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Feature Choice: Each issue, a leading AI practitioner will present a topic of their choice

Feature Choice by Maureen McKenna

Harnessing Human Energy to Renew Positive Organizational Climate: Reflections of an AI Practitioner and an Invitation to Action

ABSTRACT

The movie *Chasing Ice* provides a powerful metaphor for the foundation of Maureen McKenna's reflections as a seasoned AI practitioner. She explores the parallel experience that the urgency of climate change presents in the physical earth environment, and the urgent need for climate change in our organizations and communities – the human world environment. The article concludes with a compelling call to action to create the organizational cultures needed to flourish in these uncertain times.

A piece of ice the length of Lower Manhattan and twice the height of the Empire State Building majestically splits off Greenland's Illulissat glacier. It drops into the ocean. Start to finish only seventy-five minutes! This event is both magnificent and terrifying, and it's live on the earth stage as seen in the 2012 documentary *Chasing Ice*, a movie featuring the work of photographer James Balog. His mission, through his Extreme Ice Survey (EIS) project, is to gather undeniable evidence of climate change. He uses time-lapse cameras to capture the changes in the world's glaciers, compressing years of change into seconds, and showing us how quickly our glaciers are melting.

As I experienced this movie I asked myself: "How can anyone dispute the fact that climate change and global warming are real?" and "What am I doing to help?" In a moment of insight a couple of days later I could see a parallel experience of the urgency for climate change in the physical earth environment and the urgent need for climate change in our organizations and communities – the human world environment. It was a "Eureka" moment. I felt I understood the small, yet significant, contribution that I (and other like-hearted AI practitioners) can make.

As AI practitioners we work with our clients to create healthy climates within organizations, teams and communities. We help to create work environments where people are engaged, creative and innovative, enabling their organizations to achieve sustainable success. As critical as it is for humans to change the way we "fuel" and renew energy to our physical world, it is also critical that we change the way we "fuel" our human interactions. To do so we must change the way we interact within our organizational environments and in our personal lives.

While the world is awakening to the realization that the non-renewable energy sources we use are radically impacting our climate in a negative way, we as practitioners and leaders can help our clients, employees and stakeholders find the renewable and positive sources of *human* energy to impact the climates

'Seventy-one percent of American workers are "not engaged".' Gallup poll

of our communities and workplaces. One way to measure the significance of these organizational climates is to study employee engagement – or lack of engagement. A 2011 workplace Gallup poll study states:

"Seventy-one percent of American workers are 'not engaged' or are 'actively disengaged' in their work, meaning they are emotionally disconnected from their workplaces and are less likely to be productive" (Blacksmith and Harter, 2011).

Disengagement has significant financial and opportunity costs, limiting innovation and collaboration. At a time when there is a growing need to draw upon people to be innovative and creative, there is a human energy shortage to fuel this growing need.

The shifting of society's energy

Scientists in the 1980s experienced great resistance when they began to present the idea of global climate change, and the idea that human beings need to change their behavior to reduce the levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Around the same time, David Cooperrider, now Fairmount Minerals Professor at Case Western Reserve University, was also experiencing great resistance when he suggested that we need to look at a different way to approach organizational change. Some people even laughed at his revolutionary idea that we create our organizations based on our anticipation of the future and that the image of the future guides the current behavior of any system. Like the scientists who would not abandon their commitment to the environment in the face of skeptics, Cooperrider held fast to this new approach that viewed organizations not as problems to be solved, but as mysteries to be embraced.

Today there is a shift occurring both in the awareness and acceptance of Global Climate Change in the physical realm and the awareness and acceptance of focusing on strengths in the organizational realm. Gallup and other reputable research organizations are producing data that clearly show the increased productivity that can be achieved when organizations focus on strengths:

"Companies achieve superior performance when they immerse their employees in an engaging, strength-based culture. In the sixteen organizations in which Gallup has administered its strengths orientation index, researchers found that employees who perceive that their organization is committed to building the strengths of each associate are much likelier to know what's expected of them at work. They also feel that they have opportunities to do what they do best every day" (Apslund and Blacksmith, 2011).

Weaving AI principles and assumptions into work

In some recent conversations with AI practitioners, my colleagues and I have observed that organizations are more open to the concepts of strength-focused approaches to change than they might have been in the past. Words such as story, appreciation, strengths, creativity and play have become part of the working lexicon. I personally find myself spending less and less time having to explicitly provide clients with the research and background on a strength-focused approach to change. Rather, I am increasingly able to move much more quickly to weaving all the principles and assumptions of Appreciative Inquiry, Positive Psychology, Appreciative Intelligence, Positive Deviance and other such techniques implicitly into my work with my clients. My dear friend and mentor, Jane Magruder Watkins, describes this as "stealth AI". The fact that clients are



The Illulissat glacier, Greenland

Scientists in the 1980s experienced great resistance when they began to present the idea of global climate change.

Change is not only the 'only constant' – it involves higher and higher levels of complexity.

more open to a strength-based approach without needing to be convinced beforehand shows that these ideas are gaining momentum and acceptance in broader communities.

Why are strength-based approaches gaining more credibility?

There is a great outcry today for organizations, communities and countries to innovate. Like the glacier that has taken hundreds, if not thousands, of years to form and collapses in mere minutes, the speed of technology-induced change is causing us to be drawn into more complexity and interconnectedness than ever before. In our world, change is not only the only constant – it involves higher and higher levels of complexity. We ride on an ice-flow on the sea of change, requiring us to be comfortable and confident with the unexpected as the waves beneath our feet shift and pitch. We are also constantly looking out for those "icebergs" that can suddenly appear on our horizons. I believe our job as facilitators and consultants is to help people find their sea legs – helping them to find equilibrium.

This means helping them strengthen their internal resilience and develop a strong core that will give them balance and enable them to tap into the renewable energy within themselves. By focusing on internal strengths, inclusive leadership and collaboration practices, we help leaders focus on return on investment (ROI) and return on energy (ROE) through healthy and sustainable practices. Human energy, however, is quickly depleted through anxiety, cynicism, fear, and causes people to be disengaged. In the 1990s, Gallup Poll estimated that disengaged employees cost the US economy more than \$350 billion in lost productivity. Globally that number must be staggering!

Just as scientists have been researching climate change for years, IBM has been researching CEOs' views of coming challenges and emerging trends. Every two years since 2004, IBM has conducted one-on-one interviews with up to 2,500 CEOs from 64 countries, including those from the private sector, public sector, education and healthcare. CEOs have been asked to name the top three external forces that they believe will have the biggest impact on their organizations. According to IBM:

"In our past three global CEO studies, CEOs consistently said that coping with change was their most pressing challenge. In 2010, our conversations identified a new primary challenge: complexity. CEOs told us they operate in a world that is substantially more volatile, uncertain and complex. Many shared the view that incremental changes are no longer sufficient in a world that is operating in fundamentally different ways" (IBM, 2010).

Capitalizing on complexity

Their key findings show that managing complexity and fostering creativity in leadership are highly valued competencies and fundamentally critical to productivity and success. In addition, capitalizing on creativity has become a theme of great interest to CEOs, as they see financial opportunity associated with encouraging creativity:

"The effects of rising complexity call for CEOs and their teams to lead with bold creativity, connect with customers in imaginative ways and design their operations for speed and flexibility to position their organizations for twenty-first century success" (IBM, 2010).

It is clear that the need for people to deal constructively with complexity is growing rapidly. Using the philosophy and tools of AI, Positive Organizational Scholarship and Positive Psychology now become strategic enablers to the organization. These philosophies and tools enable people to function in a world of complexity by helping them to let go the need to be the “knower” and to be open to inviting all those who are part of the system to explore and co-create solutions. What makes these philosophies and tools so powerful? For one thing, there are no wrong ways to use them. Creativity itself has become a leadership style, and by simple definition, creativity engages people in seeing the possibilities and deciding what opportunities they want to seize and implement. This can be as simple as using powerful generative questions in a coaching session, or as far reaching as conducting an organization-wide summit where in a few days people can literally tap into the positive core and energy of an entire organization.

One solution to the human energy crisis: produce renewable and sustainable energy at work and in the community

After watching the movie *Chasing Ice* describe the urgency to find clean, renewable energy sources before we destroy our world, I realized that over the last fifteen years of working with Appreciative Inquiry, I had found a way to “fill up my tank” with clean and renewable energy. People who experience AI often talk about how they are re-energized while participating in an interview, a workshop or a summit. They talk about coming into the sessions feeling exhausted and disengaged and leaving re-energized.

That's Manhattan! A photomontage by photographer James Balog, also the photographer in *Chasing Ice*.



As practitioners we are privileged to witness this re-energization and having a role in managing the precious resource of human energy. At its best, this re-energization manifests itself as a re-connection to a vital life energy source that has the capacity to generate a renewable energy source within the human system upon which it is applied.

One simple example of this powerful energy source happened at a nursing summit a couple of years ago. A nurse came up to me in tears of joy. She told me that during the paired interview she had rediscovered her passion for nursing. She was once again excited and passionate about her work and the contributions that she could make. Touching experiences like this show us that a strength-focused approach to challenges, problems or opportunities taps into our creative energy and allows us to be innovative in co-creating sustainable solutions. It also provides us with access to a clean, renewable energy source – the human spirit.

The early OD pioneering spirit: collaborative design, spirit of inquiry and positive assumptions.

Climate change is coming to our professional shores and there are radical shifts happening in the field of Organization Development (OD). This is an exhilarating time of change and we are fortunate to be part of a generous, open and caring community with thought leaders who are pushing the world to reshape practices and approaches in business, government, community and NGOs. I recently read an article by David Cooperrider and Lindsey Godwin (Cooperrider and Godwin, 2010) describing the exciting breakthroughs in theories of leadership and the “strengths revolution in management”. In a Forward written for *AI Practitioner*, David describes the strengths revolution as follows:

“To appreciate the magnitude of strength revolution is to appreciate possibilities such as these: Imagine what would happen to you if you had the ability to consistently see, and connect with, every strength – every one of the capacities – inherent in the world around you; or to see every positive potential in your son or daughter; or, like Michelangelo, the intellectual ability to sense the towering, historic figure of David ‘already existing’ in the huge slab of marble – even before the reality” (Cooperrider, 2008).

David and Lindsey point to strengths-based management, Appreciative Inquiry, Appreciative Intelligence and positive organizational scholarship as the foundations of a new 21st century field of organization development they call Innovation-inspired Positive Organization Development (IPOD). They describe IPOD as harkening back to the ideals of an early OD pioneering spirit: collaborative design, spirit of inquiry and positive assumptions.

Small and regular actions to create a positive and generative climate

Making a difference can seem daunting when you look at an issue on a scale that is beyond your own capacity to impact. For example, changing behaviours that create climate change on the global–physical environmental scale can seem overwhelming in the face of melting glaciers, rising waters and political reluctance to act. And yet we know that small actions can make a difference: keeping our tires properly inflated can save 3% on our gas consumption; changing to more efficient light bulbs, recycling household disposables. All of these actions help reduce our carbon footprint. If we all work together to implement these small changes we *can* make a difference.

In complex systems making a small change can have a significant impact on the organizational climate. Following are three stories that illustrate how we can reframe in the moment to help create positive and generative climates within our organizations, our communities and our families.

1. Create a climate of empathetic inquiry

On September 12th 2001, the day after 9/11, I was with a group to conduct a strategic planning session. We were debating whether we should reschedule the session since no one was feeling inspired to work. In that moment I invited the group to instead form pairs and answer this question:

“In all of our lives we have at some point experienced fear and anguish. It might be the death of a loved one, facing a health crisis, loss of a job. Tell me your story of how you found the courage and strength to move forward in a time like this. What helped you to get through that difficult time?”

An hour later we came together, refreshed and ready to work. One outcome from the session was to create a conference that would bring together unemployed Internationally Educated Professionals (IEP) together with key stakeholders to help our new immigrants discover ways to be gainfully employed. We had our first conference fourteen months later with over 700 IEPs and we have held this conference every year since. The 2013 conference is focused on: Ask questions. Be inspired. Get connected for professional success in Canada.

The story demonstrates the magic of asking a question at the right time. The question was not complex. Nor was it evaluated, studied or debated for hours to create the perfect question. It was simply empathetic. It addressed our urgent need to talk about our pain that day. It allowed us to share our stories of difficult times, and discuss what helped us get through it – all for the benefit of the future.

2. Nurture a climate of positive imaging

A story told by my colleague Judy Dahm in Calgary illustrates a simple way of having impact through consciously focusing on nurturing a positive climate. In a corporate two-day executive-coaching class the participants had an evening assignment to practise asking positive questions and experience the power of listening and acknowledgement – a powerful learning opportunity for those raised in traditional management practices.

One executive came back the next morning excited to share his experience. He talked about his four year-old son, and how every night at about 7:30 pm the battle of bedtime started. On this night, the father simply started to engage his little son in conversation. He asked “What was the best part of playschool today? What are you looking forward to in school tomorrow?” The child gleefully told of his day, how much fun he had and how much he was looking forward to the activities promised for tomorrow. Then the father asked: “What do you need to do to get ready for tomorrow?” At this point, the little boy headed towards the bathroom and said: “I’d better go brush my teeth and get to bed so that tomorrow will come sooner!” The father was absolutely floored, and still in disbelief when he shared the story with his colleagues.

3. Model a climate of active learning

My colleague Sue Derby in Toronto tells a story of how creating healthy organizational climates requires that leaders support their people rather than judge them, as they take risks to be more creative and innovative.

Sue was invited to guide a strategic planning process, using Appreciative Inquiry, with the leadership team of a large multinational. The organization is acknowledged within its business sector as a powerful leader – respected for its approach to measurement of business results. In particular they have very high performance expectations of their people. Each quarter the executive team requests all sales directors to present their previous quarter results and the next three-month outlook in a formal operations review. Traditionally these sessions had taken on a problem-focused flavour – a “climate” that would leave those who had not “made plan” feeling unsettled and apprehensive about presenting and sharing.

About a year later Sue’s client shared with her a story that had created a lasting shift in the climate of these sessions and in the organization. The first director

**‘I’d better get to bed so tomorrow will come sooner!’
4 year-old to his father**



The CEO was modelling a strength-based focus while still holding the director accountable

of sales to make a presentation in a recent session had not “made plan” that quarter and was nervous about his presentation. Before he could even begin, the CEO instead took the lead and asked a very different question:

“We are all aware that your division didn’t make plan this quarter. I’d like you to begin by sharing with us what you and your staff have learned about your customer base and how you will use what you have learned to get back on plan next quarter.”

Visibly surprised by the question, the director took a long pause and then plunged into a passionate and informative presentation. The “climate” in the room changed in the moment. The impact of the question was felt throughout the organization. It was clear that the CEO was modelling a strength-based focus while still holding the director accountable for business results. She was asking him to hold the tension between the results and the learning and use that to innovate. The sales director and his division achieved and exceeded targets for the balance of that year.

This is a great example of a leader modelling the “climate change” she seeks – in this case promoting a genuine curiosity about discovering and learning, and secondly a commitment to apply what has been learned. This combination encourages risk-taking – an essential element to creating a climate of innovation (Isaksen and Tidd, 2006). If we are to encourage employees or colleagues to take more risk and be more innovative we need to help them to actively learn in ways that will help them to excel in their own results.

Not only can leaders modelling these behaviours accelerate the rate of change within their organizations. They can change the internal climate in the moment!

[A] generation that wakes up each morning and not only imagines that things can be better but also acts on that imagination every day.

An invitation to action

The preceding stories of simple actions, rooted in the principles of AI, represent tangible areas of effort for creating a positive climate at work, in the community and at home.

I am excited about the convergence of these two worlds of climate change – the physical and the human. We can impact our climate, positively, in both. As the world searches for renewable, clean energy sources, we as AI practitioners have the gift to help organizations and communities discover and tap into their own renewable, clean and healthy human energy source. Together we can explore, innovate and continue to share our learning stories in the AI Practitioner as a community of practitioners of Innovation-Inspired Positive Organization Development (IPOD).

As I thought about my invitation to action, I was reminded of *The New York Times*’ columnist Tom Friedman’s powerful call to action at the end of his book *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (Friedman, 2005). The book describes how globalization has changed core economic concepts. Friedman reminds us of the power of choice:

“I cannot tell any other society or culture what to say to its own children, but I can tell you what I say to my own: The world is being flattened. I didn’t start it and you can’t stop it, except at a great cost to human development and your own future. But we can manage it, for better or worse. If it is to be for better, not

The Berlin wall: The world needs you to be the generation of 11/9, not 9/11.

for worse, then you and your generation must not live in fear of either the terrorists or of tomorrow, of either Al-Qaeda or of Infosys. You can flourish in this flat world, but it does take the right imagination and the right motivation. While your lives have been powerfully shaped by 9/11 [the date of the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York City], the world needs you to be forever the generation of 11/9 [the date of the peaceful downfall of the Berlin Wall] – the generation of strategic optimists, the generation with more dreams than memories, the generation that wakes up each morning and not only imagines that things can be better but also acts on that imagination every day.”



Let's reach out across the world and engage others to join us as active members of what David Cooperrider calls the "strength revolution", fuelled by healthy, positive, renewable human energy. Let's be the generation of 11/9. Let's join together in this call to action to join the strengths revolution, and in doing so we can adapt and create the organizational climates we need to flourish in these uncertain and disruptive times.

I invite you to consider the question: "What is the smallest change or action that will personally take?"

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