

The cover features several colorful speech bubbles. At the top right, there is a light green bubble and a red bubble. On the left side, there is a large blue bubble. In the center, there is a large red bubble. To the right of the red bubble is a large yellow bubble containing the subtitle. Below the red bubble is a light green bubble. At the bottom left, there is a yellow bubble.

Conversations Worth Having

Using
Appreciative Inquiry
to Fuel Productive
and Meaningful
Engagement

JACKIE STAVROS AND CHERI TORRES

Introduction by David L. Cooperrider

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Praise for *Conversations Worth Having*

“Groundbreaking! Jackie and Cheri provide a great approach to improving communication in any setting. To be a great leader, read this book!”

—Loyd Beal III, Lieutenant Colonel, US Army

“This is the *first* book I would recommend for managers who want to be more effective and for those aspiring to be future leaders!”

—Daniel K. Saint, PhD, former Partner and Global Practice Leader, Deloitte

“Jackie and Cheri show us how to change the world one conversation at a time!”

—Lori Marsee Kuehn, Senior Manager, Global Employee Engagement, General Motors Company

“We often get stuck seeing the world through a distorted lens. Much may seem broken and unchangeable. Through this lens, doing great work is nearly impossible. That’s why—for leaders and managers—reading Cheri and Jackie’s book is essential. Their simple techniques help people move from problem to potential, creativity, and continuous growth.”

—Mark Levy, founder of Levy Innovation and author of *Accidental Genius*

“Jackie and Cheri offer the first practical guide to shift our conversations to bring the change we thirst for in ourselves, relationships, and organizations. The simplicity of their practices makes this my go-to resource for working with leaders.”

—Neil Samuels, President, *Profound Conversations*, and author of *Brilliant: The Heathside Story*

“We create our worlds through conversation. This book shows the difference between conversations that are generative and conversations that hold us back. It illuminates how Appreciative Inquiry can transform personal experience and offer organizations constructive paths forward.”

—Juanita Brown, cofounder of the World Café and author of *The World Café*

“An entertaining and fascinating read! Cheri and Jackie blend stories about personal and organizational conversations with how to frame conversations so people engage and take action. You will never look at your world of conversations quite the same way.”

—Irmgard von Wobeser, family and couples therapist, Centro Psicológico de Cancún

“Stavros and Torres brilliantly translate Appreciative Inquiry into everyday communication practices for enhancing relationships. Diverse stories about people who have actually applied their ideas make this book interesting, accessible, and highly useful.”

—**Diana Whitney, PhD, founder of Corporation for Positive Change and cofounder of The Taos Institute**

“This book is a timely gift. Jackie and Cheri’s work has significant relevance for our world of conversations, from individual and group to corporate and international interactions. Their appreciative approach is a welcome addition to the literature on effective communication.”

—**Virinder Moudgil, President, Lawrence Technological University**

“Conversation is how we understand each other and build trust. Cheri and Jackie marvelously show us how Appreciative Inquiry supports us. Their framing and flipping exercises are a gift. I will use this book in our workshops.”

—**Kathy Becker, President and CEO, Company of Experts, Inc., and CEO, Center for Appreciative Inquiry**

“A great work! A must-read for business managers and teams! Jackie and Cheri show us how we can positively impact people!”

—**Massood Omrani, PhD, Managing Director, CADFEM Americas**

“We carry on conversations in our minds without realizing their influence. Jackie and Cheri show how to make sure there’s a positive effect. This book succinctly teaches us to have effective interactions with ourselves and others!”

—**Dan Casetta, Western Region Manager, Cutco Corporation**

“Now is the time for connections through conversations. Jackie and Cheri provide a pathway to lead us past polarity. These two Appreciative Inquiry experts have written a book to help individuals, organizations, and families navigate the choppy waters of differences.”

—**Marge Schiller, founder of Positive Change Core**

“This is my favorite book on Appreciative Inquiry! It captures the core concepts in a tight package, explains everything well, and provides techniques you can put to work immediately! To use AI in your work or at home, pick up this gem.”

—**Seth Kahan, founder of the Visionary Leadership Academy**

“Jackie and Cheri provide practical ways to use Appreciative Inquiry every day. They show how to solve tough problems, create meaningful dialogue, and build productive relationships using simple practices. My favorite: asking generative questions. Great book!”

—**Jennifer A. Hitchcock, Executive Director, US Army Tank Automotive Research Development and Engineering Center**

“After reading this book, you will be equipped to foster thriving and well-being in your life. This book is brimming with insights, stories, and practical tools. It is a gift to leaders, change agents, and individuals who wish to create positive change! I loved this book!”

—**Jane Dutton, Robert L. Kahn Distinguished Professor Emerita, Ross School of Business, University of Michigan**

“An amazing book with practices to transform your life, family, and organization. Every conversation is an opportunity—a must-read book to deepen connections, strengthen relationships, and change the world for the better.”

—**Betsy Crouch and Zoe Galvez, cofounders of ImprovHQ**

“I engage in conversations with stakeholders from the grassroots to local and state levels. This book is a great resource on how to have *conversations worth having!* This is your guide to any conversation in any moment. Keep it close!”

—**John F. Baran, Lead Planner, City of Detroit**

“This book is a gift to the world! It should be read by future leaders, teachers, and parents. The stories moved my heart to understand that conversations make all the difference. I plan to purchase copies for those whom I love.”

—**Rose Heinrichs, former elementary and special education teacher**

“This book shifted the way I engage and react in my conversations. It has helped me to express myself genuinely, listen to and understand others, and become a more valuable version of myself—at work and home.”

—**Stephanie Schlueter, Manager, Natural View Market**

“This book is for everyone! The authors make it clear, we are our conversations, and it’s through our conversations we come alive and make meaning together. It’s an easy, delightful read that is uplifting and actionable. The world is ready and waiting!”

—**Robyn Stratton-Berkessel, founder of PositivityStrategist.com**

"I have hundreds of conversations daily. This book reinforces that every conversation builds connection and trust. The authors underscore how the words we use affect others. I now make sure that I have conversations worth having!"

—**Gavin Johnson, Principal, Brighton High School**

"This is a *great* book because it tells you clearly *how* to change conversations to ones worth having. I invite you to read this excellent book and put the concepts into practice."

—**Sue Annis Hammond, founder of Thin Book Publishing**

"Jackie and Cheri share how to transition from downward-spiraling conversations to upward-possibility conversations. For those in the Appreciative Inquiry or positive psychology communities, you will find this book quite useful to your research and practice!"

—**Marrisa Fernando, Director, MMOD Program, Graduate School of Business, Assumption University of Thailand**

"I have lots of conversations with my kids. Most are good—some are not. This book gave me a simple way to communicate more effectively with my children and easily approach conflict."

—**Monica Chester, homeschool mom and nurse**

"Jackie and Cheri teach us to be intentional with our conversations using simple practices to move any conversation away from what we don't want and toward creative possibilities."

—**Jeff Bouwman, Director of Finance and Operations, Western University, and author of *Your Income, Your Life***

"Shared through stories and grounded in science, Jackie and Cheri's book makes a wonderful contribution to the application of Appreciative Inquiry. This book moved me from interest, to hope, to heartfelt awe and empathy!"

—**Sarah Lawrence, founder of Thriving Organisations**

"Our interactions allow organizations to flourish or fade into obscurity. The authors give us a way to host high quality conversations that create an environment that works for all!"

—**Dr. Paul A. Miklovich, Administrator, Cleveland Clinic**

Conversations Worth Having

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Using Appreciative Inquiry to Fuel
Productive and Meaningful Engagement

Jackie Stavros *and* Cheri Torres

Introduction by
David L. Cooperrider



Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
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Conversations Worth Having

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For those in conversation

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Contents

<i>List of Stories</i>	viii
<i>List of Tables and Figures</i>	viii
Preface	ix
Introduction by <i>David L. Cooperrider</i>	1
1 Shifting Conversations	13
2 What Kind of Conversations Are You Having?	27
3 Two Simple Appreciative Practices	45
4 What's Driving Your Conversation?	63
5 Scaling Up Great Conversations	85
6 It's Not Magic, It's Science!	107
7 Any Time, Any Place, Any Situation	119
<i>Notes</i>	135
<i>Bibliography</i>	141
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	143
<i>Index</i>	149
<i>About the David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry</i>	153
<i>About the Authors</i>	155

viii Conversations Worth Having

Stories

<i>Alisha, at the New England Medical Center</i>	13
<i>Elizabeth, Ram, Mary, and Kamal, at Community One Bank</i>	19
<i>Mark, at a Fortune 100 company, preparing to talk with staff</i>	48
<i>Melissa, about being late</i>	50
<i>Monica and Aiden's parent/son conversation about the car</i>	55
<i>Jerry Sternin and Save the Children</i>	57
<i>Gabriela's generative question for the university provost</i>	59
<i>Jamal and his teachers</i>	69
<i>Daniel and First Nation's gangs</i>	75
<i>Ravi, at the International Tech Company in India</i>	78
<i>Jack and his kids at bedtime</i>	80
<i>Erich and the German automotive tech center</i>	87
<i>Los Angeles Police and HeartMath</i>	108
<i>Ally's story about her dad</i>	129

Tables

2.1 The Nature of Conversations	29
3.1 How Positive Framing Draws People In and Inspires Engagement	47
3.2 Examples of Generative Questions	61
4.1 Principles at Work in Jamal's Story	72
4.2 Appreciative Inquiry Principles Summary	82
5.1 Five Classic Questions for an Appreciative Inquiry Interview	95
5.2 Appreciative Inquiry 5-D Cycle: Phases and Activities	104
6.1 Results of Losada and Heaphy's Research	116

Figures

3.1 Flipping: Framing a Conversation Worth Having	53
5.1 Appreciative Inquiry 5-D Cycle	89
6.1 Right Brain/Left Brain Neural Processing Centers	111

Preface



*Sometimes the greatest adventure
is simply a conversation.*

– Amadeus Wolfe

Conversations lie at the heart of how we interact. We are almost always engaged in either internal dialogue or external interaction. But how often are those conversations worth having? We've heard from countless numbers of people who long for positive change in their lives, communities, organizations, and the world. They are tired of meaningless interactions and conversations about change that are negative, drag everyone down, and zap energy—and then nothing happens. They are weary of wasting time on conversations that focus on what's wrong, without producing any actionable results. They are frustrated with the destructive conversations broadcast nationally and globally that fray relationships, pit people against one another, and generate fear and hopelessness. They long for meaningful engagement that builds connection, fuels productivity, and generates positive change.

This book is about those meaningful conversations. It tells how to have conversations that are productive while strengthening relationships and generating possibilities for a future that works for everyone. Conversations worth having energize people. They foster efficiency, fuel meaningful engagement, and generate creative possibilities. They matter because they inspire cooperative action that has a positive impact for individuals, organizations, and communities. We believe that living into our potential begins with these kinds of conversations.

As authors, both of us are longtime practitioners of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), one of the most widely used approaches for fostering positive change in individuals, groups, and organizations. Our journey into AI began in the 1990s when we met David Cooperrider, cofounder of AI. At its core, AI is about discovering the best in people, organizations, and the communities around them. AI is grounded in the notion that we create each moment, and ultimately our social systems, through conversation and shared meaning-making. Appreciative Inquiry is the inspiration of our work as well as the foundation of this book, *Conversations Worth Having*. In its pages, you will learn two simple AI practices and five powerful principles to make almost any conversation one worth having. Rather than heading down a negative path, we show you how to frame conversations in ways that make people you're talking with want to engage and take action. We guide you to ask questions that can change the direction of any conversation, inspiring connection, new knowledge, and innovation. Principles we lay out in the book will influence how you think about your own experiences and challenges, helping you reflect on them more constructively and productively.

Each chapter is built around real-life stories drawn from our personal and client relationships that demonstrate practices

and principles that were used to transform both conversations and outcomes. These include primarily applications in the business world, as well as several stories from the realms of education, community change, and family dynamics. We also share the research behind this work, because it is truly evidence-based. From our vantage point, one of the most exciting things about life is the power of a single conversation to make a significant, positive difference. We invite you to join us in creating a positive change in your life and work by engaging in conversations worth having.

We are especially grateful to be working with Berrett-Koehler, whose mission is connecting people and ideas to create a world that works for all. We hope that our contribution to their important work will help to influence positive change on the planet. We invite you to be one of many catalysts who are stimulating conversations to support a world that works for all.

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P.S. We would be grateful if you would share some of your stories with us.



Introduction



We live in worlds our conversations create.
– David L. Cooperrider

“I am struck by the simple fact that my impact as a leader, and even my whole day, goes better when I share my amazement, when we open minds, live into deeper and better questions, and interdependently emerge new things in every conversation . . .”

“Life worth living . . . must be made of affirmation.”

These are the words of one of the most remarkable chief executive officers I’ve ever worked with, arguably one of the greatest, most thoughtful corporate leaders of modern times. In one of its classic cover stories, *Fast Company* called him the Trillion Dollar Man. The article featured Dee Hock’s leadership theory and his founding of Visa, one of the largest, most innovative, and successful organizations of the past half-century. Today, Visa has a market value of some \$400 billion and annual financial transactions approaching \$10 trillion. During Dee’s tenure as CEO, the corporation increased its profits by

2 Conversations Worth Having

10,000 percent, but more importantly it reinvented the very concept of organization itself. In many ways, it was an early prototype, not a final model, for the more fully human organization we are seeking and even seeing emerge today. The exciting story in Dee's career is his belief in people, which he expresses this way: "The truth is that, given the right circumstances, from no more than dreams, determination, and the liberty to try, quite ordinary people consistently do extraordinary things."¹

I had the privilege to work with Dee for more than five years. We were uniting the positive power of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) with his concepts of the more fully human organization—a collaborative, intrinsically motivating system capable of liberating the human spirit without reverting to tired, old command-and-control forms of bureaucracy. After years of working with Dee, I began to search for the core of his success. Yes, he was courageous. True, he was tireless. Right, he was an amazing learner. For example, when I visited his home he had just turned his dining room into a massive library spanning the fields of complexity science through the new biology of living systems to the humanities, including many of the classics in art, history, and literature. There were well over 8,000 titles in that "dining room" library, and each one had his underlines, exclamation points, and margin notes. His insatiable love of learning, of course, was a signature strength. And yes, he was skilled as a CEO, with talents in global finance, negotiations, and the future of digital technologies. Yet I still could not put my finger on his mystery. What was that unique difference, that "something more," that made all the difference and made Dee so extraordinary?

It was not until I opened this *very special and graceful book*, by Jackie Stavros and Cheri Torres, that I understood

the secret to that CEO's exceptional career and success. Dee Hock had a gift: a Jeffersonian belief in "we the people" and the idea of "organization as community," which I would summarize as this:

Our organizational lives and the lives of others flourish or flounder, one conversation at a time.

For Dee, the difference between success and failure in leadership was all about the art of the "conversation worth having"—precisely the kind that this book describes with such clarity and practicality. Peter Senge, commenting on how Visa was conceived and co-created through literally thousands of conversations and dozens of disciplines, said that the early days of the company "may simply be the best business example of an emerging revolution in organizing."²



Change begins with a single conversation.

As CEO, Dee Hock instinctively knew that all the abstract notions of management—corporate culture, strategy formulation, organizational alignment, change management, living the brand, joint venturing, winning the customer, enabling innovation, recruiting top talent, creating atmospheres of aspiring versus fearing, improving connectivity, and scaling up excellence—were accomplished one conversation at a time, with teams, persons, and both small and large system meetings. Dee called "this abundance of interdependent diversity that was the deeper meaning." When I look back at our years of working together, what most stands out was how Dee, when at his best, was a maestro of vital conversations—some of the

4 Conversations Worth Having

greatest I've ever been part of. Many of them became defining moments. This experience led me to believe this:

Every organization and every life's destiny is a series of defining moments—moments that shape us, change us, and have a huge impact on our development and strategic choices. Our research indicates that almost all of these moments involve the power of vital and caring conversations with significant others.

After numerous virtual conference calls and telepresence meetings with Dee (not his favorite way of conversing), I recall thinking: “I have never seen a CEO giving so much time and positive energy to each conversation, with such purity of attention, curiosity velocity, mutual inquiry across boundaries; getting everyone engaged like a contact sport; inviting full voice; and modeling the beginner's mind with real listening. Everyone felt appreciated, honored, elevated, and heard.”

In one instance, drawing on lessons from the Visa start-up story, we were working with an organization to help its members articulate its body of beliefs, those constitution-like principles that provide the core values for years to come. My job was to apply the mindset of Appreciative Inquiry, an approach that values all voices, seeks to inspire generative theories and possibility thinking, opens our world to new possibilities, challenges assumptions of the status quo, and serves to inspire new options for better living.³

Dee called for a conversational process in which a diverse group of all relevant and affected stakeholders would meet and deliberate for three full days, every forty-five days, for an entire year. This schedule provided the time for vital conversations to get at the essence of what matters. Looking back, in a world where relationships are often superficial, this process

was astonishing. Because of those inspired conversations, the organization doubled in growth, doubled again, and continues to grow exponentially. So deeply held and valued were its guiding principles that, because of the power of conversations that matter, the organization had the courage to craft one final and concluding principle for the entire global system, with over 850 centers in some 150 countries. This principle stated, “Any individual or organization in this global system can do anything it wants, at any scale, and in any manner—as long as it advances our shared purpose and principles.”

This was a radical principle. It asked everyone to be a leader—to build the culture via every conversation. In effect, it told the organization’s people that they needed very little traditional supervision. It eliminated the need for a large, expensive, central office hierarchy and thick books on standard operating procedures. It realized that the intrinsic motivation that comes from inspirational beliefs is much more powerful than extrinsic forces. One lesson derived from that principle is highly relevant right now:

When you approach each vital conversation as if it could become the most important conversation you might ever have, you can create a positive legacy. How often do we think of our next conversation with this kind of alertness and high anticipation?

Originally, the prospect of deliberating for three full days, every forty-five days, for twelve months took everyone by surprise. Now, as I look back, I realize it was not the number of days that was important; it was the tough-love message Dee was sending. He was raising the bar on how we conceive of leadership work and think about conversations. In his book that shares the Visa creation story, the word *conversation* is

6 Conversations Worth Having

used ten times more than the term *strategic planning*. Conversation is a meeting of hearts and minds. I believe this:

When hearts and minds meet, they don't just exchange facts and create atmospheres of hope or despair: They transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new explorations of possibility. Such conversations are literally living systems, living on the edge of chaos and order—like all of life, when it is most alive, busting out all over with pattern and coherence, but also alive with novelty and emergence.

When you think of conversations worth having, think engagement, interweaving, co-creation, inspiration, respect, illumination, emergence, enriched relationships, trust, empathy, and bringing out the best: *think legacy*.

We live in worlds our conversations create.

Moreover, leadership is a tapestry of both failed and successful conversations that weave the fine threads of our cultures and relationships, budget alignments, customer communities, innovation trajectories, and best places to work into ethical environments where people can thrive and enable their individual and collective greatness to emerge.

On the reverse side of the tapestry, we've also experienced conversations that have caused irreparable damage—destructive conversations. Consider marriages and partnerships where people wish they could replay history and avoid that one unfortunate and explosive conversation that caused a rupture. Consider another life-depleting form of conversation: the boss who begins every meeting by treating the world or

the organization as “the-problem-to-be-solved”; where every agenda item is about threats to the business, failure rates, anger about missteps; and where the main life-depleting atmosphere left in the aftermath is fearful and toxic, some combination of disappointment and distance. And, with all of this at stake—each conversation part of a legacy—recall your own schooling. Did you ever take a course on conversations? Not just any kind of conversation, but life-giving ones that serve to open your world to new possibilities, elevate greatness, and build bonds of mutual regard and positive power, not “power over” but “power to.”

This book, then, represents a breakthrough in the combined fields of Appreciative Inquiry and Peter Drucker-like strengths-based management, positive psychology, and design thinking. What you hold in your hands is the course you’ve likely never encountered in only one book but always wanted. *Conversations Worth Having* can change your life at work, certainly. Perhaps even more significant, however, is the difference it can make in creating precious, growth-promoting moments and relationships with significant others, family members, partnerships, and community.

Why my excitement? After all, a handful of books out there today describe courageous conversations, confrontational meetings, conflict resolution, and even “ferocious conversations.” And while they, too, show how our lives succeed or fail one conversation at a time, I believe this is the *first* book of its kind to take Appreciative Inquiry’s profound promise of positive leadership into legacy-creating conversations.⁴ Imagine taking the innovation-inspired tools of design thinking, the strengths-based leadership philosophy of Peter Drucker, the science of positive psychology, and the generative power of Appreciative Inquiry for bringing out the best in people and

8 Conversations Worth Having

organizations—and then making all of these accessible as the operating system, even the DNA code, inside every conversation worth having.

The possibility that every conversation can start with a positive frame and end in an even more positive way is the central idea of *Conversations Worth Having*. In pursuing this radical idea, the authors take us into the principles of AI, now being applied at places such as Apple, Johnson & Johnson, the U.S. Navy, Coca-Cola, Verizon, Vitamix, Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, and even the United Nations.

For example, instead of the metaphor that “the-world-is-a-problem-to-be-solved”—which almost automatically triggers a deficit-analytic search into breakdowns, gaps, and root causes of failure and places most of our attention on yesterday—we might consider instead an assumption that organizations are living systems, alive, embedded in “universes of strengths.” The most vital conversations, this book’s authors have discovered, begin in a wide-angle, valuing way—searching *the appreciable world*, which is always larger than our normal *appreciative capacity*, one where the starting assumption is this:

It is not only that we live in a universe of strengths and unlimited human imaginations, but surrounding every change situation we are part of—whether internal to the system or external to the system—there exists the strength combinations and innovation potentials, including consciousness shifts, greater than any organizational challenge or opportunity we will ever face.

Complexity science describes the concept of “sensitive dependence on initial conditions,” which can turn tiny

snowballs into mountains of avalanches. We see many of those same dynamics in conversations, right from the fateful moment when they are first framed. Small beginnings can have huge consequences, especially in human systems, which often become what those in the system ask questions about most frequently, authentically, systematically, creatively, and rigorously.

So, *Conversations Worth Having* is not at all about turning a blind eye to anything. Instead, it is about something quite artistic, ever so subtle, seeing *beyond the problem* and inviting a different kind of inquiry or search that creates an empowering environment, one that has a high-strengths density and a prospective, future-forming power. You will witness this different kind of inquiry in the first two stories the authors share in chapter 1, about a large teaching hospital and a failing bank.

This book is built on the authors' relentless optimism, yet it is anything but Pollyannaish. Indeed, in this book, the authors take us into some of the hardest moments any manager, family, business, government, or community might face. *It skillfully provides exactly the right amount of theory for those who want the science of it, but mostly it's about practices you yourself can use and engaging narratives that illustrate and vivify.* The storytelling is honest, heartfelt, and real. You cannot help but reflect on your own life as the authors narrate their own and other transformations.

If you read nothing else, turn to the end of the book for the gripping account of the daughter of one of the authors: It's the true story of a mother and daughter and their response to a young father's harsh and untimely diagnosis of stage four lymphoma. The story, which moved me to tears, was written by the thirteen-year-old daughter, Ally. Courageous Ally teaches

10 Conversations Worth Having

us how *Conversations Worth Having* is also about loving and being loved. The bottom line:

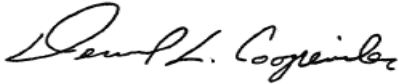
You learn that in any time, any place, any situation, no matter what people tell you, conversations matter and that words, generative questions, and the cognitive power of love—seeing through the gift of new eyes—can change lives, relationships, and organizations.

If you could choose only one inspiring and resource-rich book on leadership as conversation, what do you suppose it would be? For me, the answer is right here in your hands. Jackie Stavros and Cheri Torres—as well as Ally and her father, Paul—have given us a gift. In business, it will strengthen relationships, because the relationship *is* the conversation. In homes and schools, it will help you see and bring out the best in your children and young people—because those, too, are relationships where the conversational ecology is precious and can produce life-defining moments. And when you read this small volume through the lens of your own conversational history, it will likely resonate with something you and many others have experienced:

Relationships come alive where there is an appreciative eye, when we take the time to see the true, the good, the better, and the possible in each other and our universe of strengths, and when we use this concentrated capacity to activate conversations that open our world to new possibilities, elevate collective genius and purpose, and build bonds of mutual regard and positive power—not “power over” but “power to.”

In the end, Jackie and Cheri have given us the gift of hope. *Conversations Worth Having* are those that allow us to grow the

most and, in the process, also contribute the most. In a world where so many conversations separate us from our vast potentials, may this book change not simply our world but also the world of conversation.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "David L. Cooperrider". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'D'.

*Distinguished University Professor, Case Western Reserve
University & Honorary Chair, The David L. Cooperrider
Center for Appreciative Inquiry, Champlain College, Stiller
School of Business*



1

Shifting Conversations



*One great conversation can shift
the direction of change forever.
- Linda Lambert*

Alisha Patel, a senior administrator at a thriving medical center in New England, was surprised at the less-than-stellar patient satisfaction report that was sitting on her desk. Her surprise turned to understanding when she saw which hospital unit this was from. The director of that unit had recently quit because she felt frustrated with the new leadership model and refused to change. Alisha was filling in until a new director was hired.

She sent a copy of the patient satisfaction report to the nurse managers in the unit. She also emailed them an assignment for their next management meeting, which was a week away: *Pay attention. Look for what staff members are doing that contributes to patient satisfaction. Come prepared to share a story of a best practice you've seen during the week.*

14 Conversations Worth Having

The nurse managers were confused when they got the email; one even wrote back, asking if Alisha had made a mistake. “No,” she replied, “please look for what’s working well and bring your best story next week.” This was a dramatic shift from what these nurse managers were used to, and it created quite a buzz. The former director usually read them the riot act, tried to find who was at fault, and demanded they do better, or else. They were glad to see her go!

When the nurse managers met, Alisha acknowledged the team for their quality of care and service to patients. Then she asked about their stories. They each shared a story of best patient care and then together analyzed the stories for strengths and replicable practices. They discovered several unique actions, but mostly there were consistent themes for what created high patient satisfaction. The nurses seemed excited about the ideas. “This was an amazing way to handle our problem, Alisha,” one of them exclaimed. “I can’t tell you how many meetings we’ve had that focused on this problem, and nothing ever changed. This was so effective. I know things are going to improve after just one meeting with you!” They left the meeting committed to sharing and implementing the best ideas. They were alive with possibilities!

Alisha smiled confidently as the staff left. She was thinking about the changes that had occurred over the last year. She remembered what it had been like working at the medical center before introducing their new leadership model. They had experienced steady growth in patient services over a three-year period, and, based on that growth, the demands on the



*The conversation is
the answer.*

staff were having a negative impact on performance, which was evident in their quarterly reports. Patient satisfaction had been steadily declining. Decreasing employee engagement was reflected in unplanned absenteeism and lower retention rates, which made matters worse for everyone. On top of that, patient “throughput” was not optimal, which meant the center lacked the beds they needed to serve the people who needed them most.

All of this negatively affected both the bottom line and employee morale. Everyone felt overworked and stressed. She knew the staff were always striving to provide a high quality of care, but the medical center’s growth had become stressful, triggering short tempers, a lack of compassion, limited time for patients, and tension among staff and administration.

Alisha had not always been such an affirming leader. She was responsible for quality, and she lived by the quarterly performance reports. When performance stats were up, she didn’t worry; it gave her a chance to focus on other responsibilities. She would send the reports to directors, but she never went out of her way to acknowledge them. She took good reports for granted. When performance stats started declining, it was a different story. She gave the reports all her attention. She spoke face-to-face with directors, and her tone was critical: “These reports are not satisfactory. Every quarter it’s the same or worse. You’ve clearly done nothing to improve!”

The managers would defend the results, saying, “We *have* made changes, but we can’t do anything when we are understaffed and people don’t show up for work. Some of our staff are already working double shifts to cover for other folks!” “I don’t want excuses, I want results,” she snapped. “We are doing the best we can,” a manager snapped back. “Well, you’ll have to do better!” Alisha ended the conversation.

The managers always left demoralized and with no ideas about how to resolve the issue. Alisha's levels of stress and dissatisfaction grew over this period, and it became next to impossible to hide her frustration from her colleagues. Her stress rolled over into her family and nonprofessional life as well. She became short-tempered, negative, and quick to criticize both her kids and her husband. She had fast developed a reputation for being the kind of person she never wanted to be, as a manager, partner, or parent. She realized she was going to have to do something if she wanted things to change. So she began an online search. She was intrigued by the headline of an upcoming workshop she found, about something called Appreciative Inquiry (AI), which promised tools and strategies for strengths-based change at any level—personal, organizational, and community.¹ What caught her attention was this headline:

The Best Healthcare Clinics in the World
Are Strengths-Based; Their Performance
Outpaces All Others!

She read further: "*When we're unable to act with agility, speed, and unity, opportunities are missed and revenue is lost.*" It was as if these words were written just for her. In hospitals, she knew, agility and speed can mean the difference between life and death, and lost revenue seemed to lead to financial decisions that negatively affected quality. What convinced her that this was the workshop she needed was a quote from David Cooperrider: "*We change best when we are strongest and most positive, not when we feel the weakest, most negative, or helpless.*"² She realized she had become negative, focusing on everyone's weaknesses, including her own. Everyone was feeling helpless

to turn things around. So she clicked on the registration tab.

During her online training, she learned about the practices and principles of AI. Somewhere in the midst of the week she realized she herself had actually been contributing to the problem at her own medical center. She had dug in her heels and had badgered the staff, without asking any questions or helping to find solutions. She vowed to be part of the solution when she returned.

The first thing she did was to create a positive framework for her next conversation: *More and more, our patients feel highly satisfied with our care.* Then she adopted an attitude of curiosity. She wondered if some of the patients felt highly satisfied. If they were, why? What were their stories? What was the staff who cared for them doing that made a difference? These were the questions she led with at her next staff meeting, and she noted a remarkable shift in the conversation and in more positive outcomes. Alisha felt in awe of how much easier and more effective this approach was. And the proof was in the reports. Quality improved in the next quarter!

A year later, after her recommendation, senior leadership, management, many of the nursing staff, and a handful of physicians had gone through a series of AI workshops that literally gave them the ability to turn their culture around simply by changing their conversations. Alisha thought about her own conversations with staff these days. They were appreciative and inquiry-based, focusing on what they did well and what mattered to everyone: best and heartfelt care, patient recovery, and a place where everyone thrived.

She also realized that her focus of attention had shifted. Instead of seeing the staff themselves as problems, she was seeing their actions as possibilities. Her conversations with them were very different from those she had had a year ago. These

were conversations worth having, and the results they produced were creating positive change throughout the medical center.

For example, the Emergency Room staff engaged members of clinics and urgent care centers in productive conversations focused on getting people to use the ER only when needed. They mapped their clinical care strengths and specialties across the city. They asked questions to inspire possibilities and new ways of thinking, as well as ways to work together to help prospective patients choose the right location for care. Such questions included: *What would have to happen for every citizen to know where to go to get quick and reliable care during the day and after hours? How do we make sure transportation is available to move people where they need to go?* The result was a Right-Care, Right-Place plan to help patients learn over time where to go and how to get there. The staffs worked together and developed a system that was delivering *right care in the right places*. Ultimately, this meant the ER team was serving patients who really needed emergency care. It also meant less chaos and crowding in the ER.

What Alisha and most of the staff discovered was that conversations that were appreciative and inquiry-based fueled productive and meaningful engagement. These conversations were generating exceptional outcomes. The staff throughout most of the medical center had developed a sense of unity and commitment to one another because they intentionally engaged in these kinds of conversations. They routinely thought of innovative ways to improve care and consistently put patients—and one another—at the center of all they did. The results spoke for themselves. The work climate changed significantly. This positive vibe made the medical center a place where people wanted to work. Employee retention improved and staff

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