appreciative inquiry is a change methodology that grew out of

dissatisfaction with action research (Revans, 1998). Like its predecessor it is a very practical methodology that engages with the organisation through direct intervention. The emphasis within appreciative inquiry is on the conversational and sense-making life of the organisation as sources of continuity and change. It is a highly psychological approach in that it focuses on the social-political aspects of organisational life rather than the

**Positive psychology can help organisations move on from the 'burning platform' model of change**

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logical-rational aspects. It is an approach to organisational change that embraces human nature, including human emotions and cognition.

One of the things appreciative inquiry and positive psychology share is an understanding of the nature and power of positive emotions. Cooperrider, the founder of appreciative inquiry, and his colleague Whitney (2001, p.22) note:

Put most simply it has been our experience that building and sustaining momentum for change requires large amounts of positive affect and social bonding – things like hope, excitement, inspiration, caring, camaraderie, sense of urgent purpose...

The work of Fredrickson and Branigan (2005) offers empirical support to this impact of positive affect, demonstrating that positive emotional states are associated with more socially oriented behaviour, greater curiosity and exploration, and greater willingness to accommodate ambiguity or uncertainty.

Fredrickson (1998) has argued that the 'fight or flight' nature of negative emotions results in a narrowing down of our thought-action repertoires. In essence the human response is concern with the threat and ways to escape it. While this may be appropriate in the most severe situation of life and death crisis, it is less appropriate for everyday situations and the organisational crisis.

Of course, negative affect can be effective in motivating change. Consider the burning platform model of change – an analogy drawn from the Piper Alpha disaster, where it was noted that it was the imminence of certain death on the burning platform that motivated people to jump to

almost certain death in a burning sea. But change motivated by negative emotional states has some associated drawbacks. In general the evidence suggests that people will behave as required as long as the threat exists and is seen as salient to them

'How do I avoid getting shouted at?'. This is a subtle but highly significant difference in focus that produces much of the 'heads down, the storm will pass' behaviour so typical in organisations.

So, what does positive psychology have to offer managers who need to induce change in their organisations, often while also maintaining a high level of performance? Feeling good tends to increase feelings of sociability. Feeling and being sociable increases our social resource through the building of social bonds and attachments (Lee, 1983). Interest and curiosity are also associated with positive emotional states. Feeling interested prompts

exploration, promotes the accumulation of knowledge, and enhances the ability to deal with intellectual complexity. Positive emotional states thus allow expanded and broader scopes of attention, greater openness to new information, and flexible and inclusive thinking that is creative and efficient (Isen, 2000).

In short, positive affect produces broader, more flexible, greater cognitive organisation, and an ability to integrate diverse material (Isen, 1990). It also stimulates feelings of hope and optimism, which are associated with greater tenacity, versatility and self-confidence (Snyder et al., 2005). When people are being asked to do new things, or to work in an unfamiliar way, often working closely together, then these are exactly the resources they need to enable them to succeed.

Research by Losada and Heaphy (2004) offers further evidence of the benefits of positive psychology, and particularly positive emotion, to organisational life. Their research demonstrated that the ratio of positive to negative comments in a group makes a huge difference to team performance. This research makes it clear that positive emotional comments, and states, are key to high performance in teams and, by implication, organisations. This of course is particularly

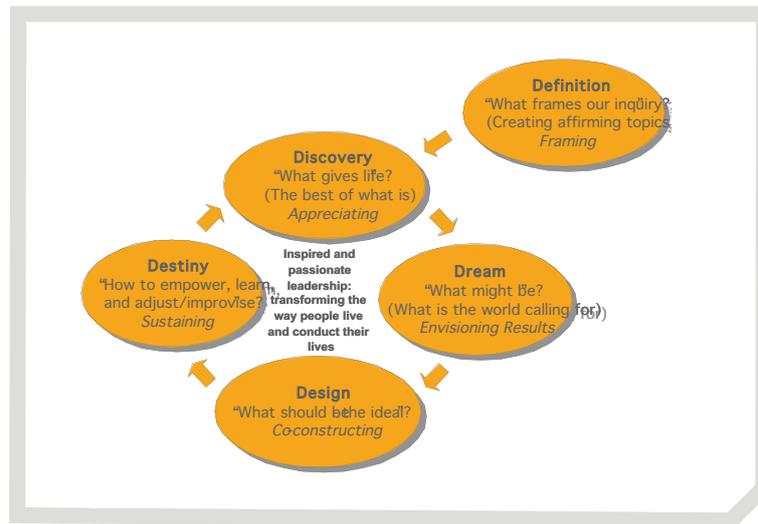


Figure 1: Appreciative inquiry is based on four stages of organisational change that encourage members of the organisation to think about what gives life to the organisation, what aspirations it has for the future, what should be done and how (Lewis et al., 2007)

(Sidman, 1989). However, once the threat diminishes or is reappraised as being less salient, behaviour may revert to former, more rewarding, patterns. We know this colloquially as 'when the cat's away, the mouse will play'.

A pattern can develop in organisational life where to induce and maintain change the business has to keep finding new threats and then shout about them ever louder. The people in the organisation, on the other hand, get better and better at ignoring what are now perceived as unrealistic threats. The business has effectively got itself into the situation of crying wolf, and the people's concern becomes not 'How do I avoid the threat management are shouting about?' but

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relevant to change because of the effects of positive emotional states. Losada and Heaphy write 'negativity dampens deviations from some behaviour while positivity acts as amplifying or reinforcing feedback that expands behaviour' (2004, p.740).

### Appreciative inquiry in action

So the evidence of how positive psychology can contribute is building. But the question remains, how this approach can be operationalised in a model suitable for organisational change?

Appreciative inquiry (AI) offers the answer to this question. AI is an integrated, organisational-level methodology for approaching organisational change, based on an understanding of how organisational resourcefulness is generated through accessing many human psychological processes, such as positive emotional states, imagination, social cohesion and the social construction of reality (Lewis et al., 2007).

The approach is based on four stages of organisational change that encourage

members of the organisation to think about: What gives life to the organisation? (Discovery); What aspirations does it have for the future? (Dream); What should be done? (Design); And how? (Destiny). Such a four-step prescription (see Figure 1) could give the impression AI is mechanistic process, but in reality the model is more of a pen-sketch guide than a route map. The collaborative nature of the approach means that the AI is in practice organic and emergent. The result has been that it is now beginning to be used by large

"AI is an integrated, organisational-level methodology for approaching organisational change"

institutions and not-for-profits to involve staff and draw on their energies. Many of the insights and techniques associated with positive psychology can be effectively incorporated into the AI and the result stimulates rather than depresses those in the organisation.

As a profession, occupational psychologists are in a position to offer business-effective and evidence-based approaches. Appreciative inquiry works with our understanding of how people make sense of the world, and equips them for change as part of the process through using their strengths and the strengths of the organisation in order to move forward.



**I Sarah Lewis**  
is Managing Director of  
Jemstone Consultancy

**I Jonathan Passmore**  
is based at the School of Psychology,  
University of East London  
j.passmore@uel.ac.uk

**I Stefan Cantore**  
is a Senior Fellow at OPM  
www.opm.co.uk

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