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What Is Appreciative Inquiry?

The term *appreciative inquiry* refers to an approach to achieving change in organisations. This approach is, to some extent, codified in a series of models of practice. At the same time it is a philosophical system of beliefs about the nature of truth, knowledge, and reality, and of how change occurs, or not, in human systems. This combination of profundity and practicality is the basis for appreciative inquiry's versatility, flexibility and robustness. That said, it is not a panacea for all ills. It is as important to know when it is not an appropriate approach as when it is.

In this first chapter we briefly consider the development of appreciative inquiry as a change methodology and outline some of the places to find case study accounts of appreciative inquiry practice beyond those recounted in this book. We look at what distinguishes appreciative inquiry as an approach, particularly the view it takes of organisations as living human systems. The chapter then considers how that difference in perspective affects the mode of practice and the approach to creating change. In examining when it is appropriate to use appreciative inquiry, we look at the nature of different organisational problems and the rise of dialogic organisational development as a broad field of distinctive practice within which appreciative inquiry fits. This chapter notes also that appreciative inquiry is a field application supported by scientific theory from academic sources. We look at this though the lens of evidence-based standards of intervention and consider the challenge for field-based practice. Finally we look at, and consider, the validity of some of the critiques of appreciative inquiry since its introduction to the field of organisational development at the end of the 1990s.

Practical Appreciative Inquiry: A Toolkit for Applying Appreciative Inquiry to Organisational Challenges, Opportunities, and Aspiration, First Edition. Sarah Lewis.

What Are the Origins of Appreciative Inquiry?

In 1987, as part of his Ph.D. research, supervised by Suresh Srivastva, into organisational change and development, Cooperrider [1] made a serendipitous discovery: that asking about and focusing on the good aspects of organisational life can produce positive change.* His breakthrough realisation was that organisations can positively and effectively engage with problems without necessarily addressing them head on, without even framing them as problems. This continues to be a revolutionary idea in the world of organisational change where it is still widely believed that to solve a problem you need to talk about the problem **as a problem**. Appreciative inquiry suggests that we can address, work on and solve problems while talking about the situation in a different way: in an appreciative way. How does appreciative inquiry work?

Figure 1.1 illustrates the process by which a positive inquiry into a positive experience, a practice which forms the basis of appreciative inquiry practice, has an impact on emotional states, relationships and the ability to

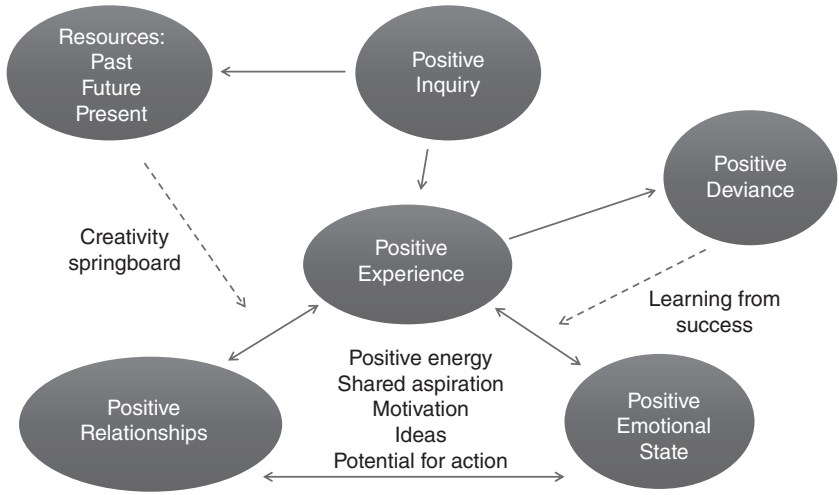

Figure 1.1 Positive Energy: the shared experience and demonstration of positive affect, cognitive arousal agentic behaviour among unit members in their joint pursuit of organisationally salient objectives.

* As this book was going to press, I came across this excellent account of how David Coopperrider arrived at the idea and practice of appreciative inquiry: Bushe, G. (2012) Foundations of Appreciative Inquiry: History, Criticism and Potential. AI Practitioner Vol 14, No.1. www.aipractitioner.com

access resources. This process, through the generation of positive energy, shared aspirations, motivation and ideas, creates the potential and impulsion for action. Positive deviance [2] is a positive psychology term that refers to exceptional performance. It's these examples of exceptional performance that appreciative inquiry brings into focus as a resource for organisational learning, growth and development. The diagram below also illustrates how appreciative inquiry generates hope, a key motivational emotion.

Today, Champlain College, which houses the David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry,[1] lists a variety of organisations using appreciative inquiry. These range from corporations such as Apple, Johnson and Johnson, Coca Cola and Visa, through non-profits such as the United States Navy, American Red Cross and the State of Massachusetts, to global initiatives such as the UN Global Compact. Case studies can also be found in the core practitioner publication *AI Practitioner: The International Journey of Appreciative Inquiry*.[2] Founded by Anne Radford in 1998, it continues to capture and disseminate appreciative inquiry theory and practice across the globe. Further case studies can be found in the book *Appreciative Inquiry for Change Management* [3]. A number of case studies are also shared in this book.

How Is Appreciative Inquiry Different to Other Change Methodologies?

There are many factors that distinguish appreciative inquiry from other change practices, as will become evident throughout the book. However, there are four key practices to highlight at this point. One is the specific kinds of question asked by appreciative inquiry, questions that target exploration of, and expand conversation about, the good and the best. Another is its focus on the conscious and deliberate redirecting of attention away from the problem to the aspiration. The third is the creation of a pull motivation through the lived experience of a more attractive future. And the fourth is the involvement of the whole system from the very beginning of the intervention. These practices are explored throughout this book. In essence, while other approaches essentially ask what has gone wrong here and how can we fix it or prevent more of it, appreciative inquiry asks what is going right here and how can we grow more of it.

Behind these surface differences lie differences in understanding the nature of an organisation. Appreciative inquiry views organisations as psychological spaces, full of psychologically alive and complex people: people who experience emotions, have differing relations with each other, who can

be fired up, or depressed, just by their imaginations. People who are motivated by things like loyalty, fair play and a sense of justice or betrayal as well as by logic or greed. Appreciative inquiry understands that all of human drama, all the emotions that fuel comedy and tragedy, are present in organisational life. One might say that it views organisations as Shakespearean theatre. Many other approaches tend to treat organisations more like predictable, logical machines.

There are further differences in the mode of practice. Appreciative inquiry is a co-creative, collaborative methodology, sailing close to the idea of 'no conversation about me without me'. This means that people are involved in conversations that affect their future from the very beginning. The ambition of this upfront investment is to generate energy for change in all levels of the system simultaneously. Obviously, this speeds up the process compared to a more traditional top-down linear 'energy-pumping' approach. Involving everyone from the beginning means that more people are simultaneously available to take the lead on different, forward-focused activities. While this may present challenges of coordination, it means that change can be achieved by a lot of people doing a little, rather than by a few having to do everything. This is a more effective use of organisational energy and makes it less likely any key player will burn-out through work overload.

Possibly the most important difference between appreciative inquiry and other approaches is that appreciative inquiry views organisations through a social constructionist lens [4].[3] Approaching the organisation from this perspective, we view it primarily as a social system that creates, through language, an understanding of itself and of the social world in which it exists. This social world is the context within which possibilities for action do, or don't, exist. As we work to change the social world, through working with perceptions, connections, stories and belief systems, so we work to change the potential for action.

Compared to the facts-and-data approach to change, which owes allegiance to the premises of hard science, appreciative inquiry is more akin to anthropology, ethnology or sociology, all of which are interested in the meaning given to objects, the myths, rituals, group norms and mores, the beliefs held by the group about appropriate behaviour that govern the boundaries of the acceptable, the power structures, and the stories told and their significance. This makes appreciative inquiry as an approach to organisational growth and change particularly interesting to those of us who, as psychologists, were trained in the scientific method, yet who also recognise

the validity and effectiveness of a social constructionist perspective. As a practitioner, I feel I spend a lot of time balancing on this edge, living in both world views.

How Does Appreciative Inquiry Engage with Organisational Problems?

This is a frequently encountered, valid question. Let's start by clarifying what we mean by problems and problem-solving.

We solve problems all the time, very effectively, and we tend, as a default linguistic habit, to refer to most challenges in life as problems. When problem-solving we tend to formulate the issue as a question that needs answering, assemble some data, analyse options against some criteria, select the best option and then implement our decision. For example, I have to organise the logistics of my consultant life. Not so long ago I had to get from a full day's delivery in Dublin in Ireland to Truro in Cornwall for the following afternoon. This turned out to be quite complicated. Solving the 'how to get from A to B within a given timetable, ensuring I arrive fresh enough to work' involved researching options to identify the optimal modes of travel, finding overnight accommodation, and paying close attention to all the timings so I didn't miss any connections. It's the kind of challenge that makes my brain melt, but I knew it would be, and it was, solvable with the application of information gathering, logic and brain power. I am sure this kind of logic-based problem-solving is very familiar to you.

Organisations, of course, deal with many problems like this all the time, trying to work out what the profit margin is on item Z, or to ascertain the optimal machinery layout in the floor space available and, on the whole, a logic-based problem-solving approach works very well in these situations. This means that the more traditional change methodologies can be applied here and will help move things forward.

The difficulties arise, in my experience, when the problem under consideration is not of this nature: when it is not a rational, logical, or analytical problem – for example, when the question is not 'What is the most cost-effective way to work?' but rather, 'How are we going to get people to work differently?' Many organisational change and development challenges are of this nature. These include recurring challenges such as, 'How can we boost morale?', 'How do we increase employee engagement?' or 'How can we get departments to work better together?' These are not easily answered

through a traditional problem-solving approach because they are essentially psychological and social challenges, not logical challenges.

Joanna Wilde refers to these kinds of challenges as 'wicked' problems' [5]. She defines wicked problems as those that are difficult or impossible to solve because they are social in nature, and they exist in a constantly changing environment. She says, 'A wicked problem is a problem whose social complexity means that it has no determinable stopping point'. In other words, it can be hard to grasp what the challenge actually is, and even if you think you do, the situation is changing all the time, meaning that any 'solution' is likely to be subject to further disruption. Wilde also points that, 'because of complex interdependencies, the effort to solve one aspect of a wicked problem may reveal or create other problems'. In other words, when working with a 'wicked' problem, unexpected outcomes, including new problems, are to be expected.

I think this description of the characteristics of a wicked problem gives a very good flavour of the kind of organisational challenge with which organisations can run into difficulties. They are challenges of a different order, and they require a different approach. This distinction is not always appreciated by organisations who only have one set of change tools at their disposal, often those of traditional problem-solving. Awareness of the mismatch between traditional ways of thinking about helping organisations develop and the basis of approaches such as appreciative inquiry stimulated a questioning of the fundamental thinking behind organisational development as a discipline and practice and led to the emergence of a new approach: dialogic organisational development.

What Is Dialogic Organisational Development?

In 2009 Bushe and Marshak coined the phrase 'dialogic organisational development' to reflect this new understanding of how to work with organisations to achieve change. To help distinguish it from what had gone before, they named the more traditional approaches diagnostic organisational development. In 2015 they brought the different strands of thinking that informed this emerging field of practice together into a seminal book [6], organised a conference, and initiated a conversation about this.[4] Even more recently they have published a series of short practitioner-oriented books each focused on a different aspect of dialogic organisational development.[5] As an emerging field the terrain and boundaries of dialogic organisational

development are still being established, but it is clear that appreciative inquiry fits well. Let's explore the difference between the two schools they identify, diagnostic and dialogic, in a little more detail.

The diagnostic approach to organisational development is likely to be familiar to you. This way of thinking, which Bushe calls the conventional mindset, talks about organisations in the abstract, as systems, as things, as parts, that can be moved around and reconfigured. It sees organisations as made up of independent, autonomous, rational individuals and groups. At the centre is the idea of the heroic leader whose vision and wisdom can steer their organisation to success. These leaders believe in rational, analytical ways of making decisions. Perhaps unaware of the importance of context to implementation, they gravitate towards one-size-fits-all solutions. And, while they might be cognizant of uncertainty and ambiguity, they usually act, and encourage others to act, as if there was certainty and predictability. Their actions are predicated on the belief that leaders can control what happens in organisations.

Working from this perspective to achieve change, the process is to name the problem, diagnose the fault, and then fix it. This approach tends to produce logic like: 'Sales have been dropping, why?' 'Because the sales team aren't selling very well'. 'Okay, then we need training for the sales team'. However, a moment's thought reveals there may be any number of reasons sales have fallen, many of which may bear little relation to the selling ability of the sales team. Organisations frequently make these jumps in logic, driven by the need to solve the problem efficiently, that is, with minimum expenditure of time and effort, rather than effectively, that is, in a way that works.

The dialogic approach spreads its net a little wider. In particular it recognises the key role of the processes of sense-making and storytelling within organisations. People engage with what they see, hear and are told in ways that make sense to them in the context of their experience. Dialogic organisational development appreciates that the 'reality' of what is going on from one perspective, and the sense people are making of it from another, may bear only a passing acquaintance; but it also recognises that it is the sense people are making and the explanatory stories they are sharing that fuel their ambitions and actions. Therefore, of key interest is the question, 'How are people making sense of things and what stories do they tell to explain things?' This meaning-making offers a point of intervention to achieve change.

Similarly, in contrast to a common view that people have huge agency in organisations, and that an inability to get things is due to some

personal failing, dialogic organisational development recognises people's interdependence and how people constrain and enable each other. It recognises that no one can control what everyone else is choosing to do and that often they can't get much done without the consent of others. It is this aspect of organisations that can be seen to explain why leaders often feel, despite their position of power, powerless to influence their own organisation. The dialogic approach emphasises that change is what emerges from the interplay of all the choices, intentions and strategies of all the stakeholders, and that this can result in both intended and unintended outcomes. Recognising and working with interdependencies is another point of intervention to achieve change.

Dialogic organisational development also argues that that far from being purely rational, people are emotional and that their emotional states, their likes and dislikes, their hopes and anxieties, affect what they believe and how they behave, offering yet another sphere of intervention to achieve change.

Frustrating though it can be for organisations that are used to working in a command-and-control way, when viewed through this dialogic lens situations are understood to be so uncertain and the local contingencies and context so important that generic tools are of very little value; rather the organisational intervention needs to be very context-specific. And instead of the logic for the change being dictated from the top, each person involved needs to go on a personal journey of discovery and change to arrive at a place where the changes make sense and are meaningful and motivating in their own social world. Appreciative inquiry offers a way to do this that is faster, more effective and more sustainable than the time-honoured approach of pushing the change onto the organisation, an approach which often provokes high degrees of foot-dragging resistance or inertia-inducing incomprehension. Appreciative inquiry is one of the most established dialogic organisational development interventions.

To summarise, these two approaches encourage organisations to focus on different things. The diagnostic approach encourages and focuses on problem-solving, creating detailed plans, directing, having the answers, monitoring, fault-finding and rigid control of plan breaches. While, by contrast, the dialogic approach focuses on creating conditions for change, problem-setting (note the difference from problem-solving), co-creating, having questions, coordinating actions, creating coherence, directing the organisation's attention and nurturing growth by amplifying small changes in the right direction. Compared with a more formal problem-solving approach, some of this sounds very fuzzy. In the light of this, given the

emphasis on evidence-based practice as the gold standard, it is important to explore how, while working in the field applying dialogic thinking and appreciative inquiry practice to organisational challenges, practitioners can meet these standards.

How Can We Ensure That Our Appreciative Inquiry Practice with Organisations Is Evidence-Based?

Wilde has some very interesting things to say about all this. She argues that the laboratory is about, and works with, controlled problems, while the field, as we have seen, presents us with wicked problems. To bridge the divide, she argues, knowledge needs to change its nature as it moves from research to practice. The emphasis needs to switch from 'know what' to 'know how'. Research-produced knowledge needs to be mobilised in a way that influences policy and practice within organisations, while our understanding of consultancy needs to shift from a knowledge-driven method' to a 'helping-based practice' if we are going to bring the benefits of the research to the field. What she is essentially saying is that telling people about the research, while it may be experienced as interesting, doesn't necessarily lead to change in practices. Many an academic making the switch from working as a lecturer to providing consultancy has discovered this. The slides, dense with details of significance, that may hold essay-encumbered students' attention rarely have the same impact on action-oriented managers and leaders. Instead of boring them to death with highly informative PowerPoints, we have to find a way of putting the knowledge into practice to produce change. We can always supply the underlying research details if requested.

Inexperienced consultants, especially when trying to introduce a new approach such as appreciative inquiry to a leadership team, are often concerned that they need a detailed research case to persuade organisations to adopt this new approach. And in recognition of this request I do provide some of this when teaching appreciative inquiry; no harm having it all up your sleeve. In practice though, most managers aren't academics, and what they're buying isn't your academic knowledge so much as something different, namely your practice expertise.

'Practice', says Wilde, 'is the process by which knowledge from one situation is converted into a different form designed to be effective for the particular situation at hand; it must judge itself by "impact" and not by the

"facts" it generates'. And she adds, in a comment I wholeheartedly agree with, 'It is the dynamic nature of translating knowledge into changing complex environments that makes the work [of consulting to organisations] engaging and rewarding'. The beauty of appreciative inquiry, to my mind, is that this is exactly what it does. It provides a ready-to-go practice methodology, based on good science. Meanwhile, positive psychology as a recent research discipline has produced a mountain of research that supports the practice of appreciative inquiry, some of which is introduced in Chapter 2.

Following this, we can see that there is a need to define what we mean by 'evidence-based practice' for working in the field. In this spirit, Barends and colleagues [7] in 2014 suggested that field evidence-based practice can be defined as 'making decisions through the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of four sources of information: practitioner expertise and judgement, evidence from the local context, a critical evaluation of the best available research evidence, and the perspectives of those people who might be affected by the decision'. This sounds like an excellent take on the challenge to me.

Also thinking this way, Jacobs and colleagues [8] noted that the way the change intervention was conducted, what he called the implementation climate, was a critical factor for effectively influencing change. In particular he noted the need to work with staff and managers to co-create expectations. I argue that appreciative inquiry fits these definitions of evidence-based practice from the field. It is a social psychology–based approach to organisational change and development, and as such is predicated on a particular understanding of the nature of both organisations and people, that is delivered in a contextualised way using practitioner expertise and judgement, fully involving those to be affected by decisions made. To be accepted as a robust, evidence-based methodology, appreciative inquiry cannot be presented as the panacea to all organisational ills. It needs to be open to critique.

Critiquing Appreciative Inquiry

An important aspect of being evidence-based is to be able to be critical of both method and findings. Critiques of appreciative inquiry are in short supply, as a number of researchers have noted. For example, Van der Haar and Hosking noted in the early 2000s [9] that within the appreciative inquiry literature at that time both evaluation studies and critical reflections were rare, suggesting

that critical reflection needed to become a core practice within appreciative inquiry. Given the paucity of critique I was able to find for this section, I would suggest this is still a valid criticism. Even so, we can identify the application of a critical lens to the theory in the decades after its first announcement.

In 2002 Patton [10] criticised appreciative inquiry for its emphasis on positive stories, suggesting that it was therefore unrealistic and unbalanced. This criticism is alive and kicking, often expressed as a belief that appreciative inquiry ignores or downplays the negative. We address this in detail in Chapter 3, but just to say here that this criticism is associated with a misunderstanding of the true nature of appreciative inquiry practice. Another researcher, Reed [11], argued that there was a danger of appreciative inquiry ignoring power imbalances, and he warned that it should not confuse collaboration with democracy, since without the support of powerful players in an organisation, the outcomes of the appreciative inquiry work risked being sidelined. I learnt the truth of this the hard way and find this to be a very important point of potential weakness. Throughout this book and elsewhere [12][6] I emphasise the need to work closely with leaders and other powerful players in the system. This is addressed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Drew and Wallis [13] argued that appreciative inquiry wouldn't be the first choice in any situation with an urgent need to solve a problem or deal with a crisis. Again this is a sentiment with which I happily concur: if the situation is critical, speed is of the essence, and if people are in such a panic they can barely think, then their greatest need may be to be rescued to a sufficiently safe place that they can once again engage their brains. If I were drowning, I would just want the person on the bank to throw me a rope and tell me to grab it. Only once I was safe would I be able to think about anything beyond my immediate survival. Teams and other organisational systems are, very occasionally, in this state, in which case they are likely to benefit more, in the immediate term, from knowledgeable expert direction.

Schooley [14] also raises a good point, noting that in situations such as public sector government not all stakeholders can be 'brought into the room' or forced to participate in an appreciative inquiry summit. Having made this point, they ask whether it is ethical to agree to follow the consensus of the people who participated in an appreciative inquiry process while ignoring those who chose not to participate. What about the issue of the common good? While there are some problems with the notion of appreciative inquiry being a consensus based decision-making process, it a valid concern, and I think there are ways to address this, which we explore more in Chapter 3.

Rogers and Fraser [15] extended the critique from the process to the practitioner, noting the need for good and particular facilitation and group work skills to manage and guide the process. They warn that without affirmatory facilitation and group work skills to apply the 4D cycle appropriately (as the core appreciative inquiry methodology was commonly known then and which is explained fully in Chapter 2), appreciative inquiry could go dangerously wrong. For example, avoiding hard issues and uncomplimentary data could lead to vacuous, self-congratulatory findings or even worse, could provide a platform for airing vengeful and destructive sentiment. This again is a criticism to take seriously. When I first discovered appreciative inquiry and started practicing it, I underestimated how much my ability in this new approach rested on my many previous years' experience of group work, facilitation, and indeed skills acquired in my previous career as a residential social worker.

However, it is worth noting that appreciative inquiry is a flexible process, and while adherence to the principles that underpin practice is important (these are explained in Chapter 2), there are many ways to work from the appreciative inquiry perspective. The art is to work out how you can bring your particular strengths and skills to support your appreciative practice.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced appreciative inquiry as a practice, exploring its place in the field of organisational development. It has noted that appreciative inquiry fits within the definition of a dialogic organisational development approach and that it is particularly appropriate for engaging with problems that are 'wicked' in nature. In addition, the chapter has explored the wider issues of ensuring evidence-based practice and of acknowledging and accommodating critiques of appreciative inquiry. In Chapter 2 we build on this by looking in more detail at the core and original practice of appreciative inquiry, the 5D summit.

Learning Points

1. Appreciative inquiry is based in a social constructionist, sense-making view of the social world of organisations.
2. It is suitable for 'wicked' organisational problems.
3. It can be seen as a dialogic organisational development approach.

4. It is an effective container to bring research from science to the field of practice.
5. It can be critiqued, and care must be taken in practice to ensure these potential critiques are addressed.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you characterise the difference between appreciative inquiry and more traditional approaches to change?
2. How would you distinguish dialogic and diagnostic organisational development?
3. What are the challenges of achieving gold-standard evidence-based practice in the field, and how can they be addressed?
4. What might be some of the challenges of introducing appreciative inquiry to an organisation?

Teaching Practice

1. Divide the class into two groups or more. Get each to prepare a brief talk for their colleagues that outlines, for either a dialogic or diagnostic approach to change, the benefits, the risks, and some possible organisational situations or challenges appropriate for its adoption.

Resources and Further Reading

There are many good texts available about appreciative inquiry. See for example: Lewis, S., Passmore, J., and Cantore, S. (2016). *Appreciative Inquiry for Change Management Using AI to Facilitate Organizational Development*, 2e. London: Kogan Page Chapters 1 and 2.

Watkins, J.M. and Mohr, B.J. (2001). *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer Chapter 2.

Whitney, D. and Trosten-Bloom, A. (2003). *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Chapter 4.

Barrett, F.J. and Fry, R. (2005). *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Approach to Building Cooperative Capacity*. Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute Publications Chapter 1.

For online resources see

David Cooperrider, Center for Appreciative Inquiry at Champlain College, 251 South Willard Street, Burlington, VT 05401, USA. http://Appreciativeinquiry.champlain.edu
www.aipractitioner.com.

Finally, there are many good resources in the footnotes and references sections. See particularly the Bushe and Marshak text on Dialogic OD, and Joanne Wilde's book on the social psychology of organisations.

Notes

1. David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry at Champlain College, 251 South Willard Street, Burlington, VT 05401, USA. http://Appreciativeinquiry.champlain.edu.
2. https://aipractitioner.com/
3. Social constructionism is a philosophical approach to the nature of reality and knowledge.
4. The Dialogic Salon Series hosted by the Bushe-Marshak Institute and featuring all the authors in conversation with each other and the audience.
5. The Bushe-Marshak Institute Book Series can be found here https://b-m-institute.com/bmi-series-in-od.
6. As the title suggests, this is all about preparing an organisation for a dialogic intervention, such as appreciative inquiry.

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