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# Positive Design and Appreciative Construction: From Sustainable Development to Sustainable Value

**Tojo Thatchenkery**  
**David L. Cooperrider**  
**Michel Avital**

Editors

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# POSITIVE DESIGN AND APPRECIATIVE CONSTRUCTION: FROM SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT TO SUSTAINABLE VALUE

EDITED BY

TOJO THATCHUNKERY

*George Mason University, USA*

DAVID L. C. PERRIER

*Case Western Reserve University, USA*

MICHEL AVITAL

*University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands*



United Kingdom – North America – Japan  
India – Malaysia – China

## LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

<i>Nancy Auerbach</i>	Bond University, Australia
<i>Michel Avital</i>	University of Amsterdam, Netherlands
<i>Hilary Bradbury-Huang</i>	University of Southern California, USA
<i>David L. Cooperrider</i>	Case Western Reserve University, USA
<i>Carol Dalglish</i>	Queensland University of Technology, Australia
<i>Kokila Doshi</i>	University of San Diego, USA
<i>David Dunne</i>	University of Toronto, Canada
<i>Mary Jo Hatch</i>	Gothenburg University, Sweden and Copenhagen University, Denmark
<i>Dirk S. Hovorka</i>	Bond University, Australia
<i>Ulla Johansson</i>	University of Gothenburg, Sweden
<i>Julie E. Kendall</i>	Rutgers University, USA
<i>Kenneth E. Kendall</i>	Rutgers University, USA
<i>Alesia Krupenikava</i>	United Nations Global Compact, Belarus
<i>Chris Laszlo</i>	Case Western Reserve University, USA
<i>Miguel Angel Lopez</i>	INCAE Business School, Costa Rica
<i>Héctor Martinez</i>	INCAE Business School, Costa Rica
<i>Theresa McNichol</i>	Ren Associates, USA
<i>Judy Matthews</i>	Queensland University of Technology, Australia
<i>Michael Daniel Metzger</i>	INCAE Business School, Costa Rica
<i>Philip H. Mirvis</i>	Boston College, USA

<i>Wietske van Osch</i>	University of Amsterdam, Netherlands
<i>Michael Pirson</i>	Fordham University, USA
<i>Anthony E. Smith</i>	Eastern Mennonite University, USA
<i>Tojo Thatchenkery</i>	George Mason University, USA
<i>Chester C. Warzynski</i>	Georgia Institute for Technology, USA
<i>Jill Woodilla</i>	University of Gothenburg, Sweden
<i>Nadya Zhexembayeva</i>	IEDC-Bled School of Management, Slovenia

## FOREWORD

Appreciative Inquiry is about the search for the best in people, their organizations, and the strengths-enriched world around them. In its broadest focus, “AI” involves systematic discovery of everything that gives “life” to a living system when it is most alive, effective and flourishing, and most capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves, in a very central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. It centrally involves the mobilization of whole system appreciation through the crafting of the “unconditional positive question” often-involving hundreds or sometimes thousands of people.

Increasingly, AI has become the positive change methodology of choice in the domain of sustainability. Since AI’s originating theoretical articulation almost 25 years ago (Cooperrider, 1986; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) there has been a rapidly growing convergence between appreciative inquiry, the field of design thinking, and today’s worldwide call to transform an unsustainable economy to a sustainable, bright green economy and ecology of organizations (Cooperrider, 2008). This special volume of *Advances in Appreciative Inquiry* places full attention on this convergence. While the combination of AI with design thinking and sustainable value is relatively recent, its promise and potential is already huge.

On June 24, 2004, the convergence began to flower in earnest when Kofi Annan, then Secretary General of the United Nations, called upon myself and faculty colleagues at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University to bring AI to the UN’s Global Compact initiative. As many know it, the Global Compact is the largest corporate sustainability effort in the world. In many ways, it was an astonishing call. Having been briefed on the power of the large group AI Summit method, the Secretary General decided that AI could be the best approach for advancing the UN Global Compact’s mission. In short, our team was invited to facilitate what became the largest meeting in history between the UN and hundreds of CEOs, from companies such as Hewlett Packard, Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, Nokia, Microsoft, Lafarge, Novartis, Novo Nordisk, Tata, and many others. The summit was an exploration into the next phases of global corporate citizenship and the creation of a

sustainable economy, where Kofi Annan reached out his hand to business leaders and said: “Let us choose to unite the strengths of markets with the power of universal ideals, let us choose to reconcile the forces of private entrepreneurship with the needs of the disadvantaged and the well-being of future generations” (AI Commons).

The AI summit itself engaged over 500 CEOs well as civil society leaders and several heads of state. In a report issued by Kofi Annan following the summit, one CEO, Rodrigo Loures of Nutrimental Foods, declared (<http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu>): “I have been to many global meetings and in my experience, the AI summit is the best large group method in the world today.” And in a personal letter following the summit, Kofi Annan said: “I would like to commend you more particularly for your methodology of Appreciative Inquiry and to thank you for introducing it to the United Nations. Without this, it would have been difficult, perhaps even impossible, to constructively engage so many leaders of business, civil society, and government.” All of this raised for me an observation and important question: “Why was sustainability agenda – coupled with AI – such a good match?”

What’s becoming increasingly apparent in our complex multistakeholder world is that global agenda for change faces a paradox. The global issues of our day are tremendously complex, scientifically uncertain, interrelated, and monumental. Imagine the setting I have just described, at the 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 specter of terror spreading across every geographic boundary. Imagine further the typical approach to inquiry at this kind of meeting: a massive database documenting the depth of the problematique, 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 frustrating immobilization. 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 organize, to innovate, and mobilize positive actions forward. While the diagnosis of the weighty problem might be totally accurate, it does not 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 is not long before the predictable happens: the growing sense of threat leads to separation, fault finding, and the application of the problematizing modes of analysis to the nascent, new 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 itself but the prenegotiated agreements. Why would we even consider designing such a meeting for spontaneous, open dialogue? The sophisticated search for what’s wrong, no matter how well intended, creates a contagion effect – we all become a “problem-to-be-solved.”

Our meeting with many of the world’s top businesses at the UN began with an entirely different set of assumptions. It began with the assumption that relationships come alive when there is an appreciative eye, when people seek not so much to “diagnose” but to appreciatively search for the best in each other and the assets, opportunities and positive possibilities inherent in the living system of emerging relationships. It began also with the Drucker-like management assumption that the ageless essence of leadership is all about strengths, that is, that the task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths so strong that it makes the system’s weaknesses irrelevant. And it began with the assumption that creating the new (innovation) is fundamentally different than solving the old (intervention): both are about change, but innovation requires a design thinking energy that is more contagious (positively) than can ever be realized through the mindset of bureaucratic reform. Think of the difference, for example, between the collaborative creativity of a design studio at Apple Inc. and a typical UN meeting. In an AI process, like that of a design studio, the arduous task of intervention gives way to the speed of imagination and innovation; instead of negation, criticism, and spiraling diagnosis, there is discovery, dream, and design. AI seeks to build a link and union between a whole people and the massive entirety of what people talk about as past and present capacities: achievements, assets, unexplored potentials, innovations, strengths, elevated thoughts, opportunities, high point moments, lived values, important traditions, strategic competencies, stories of what works, expressions of wisdom, insights into the deeper corporate spirit or soul – and visions of valued and possible futures. Taking all of these together as a gestalt, AI deliberately, in everything it does, seeks to work from accounts of this

“positive core” – and it assumes that every living system has many untapped accounts of the kind of positivity that opens minds, nurtures relationships, and builds resources for confident collective action.

The impact generated at the UN Global Compact Leaders Summit surprised everyone. After collaboratively designing a new growth strategy, the Global Compact grew exponentially from about one thousand of the world’s largest corporations to over seven thousand today. While it is beyond this foreword to trace every one of the twelve major initiatives that resulted, there was one that is central to the present volume. During the summit a new partnership was proposed and forged to use AI on a continuous basis to search the world and to shine a light on the theme “Business as an Agent of World Benefit” – it would be a search for companies emerging as models of business as a force for peace in high conflict zones; business as a force for the eradication of extreme poverty; and business as a force for eco-imagination and innovation. More formally, to carry it all forward, a partnership was enacted between Case Western Reserve University, the home of AI, the Academy of Management with its 19,000 professors, and the UN Global Compact. And through this exciting collaboration there would be an AI summit every several years, called the Global Forum for Business as an Agent of World Benefit. The Global Forum was then established based on the assumption that every single global and social issue of our day is a business opportunity, in disguise, just waiting for the creative innovation of good business, the entrepreneurial mindset, as well as the pragmatism of good business. In the field of sustainability and corporate citizenship, the Global Forum’s niche is unique and it is designed around one distinguishing premise, which I’ve shared at the start of each Global Forum:

Sustainable value creation is the business opportunity of the 21st century. It’s an innovation engine unlike anything we have ever seen in management – and it’s a lens, which will dominate the management agenda for the next generation of thirty to fifty years. Even more important, the outcomes will define the next episode in creative capitalism and, ultimately, will determine the well being of our imperiled planet. Hence the forum’s foremost question is this: “How do leading companies, associations, and markets turn pressing global and social issues, for example the Millennium Development Promises or climate change and energy concerns, into bona-fide business opportunities, in ways that vitally and consistently benefit both business and the world?”

This volume was envisioned and grew, therefore, from the 2009 Global Forum for Business as an agent of world benefit held at Case Western Reserve University’s Fowler Center for Sustainable Value. Once announced, including the call for papers, the forum took off. An astonishing 400



academic papers and management application workshops were proposed featuring literally thousands of innovations. Over 1000 people participated, bringing scholars and executives together across the domains of theory and practice. The forum title “Management as Designing in an Era of Massive Innovation” was carefully chosen to explore the primacy and potency of design thinking as the vortex for creating a new breed of industry-leading stars, showing how the creative designer’s attitude can transform 21st century corporate citizenship into a source of business opportunity and world-benefiting innovation. It also, as the words “massive innovation” suggested, was about scaling up, about amplifying. Indeed, the changes rippling across the fields of design, sustainability, and appreciative inquiry are nothing short of revolutionary. However, it was also clear to us that we are no longer lacking in isolated product exemplars or surprising business-driven sustainability solutions. Everyone, it seems, is going green or proposing to become more socially responsible. Today’s greater challenge lies in system-wide design. That is, it is about the task of discovering ways of overcoming the systemic challenges of collaborative innovation and applied human creativity in not only large multinational corporations, but across multistakeholder supply chains, whole bio-regions, entire industries and professions, and across economies and geographies where billions continue to be locked in debilitating poverty.

As the reader will see in this volume, true innovation happens when strong multidisciplinary groups come together, build a collaborative and appreciative interchange, and explore the intersection of their different points of view. Many talk about multidisciplinary collaboration, but few are actually successful at sustaining attempts to see what will happen. We believe that having appreciative inquiry’s strengths-based focus in the mix, along with the design thinker’s attitude, is key to success in multidisciplinary collaboration and critical to uncovering unexplored areas of innovation – especially when the aim is the creation of sustainable value. In our experience it is the fusion of strengths and AI’s search for “what gives life” that provides the glue that holds macro-efforts together and makes them successful. It was Kofi Annan’s belief in this idea – in the applied power of appreciative inquiry in human systems – that led ultimately led to this book.

In addition to the featured authors who contributed the advanced, thought-provoking chapters to this volume, as well as the reviewers who helped with constructive commentaries, I need to single out the splendid thought-leadership of Tojo Thachenkery of George Mason University, who saw this project through from creative conception to completion.

Supporting Tojo was the Advances in Appreciative Inquiry series coeditor, Michel Avital, from the University of Amsterdam. We owe a special debt of gratitude to the Fowler Center for Sustainable Value and the much admired Dean, Mohan Reddy, at the Weatherhead School at Case Western Reserve University. The team from the Fowler Center – Ante Glavas, Emily Drew, Erin Christmas, and Garima Sharma – worked night and day managing the Global Forum; to be sure it was a labor of love and the conference was so well received that it served to help us recruit the brilliant new executive director of the Fowler Center, Roger Saillant. Intellectually, the focus on sustainable value was inspired by our faculty colleague Chris Laszlo and his recent book on the subject. We are also indebted to the many doctoral students from the Department of Organizational Behavior, at Case Western Reserve University and to Professor Ronald Fry for his seminar featuring the world inquiry on business as an agent of world benefit. We were gifted too with administrative support from one of Tojo's great students, Penny Potter, and the ever-caring, competent, and dedicated Retta Holdorf. Penny played the role of Project Manager, which enabled the timely completion of the review process and various steps afterwards. Generous financial support came from leading companies such as Fairmount Minerals, Accenture, and the Brazilian Confederation of Industries. Several senior executives – CEO Chuck Fowler at Fairmount Minerals, David Abood Partner, Accenture, and President Rodrigo Loures, head of the Brazilian Confederation of Industries in Parana – are the kinds of leaders our world needs to multiply.

Finally, we owe a very special debt of gratitude to the Board and staff of the Fetzer Institute, specifically to Tom Beech and Dave Slyter, not only for the Institute's lead funding and collaborative support for the Global Forum for Business as an Agent of World Benefit, but for their belief in the positive assumptions of Appreciative Inquiry and their vision of management as a noble profession – as a humanly significant calling and as a spiritual enterprise for bringing meaning, courage, and love into the world.

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David L. Cooperrider  
*Fairmount Minerals Professor and Faculty Director*  
*Fowler Center for Sustainable Value*  
*Weatherhead School of Management*  
*Case Western Reserve University*

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# INTRODUCTION TO POSITIVE DESIGN AND APPRECIATIVE CONSTRUCTION: FROM SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT TO SUSTAINABLE VALUE

Tojo Thatchenkery, Michel Avital and  
David L. Cooperrider

*Positive Design and Appreciative Construction: From Sustainable Development to Sustainable Value* draws on the power of Appreciative Inquiry to reframe our conceptions and approaches to designing and reinforcing systems and environments that promote sustainable value across the board. Rarely in recent history have there been times when one can say that a new consciousness about a global issue has suddenly surfaced. The quest for sustainability is one in that category. It is at the top of social and political agenda for most countries. The scientific evidence of the need for a radical shift in preserving the planet for future generations has been accumulated for a long time, despite the occasional challenges of its validity by diehards who believe otherwise. Yet only recently has the awareness of sustainability shot up to the level of a common ground and a collective political will across diverse ideologies and at a global level. However, a multitude of somewhat

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conflicting approaches are offered to prescribe and maintain sustainability. Some are reactive in the form of regulations and international treaties, and others are based on free market models, such as trading in CO<sub>2</sub> emission quotas or varied pricing schemes based on energy source. In this volume, we propose a shift: a call for moving from sustainable development to sustainable value. The former is primarily a mechanistic approach that is embedded in the development paradigm, and promotes progress, growth and consumption in an ecologically friendly way. In contrast, sustainable value is holistic and embraces a universal value stance that caters for all stakeholders.

Sustainable value encompasses the shareholder value as well as stakeholder value. Until recently, shareholder value and stakeholder value were perceived as generally incompatible. The desire to make a profit was often seen as being at loggerheads with the will to create sustainable value. In other words, there was much agreement that organizations are virtually incapable of creating value for all of their stakeholders simultaneously (Hart & Milstein, 2003). This dichotomy has changed, as we hope to demonstrate in this volume.

A growing number of socially responsive investment funds have shown that it is possible to do good for both society and the shareholder at the same time. Socially responsible investing (SRI) not only strives to enhance the bottom lines of the companies they have invested in, but also to build a more sustainable world. Socially responsible investments encompassed an estimated \$2.71 trillion out of \$25.1 trillion in the U.S. investment marketplace in 2007. SRI has entered the mainstream discourse and terms such as mission investing, responsible investing, double or triple bottom line investing, ethical investing, sustainable investing, or green investing have become common. Not surprisingly, SRI has gained much popularity and is supported by individuals as well as corporations, universities, foundations, public and private pension funds, and nonprofit organizations. In the long term, it performs as well or better than non-SRI investments. Subsequently, institutional investors represent the largest and fastest growing segment of the SRI world (<http://www.socialinvest.org/resources/sriguide/srifacts.cfm>).

Related to SRI are the *Dow Jones Sustainability Indexes*. Launched in 1999, the Dow Jones Sustainability Indexes are the first global indexes tracking the financial performance of the leading sustainability-driven companies worldwide. More than 70 DJSI licenses are held by money managers in 16 countries. Owners of DJSI see corporate sustainability as a business approach that creates long-term shareholder value by harnessing the market's potential for sustainability products and services while at the



same time successfully reducing sustainability costs and risks (<http://www.sustainability-index.com/default.html>).

It is generally recognized that a major issue in the creation of sustainable value is the need to satisfy the organizational stakeholders in the process of the delivery. As portrayed by Charter (1998, p. 57), “Customers may be satisfied but if employees and suppliers are poorly treated, new ideas and improved productivity will not be generated, and the company may fail, therefore reducing benefits for stakeholders.” Therefore, improving the benefits of all stakeholders is critical. Sustainable value “creating shareholder wealth that simultaneously drives us toward a more sustainable world” (Hart & Milstein, 2003, p. 65) has thus become a visible business strategy driven by a convergence of factors such as sustainability-driven customer expectations, new technology developments in the market place including those of the competitors, and governmental incentives (Park, 2009). A sustainable company increases stakeholder value through the application of sustainable practices throughout the entire line of the business operation, management, and governance.

The history of *sustainable development* as a concept deserves further elaboration in the context of this volume. The term “sustainable development” was first used in the *International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources* (IUCN) 1980 World Conservation Strategy Report. Then the World Commission on Environment and Development report “Our Common Future” (Brundtland, 1987) brought more prominence to the concept. It defines sustainable development as “a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations ... Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43). Five years later, in the Rio Declaration (1992), the *United Nations Conference on Environment and Development* (UNCED) articulated 27 sustainable development principles, followed by the *World Summit on Sustainable Development*, which recognized that alleviating poverty should be the top goal in sustainable development.

Attempts to explain sustainable development are based on theories from neoclassical economics, ecological economics, and complexity theory (Sabau, 2010). The neoclassical approach builds on the free market model and hypothesizes markets as autonomous self-regulating systems capable of optimizing the needs of various constituents on a cost-benefit analysis