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# The concentration effect of strengths: How the whole system “AI” summit brings out the best in human enterprise

David L. Cooperrider

*Appreciative Inquiry, or “AI” is taking the strengths revolution to a new level, far beyond today’s common talent-management focus. Introducing the next generation AI Design Summit – something that a recent CEO report singles out as “the best large group method in the world today”*

TALKING ABOUT “POSITIVE STRENGTHS” gets people excited. It’s thrilling to think that a new wave of management innovation and positive organizational scholarship might revolutionize the way we engage the workforce, transform business strategy, and prepare our organizations for a world of open innovation with customers, suppliers, and other key stakeholders. It’s more than just talk. Millions of managers have been introduced to principles of appreciative inquiry and the positive psychology of human strengths. Nearly two million people have taken, for example, the VIA survey of human strengths, while another several million managers have leveraged strengths-finder tools for their own and others’ leadership development.

In this article I seek to take the positive-strengths perspective to a new octave. While people are often drawn to strengths management because of its positive bias (it feels good studying optimism and the best in life) there is so much more. This article focuses on organizational performance and results – game changing business results, some in very complex situations. Indeed, the positive-strengths perspective has implications for every aspect of a business once managers are able to advance from micro-management techniques to macro-management applications, focusing not so much on individual strengths as on configurations and chemistries of strengths. The question of how to connect and combine enterprise-wide strengths for advancing strategic opportunities is what this article is about.

When is it that the best in human beings arises most easily, productively, and naturally? Our answer, from several decades of fieldwork and hundreds of interviews with successful managers, is unequivocal: the best in human organization happens when people collectively experience the wholeness of their system – when strength touches strength – across whole systems of relevant and engaged stakeholders, internal and external, and top to bottom. Sounds complicated? Surprisingly, it is exactly the opposite. In fact, because of the natural positivity that’s unleashed when we collaborate beyond silos and artificial separations keeping us apart, it is often profoundly easy. The use of large group methods for doing the work of management, once a rare practice, is soaring in business, but this is the first article to focus on the positive human and organizational dynamic involved – what this article calls the concentration effect of strengths.

## A SPOTLIGHT ON JENNIFER’S STORY: THE COURAGE TO LEAD LIKE A MULTIPLIER

When expectations are high, and all eyes are on you, that can be the time when the potential of leadership can be truly momentous. Jennifer’s story is telling.

On June 24th 2005, Jennifer Deckard, the young chief financial officer (CFO) of Fairmount Minerals, opened her first “whole-system-in-the-room” large-group and company-wide summit. The idea started when she wondered how to take the organization’s strengths-based management philosophy to a new level, beyond the individually focused talent management system. Looking at a marketplace of unprecedented complexity, Jennifer felt that ultimate speed, dexterity, and collaborative capacity could not be found in older models of management, for example engaging one small group at a time. It was critical, decided Jennifer, to reach way beyond

silos, fiefdoms, and specialties and to create a “one firm” alignment of strengths. Jennifer found solid support from Chuck Fowler, the president and chief executive officer (CEO) of Fairmount Minerals.

Their initiative, with hundreds of stakeholders in the room, proved successful beyond aspirations. Between 2005 and 2007, revenues almost doubled, while earnings took a gigantic leap to more than 40 percent per year. Post summit research documented a workforce on fire. And plans from the initiative – including prototypes of new products, the discovery of new markets, and the design of renewable energy facilities – were put into practice with focus and speed. In addition, Fairmount Minerals would soon receive the nation’s “top corporate citizen” award from the United States Chamber of Commerce.

All of this was surprisingly easy, recounted the CFO. “Today’s customers, partners, and employees want to be engaged in radically new ways” Jennifer recalls, “and now I realize that it is not a pipedream to manage important targets as a whole system – in fact it’s fast. I call it my management macro-moment.”

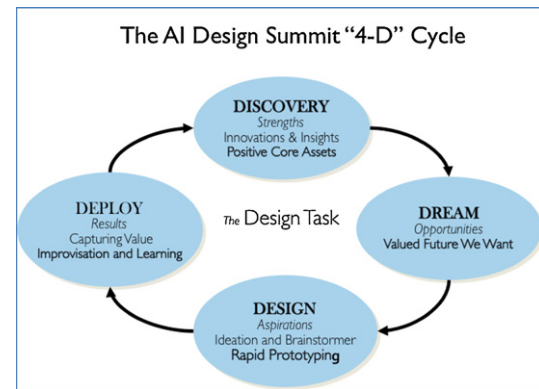
### Imagine Yourself as a Customer

To get a feel for the strengths-based macro process, imagine that you are one of Fairmount Minerals’ customers. You are the sourcing manager at John Deere, and you purchase Fairmount’s sand for making castings for engine blocks. You receive an unexpected invitation letter from the CFO. You are invited not to be an observer, but to engage as full collaborator in Fairmount’s strategic planning. So here you are now at the start of the three-day summit:

You enter a Grand Ballroom. It is teeming with 350 people from the sand company. There is no central podium or microphone. As many as 50 round tables fill the room – each has a microphone, a flip-chart, and packets of materials including the summit’s purpose, three-day agenda, and a pre-summit strategy analysis and fact base. As an external stakeholder of the company, you’ve been invited to roll up your sleeves and participate in a real-time strategy session devoted to the future.

You sit down at your assigned roundtable and you are struck by the complex configuration of individuals: the CEO of the company; a sand loader operator; a marketing specialist; a potential solar energy supplier (external); a product designer; a corporate lawyer, an information technology (IT) professional, and a middle manager from operations. Soon the “whole-system-in-the-room” summit begins.

The CFO of the company stands up from one of the 50 tables and speaks to the “state of the business” and the task of this strategic session. The focus: harnessing the innovation capacity of sustainability. She speaks about the difference between being a sustainability leader versus a sustainability laggard – and vows that this company will not be caught flat-footed by the future. An external moderator then calls attention to the key questions for the appreciative inquiry summit, each one designed to elicit discovery into strategic strengths, hidden opportunities, aspirations, and valued future scenarios – all with a focus on game-changing industry possibilities. People use the questions in the form of an appreciative inquiry interview with the person or key stakeholder sitting next to them. Within thirty minutes of the



**Figure 1** The Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle for Collaborative Designing in Large Groups of 300–2,000 People.

CFO’s welcome, people are into deep exploration, sharing, and listening, The Grand Ballroom is buzzing.

The moderator, after almost an hour, calls people to reconvene and describes the AI Summit’s 4-D cycle of Discovery; Dream; Design; and Deployment that will unfold over the three days (see Fig. 1). Soon you find yourself, one of the company’s treasured customers, being selected as the plenary spokesperson to share your roundtable’s analysis of trends and the five sustainable value opportunities for new product advances. The call is for disruptive innovation.

An appreciative inquiry summit is a large group planning, designing, or implementation meeting that brings a whole system of 300 to 1,000 or more internal and external stakeholders together in a concentrated way to work on a task of strategic, and especially creative, value. Moreover, it is a meeting where everyone is engaged as a designer, across all relevant and resource-rich boundaries, to share leadership and take ownership for making the future of some big league opportunity successful. The meeting appears bold at first, but is based on a simple notion: when it comes to enterprise innovation and integration, there is nothing that brings out the best in human systems – faster, more consistently, and more effectively – than the power of “the whole.” Flowing from the tradition of strengths-based management, the AI Summit says that in a multi-stakeholder world it is not about (isolated) strengths per se, but about configurations, combinations, and interfaces.

While at first it seems incomprehensible that large groups of hundreds of people in the room can be effective in unleashing system-wide strategies, making organizational decisions, and designing rapid prototypes, this is exactly what is happening in organizations around the world. Fairmount Mineral’s experience was not an isolated or atypical triumph. For Fairmount’s customers, the experience was eye opening. First, they saw the integrity, energy, and collaborative capacity of the high-engagement company. Then, across every silo, they saw one new business idea after another being discovered. The one that amazed them most was the new multi-million dollar business opportunity designed to take old, spent sand – the stuff that is discarded after its use in factories – and turn that into clean bio-fuel for powering the company’s heavy trucks. How could this be? Well, an engineer in one group shared how spent sand, when placed on farmland, has been shown to help grow higher yields of

biomass. Another person declared that the company's sand mining facilities are located in rural locations near many farms. Between the two observations a light bulb goes off. How might we create a new business for spent sand? Why not create a new partnership with farmers – a partnership where sand-assisted biomass growth becomes the basis for lower cost, green bio-fuels to power the heavy truck fleet. Participants experienced firsthand the power of this virtuous cycle, where one good idea meets another.

Coupled with a dozen other win-win-win sustainability breakthroughs, the summit soon helped double Fairmount's already superior double-digit growth rates and elevated it on a pathway of differentiation unheard of in its industry. The news in a Wisconsin newspaper told much of the story in a headline article "The Tale of Two Sand Companies." Fairmount Minerals, because of its agility and speed to market with its sustainability offerings, wins its license to operate. A competing company fails in its bid. It did not have a sustainability strategy or a macro method for bringing the whole community into joint planning. The impact for Fairmount Minerals, just that one win-win success, translated into billions of dollars in market value.

In this article, I go inside this story, and many others, to show how the successfully managed macro-moment represents an almost totally undefined, untaught, and underestimated leadership leverage point like no other. I describe what a macro-management is, and what it isn't (for example it is not a large scale conference of talking heads and pre-negotiated announcements) and then detail the unique X factors and guidelines for a leveraging the strengths-based management approach known simply as "AI." Moreover, I explain why the AI summit method, as an example of today's macro strengths mandate, is catching fire in thousands of organizations, and is becoming an indispensable new capacity not only for the high stakes occasion, but also for accomplishing the everyday work of management. But as easy as it can be, there are conditions for success that need to be set into place. Once understood, these success elements open significant new doors for the discipline of management. You've already mastered micro. What's next? It's the macro-management of strengths. Here's how.

#### **Success Factor #1: Reverse the 80/20 rule**

*Start by preparing your leadership team with the best in strengths-based thinking and research, and thereby laying*

*the logical groundwork for reversing the deficit bias that pervades most every organization.*

This is what Admiral Vernon Clark, the Navy's CNO (chief of naval operations) did as a pre-summit step, before the Navy's first of a series AI Summits. Convening key leaders, Admiral Clark brought nearly 20 Admirals together to envision and create a summit for an enlightened leadership model focused on "forging a culture of leadership at every level." Engagement scores showed alarmingly high turnover rates throughout the Navy. As Clark put it, "the turnover is unacceptable, and is costing America billions." His passion was for creating a high-engagement system of planning, where people from all levels could become part of the action and decision-making. He was impressed by industry-leading stars, for example Boeing, a two-time Baldrige Award winning company and pioneer in the linking together of appreciative inquiry and quality. Clark envisioned a time when E-5 sailors, for example, would sit alongside three-star Admirals, planning the future of the Naval operations and where those under thirty would be linked in an intergenerational way with the Navy's most seasoned veterans. Ultimately, Clark's vision led to an unprecedented appreciative inquiry summit with 500 stakeholders.

But it was the careful set of executive briefings on the logic of strengths, the management methods of Appreciative Inquiry, and the research findings on the role of the positive in human systems that proved to be crucial for paving the way (see Table 1 on the positive-strengths philosophy.) In addition, there were three essential concepts that spoke most powerfully to the Navy. The first was the overarching idea that leadership might well be *all* about strengths. One of Peter Drucker's core management principles formed the foundational logic for our briefing: "The task of leadership is ageless in its essence," Drucker once told us. "The task of great leadership is to create an alignment of strengths in ways that make a system's weaknesses irrelevant." People often write that one down. It's clear, it's compelling, and it is pragmatic – for what else do we, as managers have to work with anyway other than strengths?

But here's the rub. What do we do instinctively, for example, when a student or young child comes home with an A, B, C, and an F? It's what you might guess: Eighty percent of the parent's attention goes to the F. The 80-20 deficit-bias is much the same in management. Even after years of sharing and evolving the strengths theory, a majority of employees

**Table 1** Principles of AI Positive-Strengths Based Management.

#### Appreciative Inquiry and Strengths-Based Management Principles for Positive Organization Development and Change

1. We live in worlds our inquiries create; no change initiative outperforms its "return on attention," whether we are studying deficiencies or the best in life.
2. We *excel* only by amplifying strengths, never by simply fixing weaknesses; therefore, beware of the negativity bias of first framing because excellence is not the opposite of failure.
3. Small shifts make seismic differences; strengths-based change obeys a tipping point; instead of focusing 80% on what's not working and 20% on strengths it is important to put this 80/20 rule in reverse to harness the transformative power of the "positivity ratio."
4. Strengths do more than perform, they transform – strengths are what make us feel stronger; therefore magnify "what is best" and imagine "what is next" in order to create upward momentum for innovation and positive design.
5. We live in a universe of strengths – the wider the lens, the better the view. The appreciable world is so much larger than our normal appreciative eye. What we appreciate (seeing value), appreciates (increases in value).



still feel their signature strengths are not understood or appreciated by key leaders. Eighty percent of the workforce worldwide continues to feel undervalued or underutilized. Only 20 percent agree with the following statement: "At work I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day."

To explore the deficit bias even further, the Navy's leaders were asked. "How many of your last six meetings were called to fix the problem of...?" We went further: "How many of you would say at least 80 percent of your last six meetings were problem analytic?" Every hand went up. One officer suggested that there might be, in this 450,000-person bureaucracy, over 2,000 measures of what can go wrong. Another commented on the deficit analytic consulting world – "We literally have an army of consultants in our Navy," each one with sophisticated technologies for studying "what's wrong." In fact, that deficit-based industry – focused primarily on problem analysis, error reduction and repair – represents a \$350 billion dollar market. It was estimated that 80 percent of the consultant attention was on what's wrong, and less than 20 percent was devoted to strengths analysis. It's time, our briefing suggested, for a reversal of this 80-20 rule.

The radical idea at the core of the strengths movement has two dimensions. One is that excellence is not the opposite of failure, and that you will learn little about excellence from studying failure. All the studies in the world of "high turnover," for example, will teach little about "a magnetic work environment," or places where the bond is so strong it cannot be broken. But even more radical, argues the appreciative inquiry perspective, is that the process of studying a phenomenon actually changes that phenomenon: We create new realities during the process of inquiry. Studying low morale produces its own ripple effects through the "mere measurement effect." So does inquiry into the true, the good, the better and the possible. Imagine asking 500 people in an organization to reflect on the ups and downs in their careers and focus on one of the high-point periods: "Describe a time that you felt most successful, effective, and alive. When and how did it happen? What were your feelings? What about the results?" Now imagine at least five other sets of similar questions, for example, asking about a time when they witnessed an improbable but "extraordinary collaboration" between departments that produced breakthroughs. This is exactly what the Navy leaders did. In the midst of discovery, they found that we live in worlds our questions create. When we study excellence there will be an impact. When we study depression there will be an impact. The questions we ask determine what we find, and what we find becomes a powerful resource for planning and learning. After doing 250 pre-summit interviews based on the assumption that organizations are not so much "problems-to-be-solved," but living centers or "universes-of-strengths," the Admirals achieved a new understanding. With story after story of breakthrough, they saw the logic and potential of a whole-system-in-the-room summit. They experienced how a slight shift in attention can make a seismic difference. Our goal was to create an experience of Einstein's powerful insight: "No problem can be solved by the consciousness that created it; we must learn to see the world anew."

As is often the case in our deficit-based culture writ large, experiencing the logic of reversing the 80/20 rule was an important step in the Navy's pre-summit preparation. In

another company, Hunter Douglas, the introduction to AI and the strengths philosophy happened in an even more action-oriented way. Instead of an executive education off-site, senior leaders assembled for a "briefing," but instead of lectures they were dashed off to the company's manufacturing facilities. The only instruction was, "Here is the appreciative inquiry interview guide to help you search for positive deviations; please start with these strengths-searching and solution-focused questions, and invent more of your own, and interview as many people on the shop floor as possible in the next six hours."

Managers came back from their interviews later that day on fire. They heard stories of strength and courage and high performance innovation that helped them see possibilities that had not yet been discussed. Carefully crafted questions were posed for each employee. First were questions of positive deviations from the everyday – times of greatest innovation, productivity, and growth. These examples were probed for root causes of success. Then came the continuity question – one of the best strengths-based questions we've ever seen: "Obviously our organization will have to change, and yet even as we change there will be things we want and need to keep. In your view, what are those three things we should keep, even as we move into a new and changing future?" Then attention was given to positive pathways to the future: "What are the smallest changes we could make that might have the largest impact?" and "What's one bolder opportunity, perhaps disruptive and a revolutionary stretch, something that we may have never yet talked about?" One of the questions with a machine operator surfaced an idea on how to multiply the capacity of a fabric press for window shades so it could print on both sides, thereby doubling its productivity. The discovery instantly saved \$220,000 that had been budgeted for the purchase of a new press. Indeed, inquiry into the good, the better, and the possible is perhaps one of the most important things any strengths-based manager can do. If the act of studying a phenomenon in human systems alters it, what happens when we search ever more skilfully for ways that elevate and leverage the enormous universe of strengths, possibilities, and patterns of what already works?

The entire Hunter Douglas case is a remarkable one, and has a detailed volume written on it, researching the impact of the first AI Summit and how it continued into the next decade and a half, as Hunter Douglas developed through innovation, productivity and growth to become North America's leading manufacturer and marketer of custom window coverings. During a five-year period reported in the study, the Hunter Douglas Window Fashions Division experienced significant results that parallel what we know happens when organizations become more strengths-based: sales up 30.1 percent; profitability up 37.1 percent; employee turnover down 52.2 percent; returned goods down 55 percent; on time delivery 97 percent. Most important, it began in a simple way: it began when senior leaders sat down with their workforce with fresh sets of questions searching for positive deviations and the root causes of success especially during moments of peak performance, productivity, and breakthrough. One lesson: inquiry itself intervenes. Positive change begins with positive questions. Studying "what gives life" – what works, what's best, and what's possible – is not merely the opposite of what's wrong; it's totally different.

What we've discovered is that reversal of the 80/20 rule is not difficult when people experience it directly and see the mounting research-base supporting it.

**Success Factor #2: Pre-frame a powerful "task" for the summit with a purpose bigger than the system**

Often people say the positive approaches are nice when times are good. But how can you even think of bringing a whole system into the room during times of crises? What about times where the conflicts are so high people won't even talk? What about those times where unionized teamsters and corporate managers are posturing for the next contract? What about those harsh industrial transitions when a city, like Cleveland or Detroit, is economically dying or when poverty's bitter reality tips into angry violence? What about difficult economic times and corporate upheavals, like fear-creating layoffs, or times of financial meltdown?

Whether times are good or times are awash in complexity, the summit process consistently brings out the best in human systems, and one of the success factors par excellence is the creative work that a summit design team does to articulate the task of the summit. You never do a summit unless there is some important systemic need or opportunity — hopefully some big league opportunity — that can benefit from everything that a diverse set of stakeholders might be able to pull off. Several of my career high points with large groups were with organizations, communities, and even whole cities, when things looked their worst and where the prospect of launching an AI Summit or bringing hundreds of people together for three days appeared unreasonable, reckless, and ill-advised — at first.

Pre-framing (where "P" stands for *positive* re-framing) is about articulating a purpose bigger than the system. If it's a business, that purpose is usually focused outward on the customer's experience of value, such as when Steve Jobs said he wanted to make "a ding in the universe." A powerful purpose, in the sense we use it here, is a task where everyone involved would say: "My life had meaning and value because I was involved in that work." It's something that POS researchers describe the kind of work that moves from a "job" or "career" to a "calling" with meaning, significance, and value.

Consider this framing. A couple of years ago, His Holiness the Dalai Lama was in Jerusalem. Tensions — especially between the religions — were intense. "If only the world's religious leaders would just talk to one another," Dalai Lama shared, "the world would be a better place." He continued: "At the highest levels of religious leadership we don't talk, we don't know what's in each others' hearts." He also cited a Harvard study that showed that 87 percent of the world's armed conflicts were not between nation states, but between groups of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Learning of appreciative inquiry, he invited us to help launch a series of dialogues, including sessions at the Carter Center with former President Jimmy Carter. Several of the participants, Bishop Swing and the Rt. Reverend Charles Gibbs, had an even larger vision. Their idea was that in today's complex, interdependent world, there was a need for a permanent place for this dialogue. The Bishop observed: "For over 50 years, the nation state leaders of the world had the moral conviction to talk and created a place for it in the form of the UN; but what have our religious leaders done? Not only do we not have that kind of place or commitment to work

together, but in many cases, our religions are in conflict to the point where our young people see religion not as a force for peace, but for separation and bitterness." We have images in our magazines of black and white coming together, such as Mandela and DeKlerk grasping each other hands in the soccer stadium. We have nothing like that across religions — for example the Pope and the Dalai Lama connecting their hands high. At the 50th anniversary of the UN, Bishop Swing and Rev. Gibbs declared they would spend the rest of their lives building something akin to a UN (but hopefully less bureaucratic) for people of all faiths. They called on the AI Summit method to help accomplish it by establishing a charter for a United Religions initiative.

The first thing we did was to challenge the framing. The Bishop shared how there had been over 20 failures to create something like a UN among religions over the past 100 years. Time after time it proved impossible to find agreements among religious leaders across so much diversity in belief and culture. So we queried: "Do you have a title for the summit you've planned?" Yes, the Bishop said, "and a location; it's being held at the Fairmount Hotel in San Francisco, in the same room where the UN was conceived." Again we pressed for the task or title. The Bishop replied, a bit hesitant, "Well the title is, Should the World Have a United Religions?" We challenged back: "Didn't you already declare that you were going to spend the rest of your life building this?" He acknowledged yes. So we asked: "Didn't you say that this idea has failed 20 times in the past 100 years — because it got bogged down in endless dialogue?" We suggested that his title was not a summit task, but an invitation to a 49–51 debate, with no agreements likely. So the summit needed a better mandate or task. One began to emerge as we talked. After several iterations, this is what was articulated: "A Time for Action: Coming Together to Design the Global Charter for a United Religions." The task said it all. It would not be a debate; it would be a design session. We teamed up with the founder and CEO of Visa, Dee Hock, and subsequently held five design summits at Stanford University and modeled the new organization in some ways similar to Visa, which joined 50,000 competing banks into a new alliance of cooperation. In the year 2000, at Carnegie Music Hall, the charter was signed. Today, more than 600 URI centers situated across every continent work to "end religious violence and create cultures of peace and justice" in many of the most difficult conflict settings in the world. Several academic observers have suggested that the URI has the potential to become one of the few organizations to receive a Nobel Peace Prize. But the URI's birth may not have happened without that positive reframing of the summit's work. "A Time for Action..."

Marty Seligman sees the power of purpose, meaning, and significance as pillars of bringing out the best in life. He uses the acronym PERMA to describe the elements for flourishing, and this concept is germane to teams designing a productive summit task. Does the topic framing elevate or inspire positive emotion such as hope and inspiration and interest? Does it call for engagement? Does it hold potential for building high quality, positive relationships? Does it articulate or signify meaning that matters to the system and its inter-relationships? And does it call for accomplishment — something that serves to inspire valuable achievement?

The task at the first Green Mountain Roasters AI Summit met this criterion: "Coming Together to Create Phenomenal

Growth and a New Model of Sustainability for Doing Good and Doing Well.” At that time, the company’s stock price was at \$11 a share. A few short years later, it was trading at over \$100 a share, and Green Mountain was selected as the most ethical corporation in the world two years in a row – unprecedented at that time. Again, task pre-framing helped make it happen.

Likewise, the city of Cleveland took the idea of topic framing seriously and with great benefit. Beset with job loss and population flight from the city, Cleveland’s Mayor Frank Jackson wanted to find a way to unite the whole together to innovate and build. He observed an AI Summit at the UN and immediately felt the macro strengths approach was exactly what his city needed. He also noticed how much of the newer energy in Cleveland was around sustainability – he saw it bubbling up at the universities, in businesses such as Sherwin Williams and Eaton, and through networks such as Entrepreneurs for Sustainability. So he formed a summit design committee of business and community leaders. While searching for the topic and task for a summit, everyone talked about the precious assets in the region such as Lake Erie, but also how the city almost lost all of it at the height of the industrial era. Images of a polluted river on fire were seared into the national consciousness. The summit design team started there, but engaged in pre-framing. The summit task needed to address economic and ecological concerns and call people out from their silos. In the end, it became one of the best summit tasks I’ve ever seen: *Sustainable Cleveland 2019: Creating an Economic Engine to Empower a Green City on a Blue Lake*. Over 700 business leaders and civic entrepreneurs showed up to design the future for a green city on a blue lake. At the end, the Mayor announced the city’s dedication to do this AI summit every year for a “decade of determination.” The art of task elevation in this case is exactly what the whole domain of POS, positive psychology and Appreciative Inquiry is teaching managers to do: aim higher in what we study.

Topic choice is fateful. It affects what we see and do. It shapes relationships and realities. It is a constructive discipline that can be passed on and learned in management, whether one is doing a summit or not. The key question is what do we want to create, not what do we wish to avoid or solve? Human systems have a tendency to move in the direction of what they most frequently and deeply ask questions about. Thus, positive re-framing can be practiced everyday in management in everything we do. Is our task to get stuck pouring through “customer complaints” or is it to better manage the complaints but get on with a rigorous exploration and analysis of claims of “revolutionary customer responsiveness – where is it happening, what does it look like, and how can we multiply it?” Great leaders help us see. They call us to keep our eyes on the prize and the principle: human systems move in the direction of what they most frequently, deeply, and authentically ask questions about.

Think about these phases: the pre-summit work; the summit itself; and post-summit follow through. In the pre-summit phase you often have a 20–30-person steering committee or summit design team. Managers succeed when they and their design teams pre-frame the summit task as if that seed investment will produce a windfall of systemic value and enduring payoff. The task articulation is that seminal; indeed it is a tiny yet mighty seed that can produce a towering oak. The lesson: embrace pre-framing not as a semantic excursion

but as tipping point likelihood. An exceptionally well-articulated task tells everyone exactly what the work of the summit is about. It calls for the best in the system. What comes next, however, may be ever more decisive.

**Success Factor #3: Embrace whole configurations including “improbable configurations” that can combine strengths to create magic**

As we move to the second phase of the strengths revolution in management, it’s not about strengths per se; it’s about the major discovery of how the experience of the wholeness brings out the best in human beings – perhaps more powerfully and consistently than anything we have ever seen in management. Great leaders and great summits work from complete patterns of the whole, constellations of stars. It’s not the number of people that matters most. There can be an AI Summit with 20 people. What matters most is the quality of the configuration as measured by completeness. When, for example, is an orchestra at its best and most likely to hit the groove? It’s always when the whole system is in the room – including “customers” and “cameras” and “students” and the like, even the art “critics.” What matters most is the chemistry of the whole. Meanwhile so-called magic of macro is replicable not just in symphonies, but also in summits. The formula is simple: think strengths, think whole configurations.

Here’s how it works. You have some big league opportunity facing you. It might be a need to take \$75 million dollars out of the business, quickly. Maybe it’s a smaller matter where annual turnover rates of 25 percent in your sales force are killing your margins, and you want to bring turnover to near zero. Perhaps you are managing a university that wants to rise to a new echelon of academic excellence and radically improve the students’ experience of campus life – and not take 20 years to do it. Let’s take this later example. It’s actually a real one, but not a model one. Our former president at Case Western Reserve University (not named here) wanted to elevate the university to a new echelon of academic excellence and quality of student experience. We described the key AI principle of configurations of the whole, including the idea of all relevant and affected internal and external stakeholders. We suggested a stakeholder map, a drawing of the whole-system configuration capable of moving this agenda forward with engagement, aligned commitment, and speed. We reiterated our goal: What’s the best configuration to move the strategy work and transformation agenda forward? The first stakeholder group suggested was the students. The president protested: “But we can’t have students in our strategic planning meeting. It’s the faculty that run this university, and besides that, the students don’t know enough about the workings of the university or finances or any of those matters.” He then went on, “When you said ‘whole system’ I thought you meant bringing faculty from the medical school, engineering, the law school. . . Who else are you thinking about, administrative support staff and maintenance?” We responded, “Yes, and also key stakeholders in the city, such as the Mayor, and foundations that care about our success, and perhaps parents and alums and other world class universities that have moved from good to great.” That summit never happened. The deal breaker was the idea of bringing students to the strategy table.

Each time I tell the story, people chuckle in disbelief. However, it’s a story that is replicated in organizations all

over the world, especially at the time they start planning their first summit. Deceptively simple in theory, the idea of a complete pattern of the whole is too quickly compromised and is nearly always underestimated from a positivity *producing* perspective. Consider these common comments: "We can't have our customers in the room because what will happen if our adversarial labor-management dynamic rears its ugly head?" or "We can't have our suppliers in the room because they are in competition with one another" or "We shouldn't bring our frontline into our strategy work until we as a senior team get our act together and are more cohesive at the executive level" or "This IT transformation is so technical that users will just get in the way" or "Our hospital will not be able to run if we have the whole system at the summit."

Certainly these are important considerations. Unfortunately, they interfere with the most important point about the opportunity of wholeness. The well-known formula for bringing out the worst in human systems is separateness — entrenched silos, bureaucratic layering, solo players, we-they posturing, protecting local resources without appreciation for the total good, distorted communications and drawn-out coordination across layers, not-invented-here syndrome, stereotyping, entrenched specializations that don't talk to other specializations, hallway negativity, and inbreeding. And this negativity is viciously self-reinforcing. The more separateness the more chance we see (or presume) the worst in the other and the more closed door and bureaucratized we become. The more bureaucratized and entrenched, the less apt we are to even entertain the idea that a whole system in the room is the formula for bringing out the best in human enterprise. We know we should think in systems terms. Everybody teaches it, but we don't *live* it. We rarely bring the whole living system together to do systems thinking, planning, and designing in real time. So we create pendulum swings between top-down and bottom-up. First everything is centralized, but then the reaction sets in and we rush to decentralization. Indeed, it is nearly impossible for most to think beyond these two forms of management.

While management innovation in comparison to technical innovation is rare, we believe a third form of management is emerging. It's not top-down or bottom-up — *it's whole*. Macro-management includes both top-down and bottom-up simultaneously. This macro-strengths approach might well represent the formula for bringing out the better angels of each of the others — top-down and bottom-up. Why? Because wholeness embraces both. We will always need the special capabilities of well-managed top-down and what's called hard power. We will always need the distinctive strengths of inspired bottom-up, what's often called soft power. The macro-management of strengths is a significant breakthrough as an additional organization and management tool that combines soft and hard power to create smart power. Our experience shows that this kind of macro-forum for collective working does not have to happen often. But when it does happen — when there is some big league opportunity for the system — it carries with it many collateral benefits such as more trust in top-down systems and more collaborative coherence in bottom-up movements, undisciplined Web networks, and the open innovation of crowds. In addition, its fast: one three-day summit focused on a time critical and strategically important "change at the scale of the whole" can save

hundreds of smaller committee meetings and complex time-consuming handoffs across levels, regions, business units.

When Cindy Frick became the manager of sales at Dealer Tire, she found herself in a negative dynamic between a sales force that did not trust centralization and the need to have an effective centralized function that allowed for IT integration as well as an easy, one-stop interface for the outside system. Tensions were high; turnover in the sales organization was near 25 percent, not good for customer peace of mind. However, Cindy was a veteran of the AI Summit method. In her previous vice president (VP) role in a \$4-billion-dollar trucking company, Cindy orchestrated over 65, 500-person summits in two years, engaging truck drivers, dockworkers, senior executives, teamsters, managers and customers. During that time, Cindy tapped the strengths of over 10,000 people and transformed a culture of entrenched silos into a high-performance system. The stock price of the company went from \$14 dollars a share to \$55 dollars in just over two years. The AI Summit's high-engagement capability became a competitive advantage used for redesigning dock layouts, creating new products, taking millions in costs out of the bloated bureaucracy, and doing corporate strategy work. "We learned there is nothing more powerful than a unified workforce pulling in the same direction during a downturn," she says.

In her new job with Dealer Tire, Cindy seized the moment. Like most companies of any size there is usually an annual national sales meeting. The convention industry — a \$258 billion dollar industry — loves them. In Cindy's view, they are "notoriously unproductive." They are commonly filled with speakers, entertainment, and announcements of new directions in strategy, updates in training, or rollouts of new structures. But Cindy knew that these cheerleading sessions don't often leave much behind. So she redesigned the whole premise. Dealer Tire's meeting would become a task-focused AI summit to design the future along three dimensions: efficiency, systemic effectiveness, and capacity for execution (3-E's). Instead of the sales organization alone, the summit would include every function of Dealer Tire that served sales — senior executives, IT, operations, finance, marketing — and it would include every key customer, from Toyota and Jaguar to Honda and BMW. Everyone told Cindy that the customers and suppliers would not devote the time. Others feared chaos. But Cindy knew she had a secret weapon: "Today, we have the collaborative tools whereby everyone can be part of the inner circle of strategy. I knew from my previous job with the trucking company that you can reverse 50 years of labor management conflict almost overnight when you create the right conditions, including the noble purpose of improving the lives of customers." Together with her entire sales force and important customers, from BMW to Toyota, Cindy did just that. In the end, the summit erupted in cheers. One customer said: "What you have here is special. Whatever it is, don't lose it."

Years ago we were taught in management that the most effective size group is 8–10 people, so subsequently most everything unfolds that way. In its top-down form it is 8–10 people at the top doing the planning and then the communications rollout. Then in the 1960s and 1970s, we turned hierarchies upside down. Quality circles, for example, were the rage. While they looked like opposites, the family resemblance was this: it was still micro. We did not know, in an



everyday management sense, how to unite universes of strengths or harness the best in systems thinking. We did not know that the wider the lens the better the view and the better the human dynamic. With AI we learned that organizations are centers of human relationships, and that relationships come alive where there is an appreciative eye – when people take the time to see the best in each other. Think in terms of constellations of strengths. True innovation happens when strong multi-disciplinary groups come together, build a collaborative and appreciative interchange, and explore the intersection of their different points of strength. Moreover this macro-minded capability – the ability to connect ideas, people, and resources from across boundaries of all kind – paves the way for something even more inspiring in management.

**Success Factor #4: Create a system where innovation can emerge from everywhere: it's time for design-inspired collaboration**

From the Conference Board's landmark study of innovation in 2008, there has been a recent and exciting sea change in management driven largely by one thing: Managers and leaders are absorbing everything they can from designers. They are learning the skills of "design thinking" from architects and product designers as well as orchestra leaders and graphic artists. Companies from Apple to Procter & Gamble are going to the bank on it. They are embracing the power of design and the "how to" of synthetic thinking, empathy, story, iteration, visual thinking, multiple solutions, teamwork, and rapid prototyping. Design thinkers see the world through a "positive lens" where even mistakes are viewed as "material" for new possibilities, for example, when jazz musicians thrive in moments of unpredictable complexity and "say yes to the mess."

This affirmative competence, argues Frank Barrett, is exactly what the whole system macro-strengths perspective propels. Well-known design firms such as IDEO are embracing the positive organization development approach of the AI Summit to move beyond hot teams to large groups. "Design is too important to leave to designers," argues Tim Brown, the head of IDEO, in the recent book *Change By Design*. That's why he and his colleagues are drawn to the systemic approach of large group AI. Design thinkers and scholars of the positive in human systems both use an approach called "abductive reasoning" (a phrase coined by Peirce in 1938), which happens via "logical leaps of mind" from even a single deviating data point that does not fit with the existing models.

The new, design-focused AI summit achieves this through its "4-D cycle" of discovery, dream and design, and deployment – approximately one day on each D (see Fig. 1). The discovery phase is crucial. It's an analytic phase for studying the positive core of the system, defined as all past, present, and future (potential) capacity. In this phase, AI achieves a union, a knowledge link, between the whole system of stakeholders and its life-giving strengths (in relation to its task-topic) as well its smallest and biggest opportunities. The dream phase, which involves an abductive logical leap of mind from the positive deviation analysis of what's best, moves beyond and asks, "What's next?" Based on the theory of positive image-positive action – how human systems are propelled in the present by their guiding images of the future – the AI summit asks people to anticipate what positive

progress, achievements, breakthroughs, and end-results look like at some key point in time in the future. When we look at the combination of precious past strengths, positive future opportunities, and present needs or purposes, patterns emerge – we begin to sense what wants to happen. The questions help participants think beyond the internal systems: "When we look at our history and the positive core of our past, present and future capacity, and when we listen to what our world is calling for (our valued customers, communities, and world) then what do we see as possible in the future that makes us proud: What results? What positive pathways? What do we see happening that's new, better, and different, and how do we know?"

This phase leads to the discovery of not just common ground, but higher ground. It's about big picture scenario development, and it identifies design opportunities. It's clear that having this kind of design thinking in the mix is a key to success in interdisciplinary collaboration; it's critical to uncovering unexplored areas for innovation. The first time I did this – together with Peter Coughlan from IDEO – it was with a large trucking company. The topic was establishing customer peace of mind. At the summit's transition moment from the dream to design phase, opportunities emerged: new time-critical products; the design of customer intelligence teams; new throughput designs for achieving double the shipments per hour; and about 20 other opportunities, including new orientation and training programs focusing every employee's attention on customer experience. The key question for each design studio was: "How might we...?" It's a designer's dream question because it invites practical imagination. Then, with minimal training in concepts such as non-judgmental brainstorming techniques and rapid prototyping, an enterprise-wide constellation of dock workers, truck drivers, senior executives, operations specialists, marketing people and others started creating, alongside with their customers, new designs for customer peace of mind. Instead of writing action plans for later action, or words on a piece of paper, the assignment was to build the first prototypes. In one case it involved a redesign of a dock layout to achieve breakthrough increases in speed, and the assignment was to build a block model of it. Because it was designed by the whole system, there was nothing like the not-invented-here dynamic. The design was a win-win for customers and company. Moreover, it did not take years to achieve. The prototype was built in a morning.

From a POS perspective, the key insight was about the concept of high-quality connections (HQCs) and the power of design. People in HQCs, propose Dutton and Heaphy, in contrast to toxic or corrosive connections of mistrust and negativity, share three subjective experiences. First, HQCs are sensed by feelings of vitality and aliveness, including sense of positive energy. Second, being in a HQC is also felt through a heightened sense of positive regard or profound contact. Finally, the experience of being in an HQC is marked by felt mutuality; it is the sense that both people in a connection are engaged, actively participating and seeing vast potential in the connection. The highest quality connections are born not only in contexts that include systemic configurations of the whole universe of strengths, but when people leap beyond dialogue and move into design. It's as if there is a dynamic whereby *doing is an undergoing* and where positive doing (designing and building together) and positive

undergoing are inseparable. Think about the early pioneers in America. The whole community would show up at their neighbor's, bring whatever resources they had, and build the neighbor's new barn. They didn't just talk about it. They rolled up their sleeves together. The barn building built HQCs, not just buildings. These were moments of collaborative vitality and aliveness, perhaps models of human dynamics at their best.

One of the important new rules of thumb in the AI Summit is that dialogue is not enough. A focus on design thinking and its role in building HQCs provides a new window for understanding positive organizational-level behavior and actions. For Chuck Fowler, the CEO of Fairmount Minerals, the most telling moment in their first summit was when an employee team designed the prototype for a sand water filter to be used in developing countries where clean water was scarce. Again, it was not simply a good brainstorming suggestion. It was a design-and-build session where the artifact, a prototype of a \$10 dollar water filter with no moving parts, was held up high by the whole team, and the tangible image created a plausible future. People could see it, touch it, and sense its true potential. Today, that sand water filter is saving thousands of lives. It also is opening up new markets for Fairmount Minerals and represents a new strategic direction for the company focused on water. Now in production for 44 countries, it stands as a symbol of Fairmount's mission to "do good, do well" and is an inspiring part of the tremendous business growth. One sand loader-operator in that design initiative said: "I am just a sand loader operator, but in this summit everyone has a voice. I will never forget the moment we built and presented the sand water filter and everyone beamed." Inviting people to design the future is a powerful way to affirm their strengths. Designing is often an act of legacy leadership that can have impact and reverberate across the years and sometimes generations. Think of the designers of the constitution. Do you want an eye-opening team exercise? Ask people to help prototype the company of their dreams.

#### **Success Factor #5**

*Make the concentration effect of strengths a vital management skill across your enterprise and turn the strengths revolution into a macromanagement advantage for phenomenal growth, productive engagement, and creating a culture of open innovation.*

In 2004, the United Nation's Secretary General Kofi Annan called for a world summit with over 500 business and society leaders. In a surprising move counter to the UN's norms of carefully orchestrated panels, speeches, and pre-negotiated agreements, the UN Global Compact Leaders selected the positive organization development method of Appreciative Inquiry. It would be an interactive, joint design event designed to "unite the strengths of markets with the power of universal ideals" and scale up strategic partnerships for eradicating extreme poverty. It was the largest meeting of its kind ever held at the UN, with CEOs from corporations such as Alcoa, Royal Dutch Shell, Goldman Sachs, Novartis, Coca-Cola, and Microsoft seated in the General Assembly alongside heads of state, as well as leaders of international NGOs such as Oxfam and the World Wildlife Fund. One major goal was to build a growth strategy and double the size of the UN Global Compact beyond its 1,000 corporate members. Following the summit, the goal was surpassed. Several years later, the

number of companies soared to 6,000 members. After experiencing the concentration effect of the positive-strengths approach, the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan wrote: "I would like to commend your innovative methodology of appreciative inquiry and to thank you for introducing it to the United Nations. Without this, it would have been very difficult, perhaps even impossible, to constructively engage so many leaders of business, civil society and government."

The AI summit creates the concentration effect of strengths in three stages: the elevation-and-extension of strengths, the broaden-and-buildup of capacity, and the establish-and-eclipse stage of innovation. A useful metaphor is the idea of fusion from the energy sciences. Fusion, in contrast to fission or splitting apart, results when two positively charged hydrogen elements combine. It is the source of the sun and the stars. The parallel is that the more that positive organizational scholars study the dynamic of "the positive" in human systems change, the more we realize that strengths do more than perform, they transform. We are learning about how to create spaces for this kind of *transformational positivity*, the intentional use of combinations of positive assets, strengths, positive emotions and whole system network effects to initiate, inspire, and better manage change. Let's look at the three stages:

- 1 *The elevation-and-extension phase:* Here the word "elevation" means the elevation of inquiry, and "extension" means the extension of relationships. The AI Summit begins in the planning phase by creating novel whole system configurations or extensions of relationships. It believes in the power of early beginnings. And as we know, starting points – like the questions we ask and the curiosity we bring to the table – can have big effects. In complexity science, this phenomenon is called *sensitive dependence on initial conditions* where a small change at one place can result in large differences to a later state. We all know the snowball effect. The concentration effect of strengths begins this sensitive dependence on initial conditions, especially the quality of inquiry or curiosity that the space invites. Everything from a positive-strengths perspective is offered in support of cultivating a spirit of inquiry and the power of what researchers now call the curiosity advantage. POS research shows that curiosity is an underestimated power: it inspires relationships; it helps people leave the familiar and take risks; it involves the art of sparking interest among potential collaborators; it intensifies or helps us savour past successes and achievements as resources; it provides the motivation to grow and draws us out of ourselves and our certainties; it predicts the performance success of executive teams; and it induces positive energetic states. Imagine Kofi Annan turning to the economist Jeffery Sachs to hear about the concept of millennium development villages, and how this successful micro-enterprise model shows that we stand on a new threshold in the eradication of extreme poverty. These explorations, often crossing silos or specializations, bring new resources into the room. One of those resources is positive emotion – hope, inspiration, and gratitude.
- 2 *The broaden-and-build-phase:* The more that positive organizational scholars study the dynamic of "the positive" in human systems change, the more evidence they

find that our change management models may be obsolete. While most change theories emphasize the need to establish the burning platform or to heighten dissatisfaction with the status quo in order to overcome resistance, the positive strengths perspective argues that human systems usually do not embrace change well under conditions of fear, trauma, or any kind of manufactured urgency. It might be the opposite. Human systems might well become more resilient and capable of realizing their potentials the more we engage not the negative emotions, but the positive emotions – for example, hope, inspiration, and joy. Drawing from Barbara Fredrickson's research base, that's what we see as the second space or phase in the process of profusion. As people come together through the elevation of inquiry, the emotions they experience are often amplified *positive* emotions, which tend to broaden-and-build in two ways. The first is that they open minds. In contrast to anger or fear, which constricts cognition, positivity tends to open thought-action repertoires whereby we are able to see the best in the world. With the experience of heightened positive emotion we are more creative and innovative, more intelligent, and better collaborators. Positive emotions help create a storehouse or build-up of resources over time. These resources might be higher quality relationships or an "accumulation" of such things as positive anticipation, confidence and sense of efficacy, and the buildup of new knowledge. In large groups and the combination effect of strengths, we see this dynamic multiplied. Like a fusion chamber, the AI summit creates a generative space. And the concentration of strengths creates an activation of energy. In AI's 4-D cycle it's most often observed in the transition moment from discovery and dream to the activation of design-and-build.

- 3 *The establish-and-eclipse phase of positive change:* The elevation of inquiry helps a large group connect to the positive core – the sum total of all past, present, and future capacity of the system. The extension of relatedness makes possible the formation of powerful new configurations of HQC's – relationships that are life giving versus life depleting, marked by mutuality and high positive regard. Both of these broaden minds with new knowledge and generate a build-up of emotional, cognitive, and relational resources. As strength touches strength, and qualities such as inspiration and hope connect with others' inspiration and hope, there emerges a collective capacity to act, often unlike anything individuals may have ever experienced in their typical silos and solo operations.

Now critics of the positive change dynamic might say, "Well, what about all the problems?" It's an important question. First, there is nothing in the positive-strengths research or practice that says that the problematic should be avoided, ignored, or denied. Rather, we propose a new *imbalance* of an at least 80/20 focus on strengths, opportunities, aspirations and valued results (the acronym spells "s.o.a.r" and is often placed in contrast to swot analysis.) This broad 4:1 ratio – the positivity ratio found in virtuous upward swings in flourishing – is not 4:0. It's clear that in every summit there are difficult issues that need to be addressed, and are – once the high quality connections reach a point of tensile strength capable of handling the issues with mutuality and respect. At the

UN's leaders' summit, there was in fact an angry protest happening prior to the summit, with people protesting that UN leaders were hosting major global corporations at the UN. There was a fear of corporate power and co-optation. So with the whole system in the room mind-set, NGO protesters were also invited into the UN Global Compact design summit. At the end of the summit, one of the protest group leaders stood up and declared: "What I see here are images of the models of where our world's business and society cooperation can, and should go. I applaud this initiative and everyone in this room."

The concentration effect of strengths can be systematized: management practice is moving from micro strengths to macro. In one company, after one early success with the AI Summit, managers called on the AI Summit 65 times in a year and a half to manage, as a whole system, the design of new products, operations, and IT changes. Once the benefits are experienced, it's like moving from micro to macroeconomics in this new economy of strengths. Never have strengths been more open and accessible. Managers need an appreciative eye to see them and need macro skills to capture and concentrate their value. At Wal-Mart Stores, where they use AI summits to advance their renewable energy, zero waste, and sustainable product development goals, their design summits are often eighty per cent *external* stakeholders. This is a big trend. It's no longer enough for managers to manage internal strengths. We live in a universe of strengths.

### What's Next?

It's thrilling to think that a new wave of management innovation and positive organizational scholarship might revolutionize the way we engage the workforce, transform business strategy, and prepare our organizations for a world of open innovation with customers, suppliers, and other key stakeholders. The strengths movement is now in full flood. However, for many organizations, the positive-strengths perspective, while enthusiastically embraced, has reached a plateau of sorts in the micro stage of human resources (HR) and leadership development. We must now take the necessary next step: the macro strengths stage. We must augment talent management with the wider horizon of systemic configurations. It's the stage where the payoff of the positive-strengths philosophy enters into the mainstream of strategy work, open innovation, operational simplification, and managing whole-systems change faster and better. We have detailed five success factors for making the shift to macro-strengths management and focused on one of the best large group methods in the world today. We believe the payoff of macro strengths management is just beginning. Imagine, for example, the concentration effect of strengths that technology will and is enabling. World Vision did a 150-person AI strategy summit in Thailand and had 6,000 World Vision professionals and beneficiaries from a hundred other countries join via web-enabled mass collaboration tools.

We are on the eve of the positive strengths' finest hour. The POS research on positive energy networks, positive deviance analysis, high-quality connections, flourishing, and most recently the innovative dynamic of design thinking have prepared the way for managers to take the strengths

revolution in management to a new pinnacle. Simply including one customer in every key meeting will change everything, because the more complete the pattern of the whole, much like a complete protein chain, the more we bring out the best in human enterprise. Positivity can be unleashed, leveraged, and productively managed. It is a leadership task that will only increase in importance in an open economy and connected world. It's time to think strengths, think macro, and think in ways that harness the concentration effect of

configurations. For management is, ultimately, all about elevation, alignment, and magnification of strengths.



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