

Book Review : *Appreciative Inquiry for Change Management*

Sarah Lewis, Jonathan Passmore and Stefan Cantore

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Reviewed by Mark Northway FInstAM, BA(Hons).

This publication is another in a recent spate of positive, strengths-based, and generally uplifting books. This book looks at how the process of change management can be assisted by positive, appreciative questioning techniques.

At the start (and as is often the case), poor Frederick Winslow Taylor is wheeled in to provide an excuse (or blamed) as to why organisations fail to harness inner strengths of the people working within them.

(Taylor was an idealist, and his biggest contribution to society is one which is usually not acknowledged. In redesigning work along scientific principles, and in reengineering equipment and handing it back to the worker but now under the control of managers, he transferred ownership of work. That legacy could make an appearance in fig 1.2 on page 14).

It is too simplistic to blame scientific principles, or the designing of work as a machine, for the difficulties people have in organisations. Indeed, drawing on the work of Morgan and his superb book *Images of Organisations* is undermined by not considering the other metaphors offered by him.

Likewise, in the opening section of the book, we have an overview of other commonly-ascribed organisational failings in (for example) having a head and body split, methods of data-gathering, and – in chapter 2 – the implication that by not treating organisations as living systems, organisations miss a good trick. Some people are simply difficult to work with!

The book does cover the work of some others in changing perceptions. However, Morgan provided additional metaphors back in 1986; Open Systems Theory, the work of Katz & Kahn, Argyris, among many others – all have challenged the machine approach, and have played their part in creating alternative organisational structures. For example, self-managed teams, the Buurtzorg model, among others. A notable absence is the work of Nonaka, especially in chapters 3 and 6 (“The development of conversational approaches to organisational change” and “The power of conversation” respectively).

Offering the machine metaphor helps the writer’s case though, and many readers will accept it as a reasonable starting point.

Delving further into the book, the authors offer sensible approaches and stages in developing appropriate skills. There are many thought-provoking suggestions to aid dialogue, assist with problem-solving, and to harness collective strengths. Each chapter is written clearly, and - where appropriate – well supported by the work of others.

In particular the SOAR framework of Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results provides an alternative, and arguably stronger, more positive, longer-term approach than the more audit-based SWOT analysis.

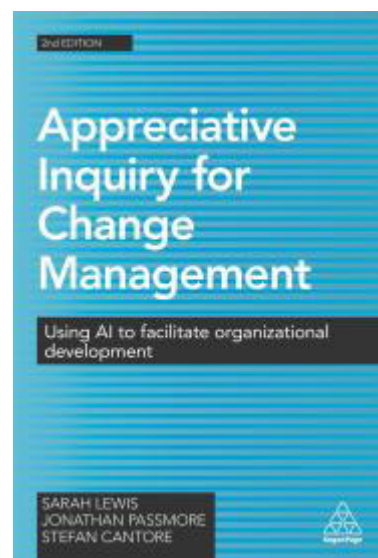
The book concludes with a series of interesting case studies which provide evidence of the benefits of the approaches outlined.

If there is one final niggle, it is that the book could address applicability (or an acceptance of the limitations) of the approaches proposed, whether this is by complexity of issues, or of the unitary/coercive nature of the people within (and stakeholders beyond) the organisation. The work of Flood and Jackson (1991) and their grouping of problem contexts could be invoked to assist in this regard.

That aside, the overall message of “Be nice, and talk to each other” is rarely written as well as it is in this book, and for that the authors are to be applauded.

Mark Northway FInstAM., BA(Hons).

Mark Northway is Director and Courses Co-ordinator at Deltic Training. Tel: 01263 711811 www.deltic-training.co.uk



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