



## Developing Your Appreciative Intelligence

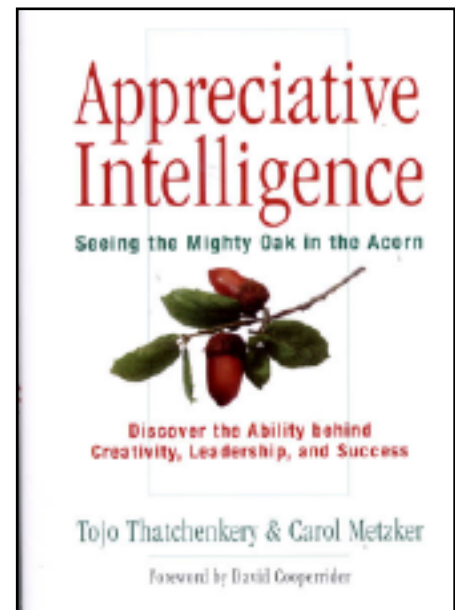
Seeing the Mighty Oak in the Acorn—Part 3

By Tojo Thatchenkery & Carol Metzker

Appreciative Intelligence is the ability to see the generative potential in any situation—the oak within the acorn—and to actualize it. It is the subject of a new book of the same name by Prof. Tojo Thatchenkery (who studied under Academy Fellow **David Cooperrider** at Case Western) and Carol Metzker, published by Berrett-Koehler. Through extensive research the authors have found that individuals with this ability can reframe situations, appreciate the positive, and see how the future unfolds from the present. They show four consistent traits: persistence, conviction that one's actions matter, tolerance for uncertainty, and irrepressible resilience.

A “first cousin” of [Emotional Intelligence](#) and [Appreciative Inquiry](#), Appreciative Intelligence has widespread potential to assist large and small businesses, NGOs, educational institutions, and non-profits to develop new solutions, collaborate better, innovate, and more. For example, the principles of AI were used by Rotary International in its successful effort to eradicate polio across all of India. It's also in use at a remarkable Quaker school in Pennsylvania, and at businesses and governmental entities in the United States.

This article includes an interview with the authors, and excerpts from their just-published book.



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## **Personal Appreciative Intelligence Profile**

To determine your personal or individual Appreciative Intelligence profile, please answer the following questions.

1. Think about a success story that you believe has something to do with your Appreciative Intelligence. Write it below (or speak into a voice recorder, if you prefer) so that you can refer back to it to answer further questions. (This story can be from any aspect or time of your life—a work, family, volunteer, or social situation, during childhood or adulthood. Please answer from your perspective—when you felt successful, not necessarily when others thought you were most successful.) Use the following questions to help you jog your memory or capture details.

- a. Where were you?
- b. When did this take place?
- c. Who, if anyone, was with you?
- d. What were the circumstances?
- e. What happened?
- f. What was your reaction?
- g. What were your emotions at the beginning and end?
- h. If possible, describe your thought processes. (Did you use insight? Did you talk to yourself, aloud or mentally?)
- i. How did the story end?
- j. What made this feel successful for you?

2. Describe a time you perceived something differently than others did, reframed a situation or product in a positive way, revealed hidden talent or skills in another person, or generated new possibilities for a challenge.

- a. What was the context? (Where were you? When?)
- b. Who, if anyone, was involved?
- c. If you can articulate it, what led you to see something different?
- d. What aspects in the present moment did you see as positive or appreciate?
- e. What part of the future desirable state was already present?
- f. What concrete steps could you see that would create the desirable end result?
- g. What, if anything, was the result?

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3. Think about a time you came up with a creative or innovative solution that you believe has something to do with your Appreciative Intelligence. Write it below (or speak into a voice recorder, if you prefer) so that you can refer back to it to answer further questions.

- a. Where were you?
- b. What were you doing at the time?
- c. What were you trying to solve?
- d. How long did it take to solve?
- e. What were the results of your creativity or innovation?
- f. What was your emotional state or mood before, during, and after?
- g. What tools, resources, or help did you use/employ in the process?

4. Which qualities of Appreciative Intelligence appeared in these stories? Describe the example.

- a. Persistence of thought or behavior
- b. Self-confidence or belief that you could solve a challenge (an instance of positive self-talk)
- c. Tolerance or management of risk, ambiguity (ideas that conflicted with your previous beliefs or knowledge), or uncertainty
- d. Irrepressible resilience (the ability to bounce back from a difficult time or to overcome an obstacle)

5. Reflect on your responses so far. When do you think you are most likely to reframe a situation? When do you most often appreciate the positive aspects of a person, product, or situation? When do you see concrete steps in the present that lead to future solutions? In what domains of your life? Under what conditions are you the most effective, innovative, creative, or successful? Of persistence, convictions that your actions matter, tolerance for uncertainty, or irrepressible resilience, which qualities are your strongest or occur most often? Bear in mind that there are no wrong answers. This is your personal and unique profile of Appreciative Intelligence.

6. Describe a future scenario in which you are happy or effective in a new area (aspect) of your life or more successful or innovative in a current area. What qualities are stronger or show up more often? What are the stories you tell yourself? Are you generating more possibilities or reframing to see a more positive future? How have you helped others around you become more successful? (For example, what talents have been revealed? Are they benefiting from your reframing of situations for a better future?)

7. How can you use the strengths and expand the profile you described in question 5 above to realize the scenario you described for question 6? This is how your future can unfold from the positive aspects of your current reality.

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## Putting Your Knowledge into Practice

Once you understand what your personal profile of Appreciative Intelligence looks like (from question 5) and have a general sense of what you want it to look like in the future (from question 6), you enter quadrant 3 of the aforementioned model of Appreciative Intelligence. Now it's time to practice new behaviors and thought patterns.

It is no easy task to change a mindset or habits that you have held and reinforced over years. For most people, discomfort accompanies ambiguity, risk, and uncertainty. You may find out that what you have always believed may not be true (for example, if you believed that your intelligence is only hard-wired and cannot change, or if you learned that the only way to make change is by filling in gaps or fixing what is broken, rather than by expanding what works). You risk change in your relationships or satisfaction associated with the status quo as you change your mindset, behaviors, and levels of success. You may possibly feel uncertainty as you begin to see and experience a new future. With time and practice, however, change and increased comfort level with it can occur.

There are at least three different ways of working on the behaviors and thoughts associated with Appreciative Intelligence. First, you can change behaviors by working on them directly or changing how you think that leads to those behaviors. This is a typical way of changing a pattern. For instance, you may be accustomed to driving to work via a particular route everyday. If construction or closure of a bridge forces you to change routes, you will probably deliberately remind yourself to travel a new direction every morning until a new habit forms.

Second, you can change your thought processes directly. One of the ideas for which 1972 Nobel laureate Gerald Edelman is well-known is called "neural Darwinism." He pointed out that our brains have some 30 billion neurons and a million billion synaptic connections. During the process of development and into adulthood, connections that are most used are kept, while the least used connections are destroyed or "pruned." According to Edelman, constant neural activation will influence neural growth and synapse formation. In other words, the more we use certain mental processes, the stronger they become. Therefore, if we intentionally work on feeling optimistic, those neural connections are strengthened. We can think of this like a mental workout—if we work the neural "muscles" of optimism, they get strengthened and we feel optimistic. If we decide to be happy, those "happy-synapses" get strengthened. In other words, by choosing to have a certain mind-set, you can end up having it.<sup>1</sup>

Third, you can change your mindset by changing your actions. To grasp the significance of this, try the following quick exercise. Smile. Hold that smile for a few minutes. (It may feel like a long time.) Within a few minutes you will begin to feel happier than you were before you began to smile. After a while, your smile will feel natural, you may relax, and you may feel genuine happiness. Because our brains do not distinguish between a smile (or other action) that is brought about by a mental state or brought about by moving our physical muscles, we can change our mindset through physical changes.

## **An Interview with Tojo Thatchenkery and Carol Metzker** **Personality and Appreciative Intelligence**

**TOJO:** It is likely that people higher AI appear to be more positive in how they deal with the world. You may see them a bit more “happy” with a kind of optimism in general. At the same time we could have a scientist who has a high degree of AI who is not necessarily very bubbly or outgoing. In general people with higher AI might demonstrate certain personality characteristics, just like someone with a higher Emotional Intelligence will demonstrate more empathy and capacity to recharge people, etc. The place where it becomes slightly different from the very external manifestation is when someone’s work does not involve a great amount of social context or social interaction. For example a research and development department doesn’t have a whole lot of interaction with customers or clients, etc. You can still have a high degree of AI because you are looking at a particular problem in a different way and able to reframe a particular situation in a different way. In general I would say that AI reveals certain personality characteristics.

With that notion comes the implication that by practicing reframing, you can change your ensuing qualities and behaviors. Conversely, by changing quality-related behaviors (for example, persisting at a particular action), you can change your perspective. By working from both directions, you may experience faster change. If one way works best for your learning style, however, use it.

A wide variety of tools for changing behaviors and thought patterns are available from consultants, teachers, psychologists, and others. The following are just a few that lend themselves to practicing intentional high Appreciative Intelligence. You will probably find that as you change one aspect of your Appreciative Intelligence, others will be affected automatically. For instance, as your ability to reframe grows, your self-talk becomes more positive and your resilience may increase. Further, as your resilience increases, you may become more confident with taking risks.

### **Tool 1: Change Your Stories**

The way the leaders we interviewed told themselves success stories or affirming thoughts (as Charlie Pellerin mentally reminded himself of the story of Davy Crockett and as Fleur Frascella said that the dancers in her community wouldn’t dislike themselves after reading magazine advertisements that suggest that thin equals beauty equals happiness), you can also tell yourself positive stories. In their book, *The Power of Resilience*, psychologists Robert Brooks and Sam Goldstein contend that people can develop “a resilient mindset” by “rewriting negative scripts.”<sup>2</sup>

To change your beliefs about your actions and resilience, pay attention to the comments your mind makes to yourself and the remarks you make to others. If you are telling yourself or others that you have failed, or envision stories in your mind that feature yourself as the victim, martyr, or underdog, replace those stories or rewrite them as a closed chapter of your personal story that eventually has a successful ending. We are not suggesting that those who have experienced terrible things or tragedies rewrite their stories as though the events did not happen or label the negative aspects of those occurrences as wonderful. Instead, ask yourself how painful memories could be written as history, not the present, and what story line would create a better future.

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Find the story of a successful person you admire—famous or not. Or, imagine yourself in the role of a winning book character—real or not. Put yourself in the shoes of any of the leaders we have written about in this book, or borrow a page from Charlie Pellerin’s book and repeat the story of Davy Crockett to yourself. Envision yourself in the role of a successful leader, able to see possibilities and overcome obstacles, and you will begin to take on his or her characteristics.

## **Tool 2: Change Your Reflections**

You can also expand your resilience and find new possibilities by reflecting on your experiences.

Barbara Frederickson, the researcher whose interviews of people before and after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the United States demonstrated the value of resilience and positive emotions for staving off depression and for learning, conducted an experiment. Over a period of a month, her research team asked a group of college students “to find positive meaning and long-term benefit from their best, worst and seemingly ordinary experiences each day.” At the end of the month, the members of the group showed more resilience than what they had reported before.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of double loop learning, introduced by Harvard University professor Chris Argyris and his late colleague Don Schön, may also be useful for you. Double loop learning is the process of examining the assumptions behind the assumptions or thinking about your thinking, in short a higher level of reflection than what is typical. In this process, you reflect on the assumptions that are used for reflection and appreciate how using different assumptions may lead to different outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

By reflecting on your assumptions, observations, and actions each day, practicing looking for new and positive possibilities in people, products, and situations, you will begin to see potential in your surroundings. If writing your reflections helps you capture your thoughts more clearly and provides for later review, keep a success journal, similar to the idea books kept by Gore associates to record their ideas, thoughts, and progress. And as the saying goes, what you seek, you will find.

## **Tool 3: Change Your Questions**

Another way to learn to reframe, or to see more of the positive inherent generative potential, is to borrow and adapt a technique from relatively new and small schools of therapy called “solution-focused therapy” and “brief therapy.”<sup>5</sup> Their key principles are that people’s problems aren’t present one hundred percent of the time but intermittently, and that therapy should focus on producing adaptive behaviors in a relatively short period of time. By learning to recognize moments when the symptoms of a problem are absent and using those experiences as the driver for change, individuals can work to make the moments without the symptoms more sustainable. The therapist helps the patient strengthen what is working by asking questions to help him or her reframe.

Those reframing techniques and questions can be used to enhance Appreciative Intelligence. First, become aware of the domains or small pockets of your



life where you are already seeing opportunities. Then ask yourself what would make you successful? This is a reframing question if, up until now, you have been preoccupied by the question of why you are not more successful. The more you focus on why you are not more successful, the more those reasons come alive and expand. So change your question to what would make you more successful. Next, ask what would happen if you had a magic wand and wished that all failure disappeared. How would you know that it had happened? What would you do differently? How would others around you know? What would other people say that would acknowledge or validate the new success?

## Advice for dealing with failure

Please note that we have intentionally used more “what” than “why” questions here. “What” questions typically generate data and understanding, while “why” questions generally elicit an emotional or defensible response and generate interpretation as opposed to data. “What” questions generally make respondents more comfortable, while “why” questions create apprehension and hesitation.<sup>6</sup>

There are other questions that may help you notice pockets of improvement, even if you feel you are still not as successful as you would like to be. At the end of a week, if you still say “I failed this week,” ask yourself whether there were times that you experienced less failure than the previous week (or weeks before). Then ask what made that small difference. Continue the process of looking for incremental improvements and stretching what went well.

As you begin to see yourself as being more successful—a new frame—you will begin to be more self confident, more persistent, more resilient, and able to take more risk.

### **Tool 4: Seek Diverse Ideas (Talk to Someone Different)**

Consider the following story. Many years ago now, a friend, a quality control expert, was driving his seven-year-old daughter to school before catching a plane to Spain. He was headed out to look for a solution to the problem of stinkbugs that were hitchhiking to other countries on shipping pallets of cans. When the daughter demanded to know why he was traveling again, he explained the problem (one on which he had consulted help from exterminators from England to Hawaii) to her.

“Wake them up!” she suggested. “Blast them with cold air and get them out of there.”

He replied, “Making them cold will only make them fall asleep and hibernate on the pallets. If we wanted to wake them up and make them go away, we’d have to heat them up.” As he said it, he realized he had solved his problem in a way—through temperature, not pesticides or other alternatives (a new frame)—that had not been thought about before. Shortly thereafter, a form of his idea was implemented. The insight that led to the solution came about by talking with someone who had a completely different view of the situation and a different set of knowledge and skills.

By seeking diverse ideas and embracing ambiguity—actively seeking information or beliefs that conflict with your own—you can stretch your comfort level with contradictions. You can figure out how to make connections between seemingly dissimilar ideas in order to create new frames. Like Dean

## Embrace ambiguity

Kamen, who is solving the challenge of the decline in engineering graduates through culture, not education, and the Rotarians, who thought of polio eradication as an organizational and managerial challenge, not a medical one, you can jumpstart your innovative ideas and creative solutions by trying on new ideas, looking at what works, and making connections among diverse concepts.

### **Developing Your Own Tools for Enhancing Appreciative Intelligence**

Finally, because we are introducing the construct of Appreciative Intelligence with this book, we expect that as people begin to think about it and use it, some people will develop further techniques and approaches for enhancing it.

As you practice the components of Appreciative Intelligence and seeking possibilities, remember that Appreciative Intelligence is not about simply calling a negative a positive. It is about seeing what is already present in a person, product, or situation—seeing an oak in an acorn, but not a tropical mango. Enhancing your Appreciative Intelligence will not make you happy all the time or keep you from making mistakes or from ever failing. What your Appreciative Intelligence can do is to help you learn new solutions from those mistakes, enjoy new achievements, and reframe your world for a better view of the future.

### **Employing and Enjoying Your Appreciative Intelligence**

In the fourth quadrant of the model, you are able to use your Appreciative Intelligence unconsciously or unintentionally. As the adage “practice makes perfect” comes true—as you repeatedly tell yourself success stories, reflect on what works well, ask yourself new questions, and spark innovative ideas through seeking out new ideas—you will probably develop new habits without realizing it. You automatically frame for a great future. Creative ideas begin to appear without you deliberately considering them or asking yourself a list of questions. Sustaining your Appreciative Intelligence in this quadrant happens automatically, because each time you use it naturally, you are in effect practicing it, even though you are unaware of it. Over time, you see the mighty oak within the acorn as a matter of course.

In conclusion, although Appreciative Intelligence cannot be seen or directly measured, it can be described qualitatively and understood intuitively. Because the brain changes and intelligence is not static, Appreciative Intelligence can be developed and enhanced within individuals. We hope that by providing a model for others to enhance their abilities, they will see their own possibilities for the future that are waiting to be realized in the present. Through their learning to see the mighty oak within the acorn, we hope that people and their organizations, families, and businesses experience the benefits and advantages commensurate with a creative, satisfied, and appreciated workforce or community.



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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Gerald Edelman, *Wider Than the Sky: The Phenomenal Gift of Consciousness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); Gerald Edelman, *Neural Darwinism: The Theory of Neuronal Group Selection* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).
- <sup>2</sup> Robert Brooks and Sam Goldstein, *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004).
- <sup>3</sup> Barbara L. Frederickson, "The Value of Positive Emotions," *American Scientist*, 91 (July-August, 2003), 330-335.
- <sup>4</sup> Chris Argyris and Don Schon, *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978).
- <sup>5</sup> Peter De Jong and Insoo Kim Berg, *Interviewing for Solutions* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing, 2002); S. de Shazer, *Keys to Solution in Brief Therapy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985); S. de Shazer, *Clues: Investigating Solutions in Brief Therapy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988); S. de Shazer, *Putting Difference to Work* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991); and S. de Shazer, *Words Were Originally Magic* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994).
- <sup>6</sup> Tojo Thatchenkery, *Appreciative Sharing of Knowledge: Leveraging Knowledge Management for Strategic Change* (Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute Publishing, 2005), 45.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### Tojo Thatchenkery

Tojo Thatchenkery, Ph.D., is a Professor of Organizational Learning and Knowledge Management at the School of Public Policy, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia. He is also a member of the NTL Institute of Applied Behavioral Science and the Taos Institute. He has over twenty years of experience in teaching at various MBA, public policy, organizational development, and executive programs in the United States, Europe, Australia, and Asia. Tojo founded the Organizational Learning Laboratory at the George W. Johnson Learning Center at George Mason University and served as its director from 1995 to 2000. His research has been funded by agencies such as the U. S. National Science Foundation and the U.S. National Security Agency.

For more than 15 years Tojo has been researching, consulting, and teaching in appreciative organizational design. Examples include Appreciative Inquiry, which he has been teaching to graduate students at George Mason University for over a decade, and Appreciative Sharing for Knowledge, a new knowledge management tool to leverage tacit knowledge in organizations. He has written extensively on appreciative processes in organizations, which include his doctoral dissertation, numerous refereed publications, and a recent book, *Appreciative Sharing for Knowledge: Leveraging Knowledge Management for Strategic Change*. Tojo has extensive consulting experience in change management, organization design, and knowledge management. Past clients include IBM, Fannie Mae, Booz/Allen/Hamilton, PNC Bank, Lucent Technologies, General Mills, British Petroleum, Tata Consulting Services, the

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International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, United States Department of Agriculture, and the Environmental Protection Agency. Tojo is on the editorial board of the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Sciences* and the *Journal of Organizational Change Management*. He is also the book review editor of the *Journal of Organizational Change Management* and the past Program Chair of the Research Methods Division of the 16,000-member-strong Academy of Management. Tojo has also used the appreciative lens to study diverse themes such as information communication technology (ICT), the economic development of South Asian countries (co-edited book), and the social capital and organizational mobility of Asian Americans in the United States.

Tojo lives in Chantilly, Virginia, with his wife and daughter and can be reached at [Tojo@appreciativeintelligence.com](mailto:Tojo@appreciativeintelligence.com).

## **Carol Metzker**

For over 15 years, Carol Metzker has helped clients tap into their success stories to uncover best practices, share knowledge, and communicate clearly for successful outcomes. She has worked successfully in educational, nonprofit, and corporate environments. She has a Master's degree in Organizational Learning from George Mason University.

Stories she has written as contributing editor for Investor Relations Update about executives in Fortune 500 companies appear in monthly print and online publications of the National Investor Relations Institute.

Her articles have appeared in numerous publications including *Global CEO*, *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *Management Next*, and the Association for Financial Professionals' journals *Pulse* and *Exchange*.

Her past experience as Director of Client Services at Anderson Leadership Group, a leadership communication consulting firm, cultivated her interest in leadership development and gave her the opportunity for close observation and experience with to-level leaders. Her work as a writer and consultant has led to interviews of hundreds of executives about their successful and innovative practices, providing a close look at companies and their members. Her work as an interviewer and writer for a national Science Foundation-sponsored study on the impact of information technology on India's development provided an exceptional view of a variety of social and business cultures.

She lives in West Chester, Pennsylvania, with her husband and two daughters and can be reached at [Carol@appreciativeintelligence.com](mailto:Carol@appreciativeintelligence.com).

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